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Review Of "The Limits Of U.S. Military Capability: Lessons From Vietnam And Iraq" By J. Lebovic

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Recommended Citation

Dominic Tierney. (2011). "Review Of "The Limits Of U.S. Military Capability: Lessons From Vietnam And Iraq" By J. Lebovic". *H-Diplo Roundtable*. Volume 2, Issue 9. 21-24.

<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-poli-sci/526>

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Review by Dominic Tierney, Swarthmore College

There is much to like in James Lebovic's book *The Limits of U.S. Military Capability*. It's crisply written, thought provoking and offers a sensible analysis of the challenges that the United States faces in counter-insurgency campaigns. The author's discussion of the lessons of Vietnam and Iraq is far more nuanced than most accounts I have read, and the controlled comparison of the cases works well. However, since praise is less useful than criticism, let me suggest some issues for further discussion.

According to Lebovic, the principal lessons of Vietnam and Iraq are that the United States should understand the limits of its power, the pitfalls of using force, and therefore adopt restrained goals. The basic argument is summarized early on: "US military capabilities are fundamentally limited and...US costs rise and benefits diminish appreciably in wars in which the US stakes are low and its goals broad and ambitious" (2). Furthermore, Lebovic writes that, "The United States is disadvantaged in these contests given quantitative and qualitative limits on US capability, potential US aversions and concerns, and strong resistance to US goals from local adversaries *and allies*" [italics in original] (3).

Are the Stakes Low?

Is it true that U.S. stakes are low in asymmetric war? Lebovic argues for the existence of "a paradox of power," whereby "the more capability a state possesses, the lower its stake in any given conflict" (209). In other words, while the insurgent adversary is totally committed to victory, the United States faces competing global priorities and therefore displays a limited commitment.

U.S. stakes are low in certain conflicts against insurgents—the intervention in Somalia in 1992-1994 is a good example. But U.S. stakes were not perceived as being low in Vietnam or Iraq. In Vietnam, two factors heightened the stakes: the domino theory, and the obsessive concern with America's reputation. Lyndon B. Johnson may have declined to mobilize the reserves, but he did send half-a-million ground troops to Vietnam.

The supposed paradox is not convincing. Greater U.S. capabilities and global commitments may have *magnified* the perceived stakes in Vietnam. Retreat was seen as having devastating consequences for America's broader position. Consider the counterfactual: if the U.S. were weaker would it really have believed it had *more* at stake fighting in Vietnam?

Is the U.S. Disadvantaged?

Is the U.S. "disadvantaged" in asymmetric war, and, if so, relative to what exactly? There are at least four respects in which this could hold true.

First, the United States could be disadvantaged *relative to its expectations*. In other words, when it begins missions, it does not fully anticipate the challenges that Washington will face. Therefore success "inevitably falls short of the intervening power's initial goals" (227).

And indeed, the United States is often the victim of overconfidence about the speed with which foreign countries can be transformed in nation-building operations.¹

Second, the United States could be disadvantaged *relative to the insurgent forces*. As Lebovic writes, “Relative to its adversary, the United States is disadvantaged by its weaker resolve and smaller resource share invested in a small conflict” (209).

Here, it’s true that the United States usually has a smaller slice of its resource pie invested in the struggle, although this is balanced by the United States’ far greater total resource pie. Whether Washington displays lower resolve than its insurgent adversaries is an empirical question. Certainly, this was the case in Vietnam. But not every insurgency movement is as committed as the Vietcong. Indeed, the militias in “ethnic conflicts” sometimes turn out to be composed largely of drunken and sadistic bullies who are quite capable of slaughtering unarmed civilians, but run away when confronted with a show of force.²

The book is mostly focused on the challenges faced by the United States when it fights insurgents. Indeed, at times, Lebovic implies that the adoption of insurgent tactics is a relatively straightforward way of humbling the United States. There is little consideration of how things look from the insurgent perspective. A rebel might conclude that Lebovic underestimates the difficulties that the guerrillas face. After all, they have taken up insurgent tactics precisely because they are too weak to overthrow the regime and eject U.S. forces. And success is hardly pre-ordained. Each challenge encountered by the United States is mirrored by an equal or greater challenge faced by the insurgents. Washington finds it hard to work with the host government: but the insurgents don’t have a host government to work with.

