

Geoffrey Perret. *Commander in Chief: How Truman, Johnson, and Bush Turned a Presidential Power into a Threat to America's Future.* New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007. 436 pp. \$27.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-374-10217-3.

Commander in Chief



How Truman, Johnson, and Bush
Turned a Presidential Power into a
Threat to America's Future

Geoffrey Perret

Reviewed by Dan Margolies (Department of History, Virginia Wesleyan College)

Published on H-Diplo (August, 2008)

Unwinnable Words on Unwinnable Wars

In this flabby book, Geoffrey Perret presents a well-worn catalog of successive American failures, misconceptions, and poor leadership by over-matched presidents in the Korean, Vietnam, and Iraq wars. Curiously, given the title and subtitle, Perret does not concentrate on each president's role as commander in chief, does not analyze broad assertions of executive power or the imperial presidency, and does not consider questions of the U.S. constitution in wartime that are of extraordinary historical and contemporary significance. Perret skirts discussion of the core linkages between these wars relating to the misuse of executive power in the pursuit of U.S. hegemony. Much of the book is, in fact, an episodic retelling of American foreign relations since 1945 (the Korean War does not even start for 130 pages) with a presentist focus colored by fury over the dishonest Iraq War. Perret offers scattershot purpose to his book by centering it on the concept of American decline. He sees "political stability, not anarchy" spreading along with a "failing America" (p. 388). He concludes, with more anger than insight, that

"nobody wants to be dependent on an America that talks loudly about how indispensable it is, yet stages coups, makes threats, overthrows governments, democratic or not, and kills many of the world's poorest people, to the amusement of some generals" (pp. 388-389). The last part of that sentence clearly demonstrates the tone of this book.

Perret calls these wars collectively "three unwinnable wars in an age of unwinnable wars" (p. 3). He ignores the incoherence of directly grouping these wars and their historical contexts. He side-steps any notion that the result in Korea was, in fact, mixed and the fact that the Iraq War is still well underway and too early for any historian to call a defeat (however certain that outcome may actually seem). In each war, argues Perret, "the enemy always held the strategic initiative"; winning required the "insoluble challenge" of balancing political and military victory; and "eventually, when public opinion realizes that a war is unwinnable, the war becomes unsustainable, whatever the party in power, whoever is commander in chief. If he won't end it, Congress will," though this actually

does not occur (pp. 5-6). Perret occasionally implies that war was reflective of domestic political wrangles, but does not demonstrate how. Getting grandly carried away, Perret argues that the war in Iraq "is also a struggle between cultures, a war between races, a war between the rich North and an impoverished South; a continuation of a 2,500-year-old struggle between East and West; a conflict that pits rich countries that are aging against poor ones where half the population is below the age of twenty-four" (p. 8). However, he does not sustain an analysis of the wars on any of these easily dismissed terms. He interprets the three wars as the end of U.S. military, political, economic, and cultural power, arguing that "the historic moment when all four types of American power were at their peak has come and gone" (p. 8). He bemoans runaway foreign adventurism yet argues, seemingly contradictorily, that "once a superpower ceases to act like one, it soon ceases to be one" (p. 13).

Perret settles anachronistically on the rise of a monolithic and static China and the end to American world power as the real results of these unwinnable wars. He does not consider any other economic, ideological, or technological causal factors in the historic transformations at the end of the twentieth century, and he does not consider the accelerant factors of globalization. At the close of a strange digression about imported Chinese goods in contemporary America that appears in the middle of his coverage of the Vietnam War, Perret posits that "Vietnam was only one triumph of Mao's Third Front. The other is the conquest of American homes, businesses, and T-bills" (p. 255). He concludes the book with characteristic overstatement and finger-wagging simplicity: "China is the only country to have gained strategic advantages from America's three unwinnable wars" (p. 389). On further reflection, however, perhaps he could have included South Korea, Japan, and Iran (at least) as nations that have benefited strategically from these conflicts.

The book caustically covers the multiple personal and political failings of Harry Truman, Lyndon Johnson, and George W. Bush, and major figures in the foreign policy elite, such as Dean Acheson, Clark Clifford, and Henry Kissinger. Much of the analysis is cobbled together psychohistory rich in insinuation and delivered with a dismissive tone. Perret argues curiously but in full seriousness that Truman was motivated by drinking "snake oil": he "was so ready to fight the Russians, the Chinese, and the North Koreans, he seemed at moments almost to welcome the chance. There was no shortage of reasons for it, including Dr. Graham's snake oil.... How much of Truman's famous decisiveness was Harry and how much was a mood-enhancing drug? Obvious question; unknowable answer" (p. 137). Later, when "a united, pro-Western Korea was within his grasp, and he threw it away," Perret dumbly asks: "Was it Harry, or the pep pills?" (p. 166).