Third, the United States could be disadvantaged in counter-insurgency *relative to conventional interstate war*. At first glance this seems self-evident. Just contrast America’s struggles in battling insurgents in Vietnam and Iraq with its record of zero (clear-cut) defeats in conventional war.

But on reflection, the notion of consistent U.S. success at conventional war, and consistent U.S. failure at counter-insurgency, gets murkier. America lost in Vietnam but this campaign was—as Lebovic notes—simultaneously a conventional war against North Vietnam and a counter-insurgency campaign against the Vietcong. Over time, the war actually shifted away from an insurgency and more toward a conventional struggle.

Furthermore, widening the historical lens, the U.S. record against insurgents improves. In the early twentieth century, for example, the United States defeated insurgencies in the Philippines, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. Lebovic recognizes that the Vietnam and

¹ For overconfidence about nation-building in Vietnam and Iraq see Dominic Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

² John Mueller, “The Banality of ‘Ethnic War,’” *International Security* 25:1 (Summer, 2000): 42-70.

Iraq cases are “exceptional” (3). Of all of America’s experiences fighting insurgents, Vietnam and Iraq are the two most costly exercises. Would the lessons of the book alter if the author considered a broader and perhaps more representative sample of cases?

In addition, America’s conventional wars have proved to be far bloodier than its counter-insurgency campaigns. If we put Vietnam to the side because it blurs the two categories of conventional war and counter-insurgency, and if we include the Civil War as a conventional war, there is a striking finding: for every American who has died fighting insurgents, over one hundred Americans have died battling enemy states. Washington certainly faces “leverage” problems engaging insurgents. But it faced equal or greater leverage challenges in conventional war, for example, attempting to coerce China and North Korea and keep the coalition united in the Korean War.

Fourth, the United States could be disadvantaged in counter-insurgency *relative to other countries*. The book does not offer such a comparison, but it would be tough to argue that the U.S. record is inferior to that of other states. It’s true enough that America maintains a “finite capacity to project power inland” (21) —but then again, which country doesn’t? During the 1980s, for example, the Soviet Union lost 15,000 men in Afghanistan waging a brutal counter-insurgency that killed one million civilians. Which superpower is “disadvantaged”?

Avoid or Embrace?

The usually implicit, but occasionally explicit, message of the book is that the United States is ill-suited to asymmetric war and should avoid this type of mission. Lebovic writes that “critics of military transformation rightly ask whether the United States should engage in irregular warfare, which places the United States at a comparative disadvantage” (20).

But the problem is that the United States has no alternative but to prepare for, and engage in, irregular war. For one thing, victory in conventional war often leads to nation-building and irregular war, for example, after the Civil War (southern Reconstruction), the Spanish-American War (the Philippines), or more recently, in Afghanistan and Iraq. “You break it, you own it,” as the saying goes. Here, the stabilization phase is often essential to the overall success of an operation. The U.S. military is either prepared for this endeavor or it is not.

And the United States may need to engage in asymmetric conflicts in other situations. For example, Lebovic hints that he would have favored U.S. intervention in Rwanda (225), “to stop a genocidal slaughter of monumental proportions.”

The danger of Lebovic’s argument is that it could contribute to a gathering backlash against nation-building (including counter-insurgency, peacekeeping, and humanitarian intervention). Given the understandable public weariness with the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, and given a traditional U.S. aversion to nation-building, many Americans will be attracted to the idea of focusing on conventional campaigns by planning for conflicts against China or Iran. After Vietnam, there was a similar dynamic where the U.S. military concluded it should never do counter-insurgency again, prepared obsessively

for war against the USSR in Europe, and unlearned everything it had learned in Vietnam at such great cost. The United States has to be careful to avoid this mistake again.

Recently, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned against: “the kind of backsliding that has occurred in the past, where if nature takes its course, these kinds of capabilities—that is counterinsurgency—tend to wither on the vine.”³

Let me end by restating that I found Lebovic’s book to be thoughtful, well written, and extremely stimulating, and I hope that its arguments are widely read and carefully considered.

³ <http://www.defense.gov/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1240>