Johnson's motivations are given similar surface treatment, with much attention to his striving personality, insecurities, phallus-waving, bullying, and talking to God and to the Holy Ghost, and less attention given to serious analysis of his policies. Johnson is sharply contrasted with Kennedy, who Perret admires as a natural-born and groomed leader and who "almost certainly" would have pulled out of Vietnam (p. 197). Perret presents Johnson as not "a good commander in chief, or even an effective one. He was too impulsive and too emotional" and acted "as if he were still the Senate majority leader" (p. 250).

Perret delivers a pedestrian account of Truman's foreign relations from World War II through the Korean War followed by a familiar narrative of the Vietnam War, which yields no new insights and does not, in fact, engage the scholarly literature on U.S. policy in any meaningful way. The citation style is scant as to be expected, with scattered and limited primary and archival materials as well as dated and seemingly random secondary material. The use of sources demonstrates that this

book was produced carelessly. Unacceptable errors riddle this book as already have been detailed by other reviewers.[1]

Perret's writing oscillates toward the tiresome. The writing in a popular history should be the major selling point of a book, and much of the narrative is indeed readable and fast paced. Throughout, however, this book is riddled with a distracting number of empty superlatives, grandiose pronouncements, and just plain bad writing. There are clichéd statements like "the United States bestrode the world like a colossus in red, white, and blue," and "it went straight for Seoul, like a tiger going for its prey's throat" (pp. 8, 150). Truman is described as "blown by the zeitgeist into an unwinnable war, no more the master of his fate than a leaf tumbling down the street in the wind," while Kennedy is given a mind "as sharp as broken glass" (pp. 148, 258). There are yet grander monuments of overwriting and mixed metaphor, like "Johnson could smell weakness as sharks can smell blood—in small traces, over long distances. Having humiliated and bullied Humphrey for more than three years, Johnson was a cobra to a mongoose during Humphrey's campaign" (p. 284). Snake oil, leaves tumbling, tigers, sharks, and cobras—why bother to try to keep this straight?

A sizable section of the book is filler narrative unmoored to a major theme. A chapter on Richard Nixon's Vietnam policy offers no new insights or connectivity to the declared intent of the book. This is followed by a cursory and wholly unnecessary textbook-style account of major foreign policy events in the administrations of Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush that does not provide new information, illuminate the actions or strategic and political thought of each successive commander in chief, or advance the central argument of the book (such as it is). Perret skirts analysis of the U.S. involvement in the post-1945 Middle East or in Latin America. He mentions but sidesteps criticism of the Iran-Contra crimes, which surely would have tied in with his de-

clared purposes of looking at run-amok executive power. Bill Clinton's many foreign policy failures and his unique position as a commander in chief with legitimacy problems, who nevertheless utilized military force with great frequency, is almost totally ignored. Instead, "Somalia was bad" is the summation of that event, while the war in Bosnia (a war that was won) is not discussed.

The real reason Perret limps through the U.S. misadventures after Vietnam is to oppose the war in Iraq. As he does with Truman and Johnson, Perret seeks to belittle Bush as a person using, for example, the irritating recurrent hook "just like Dad" (p. 324). Perret provides an unoriginal account of Bush as dunce, draft dodger, drunk, saved Christian, reader of *My Pet Goat*, self-appointed savior, patsy, and Napoleon. While dropping hints throughout the book of that the development of religious fervor in commanders in chief would culminate in disaster with Bush, Perret does not develop this theme.

It is in this latter section of the book that Perret revives the idea of "unwinnable wars" and, perhaps echoing Naomi Klein, implies that all three of these wars were launched at moments of crisis when the country was reeling from shocks: McCarthyism, the Kennedy assassination, and September 11. He concludes: "Korea, Vietnam, Iraq—all were made possible by, in, and for a nation that was not its normal self" (p. 354). Had Perret read the torrent of theoretically rich and empirically sourced books on the formation, maintenance, and systemics of American empire during this period, he may have been less confident in claiming that these wars were anomalies only fitfully tied to coherent economic, political, and ideological ends. It can be argued that these three wars and so many smaller ones were, in fact, representative of important aspects of the same search for imperial power and stability that successive commanders in chief have pursued, and on which they have found themselves foundering. They are actually not deviations from the American embrace of em-

pire, but its fruits. Had Perret considered even some of these issues he might not have produced this weak book.

Note

[1]. See, for example, Melvin Small, review of *Commander in Chief: How Truman, Johnson, and Bush Turned a Presidential Power into a Threat to America's Future*, by Geoffrey Perret, *Political Science Quarterly* 122, no. 3 (fall 2007): 493-494; and David Fitzpatrick, review of *Commander in Chief: How Truman, Johnson, and Bush Turned a Presidential Power into a Threat to America's Future*, by Geoffrey Perret, *Michigan War Studies Review* (April 4, 2008), <http://www.michiganwarstudiesreview.com/2008/20080402.asp>.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: Dan Margolies. Review of Perret, Geoffrey. *Commander in Chief: How Truman, Johnson, and Bush Turned a Presidential Power into a Threat to America's Future*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. August, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14800>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.