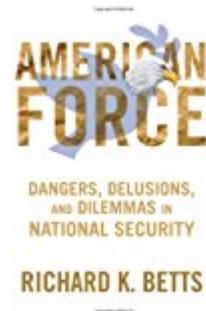




Richard K. Betts. *American Force: Dangers, Delusions, and Dilemmas in National Security*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 384 pp. \$29.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-15122-1.



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## Failure to Adjust: Post-Cold War American National Security Policy

Richard K. Betts has long been regarded as one of America's leading experts on national security affairs and his latest literary effort, *American Force*, does nothing to dispel that reputation. In *American Force*, Betts, director of the Saltzman Institute of War and Peace Studies at Columbia University, describes not only current American doctrine or the lack thereof following the end of the Cold War but also his own evolution from Cold War hawk to post-Cold War dove. In doing so, he walks a fine line between advocating "caution and restraint" and "decisive force" when necessary, acknowledging that his work will be criticized by liberals and conservatives alike, depending on what they choose to take away from *American Force* (p. xii).

*American Force* begins with a discussion of the evolution of American national security thinking following the end of the Cold War. The United States could have chosen one of two potential courses of action—"to relax or to advance" (p. 4). The expected course of action, in the author's opinion, would be to relax; that is, revel in the realization that the only other superpower realistically capable of threatening American interests interna-

tionally had imploded, leaving the United States largely unchallenged on the world stage. Instead, America embarked on an expansionistic strategy based on a unipolar view of the world, in which Western philosophies and methodologies, based on the rule of law, would be imposed on recalcitrant states.

In retrospect, this approach has been wrong. Rather than a more peaceful world, ingrained habits on the part of both liberals and conservatives, fostered by forty years of uneasy coexistence with an enemy inimically opposed to Western political and economic ideals, have led to less security for the United States. The greatest threat to American national security, Islamic fundamentalism, as Betts notes, is a "mobilizing force and model for social organization only in culture areas where the religion is already historically rooted" whereas Communism was designed to appeal to a worldwide audience (p. 8). The failure to adequately redress this shortcoming in policy poses an increasing danger to the West in general and the United States in particular. Betts goes on to argue that American policy since the end of the Cold War has been delusionary in the sense that the liberalistic American ap-

proach to national security (emphasized in the philosophy of early American political figures, such as Thomas Jefferson) remains unchanged despite this critical difference in orientation; as such, the American response to perceived overseas threats has been to maintain the forward deployed presence utilized during the Cold War and to respond militarily as opposed to politically when presented with a crisis situation.

However, the “dilemma” in this approach is multidimensional in nature; that is, it encompasses questions related to deterrence, timing, force, and the cost and benefits associated with expected results. Following the end of World War Two, Betts argues, there were two important objectives of American national security: development of a liberal political and economic world order while containing and deterring the worldwide spread of Communism. More recently, these initial objectives were supplemented by two additional objectives: access to the energy assets of the Middle East and the attrition of anti-American terrorist organizations. Despite one’s own political leanings, there was little domestic debate about these objectives.

But the author notes a difference in perceptions regarding the essence of national security. One viewpoint is that national security policy is identical to foreign policy, whereas a differing opinion (one the author shares) reflects the view that national security is based on leveraging one’s military power against one’s adversaries. However, in Bett’s opinion, national security is an essential subset of foreign policy, which includes “everything of interest to the United States in the outside world”; that is, politics, economics, social issues, and so forth. There is a critical difference in the use of military power (defined by the author as “conflict between adversaries who both believe that their capability or strategy gives them the chance to win”) versus the inherent functions of policing power, of the sort used in Kosovo, for example (p. 23). Moreover, Americans have a tendency to equate national security with international security; however, the two are not the same. What is important to U.S. national security may in fact be detrimental to the security interests of another country, a good example being the recent moves by the United States to strengthen its forces in the Pacific Rim (redeploying marine units to Australia), thus heightening Chinese suspicions of a latter-day “containment” policy of the sort employed against the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Nonetheless, Betts argues that, despite the end of the Cold War, relying on political and economic develop-

ment became secondary to military concerns. He cites four reasons for this. First, government structure, in particular the National Security Act of 1947, saw the establishment of new departments and agencies (Department of Defense, Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Council), and periodic reorganizations of existing organizations has led to economic concerns being sidelined. Second, he examines resource allocation, noting that defense and intelligence related expenditures have dominated non-security related spending. Third, he argues that in terms of rules of engagement, the United States has conformed law to fit policy concerns when it sees fit. And finally, the United States refocused attention on the crisis du jour at the expense of other foreign and economic policy concerns.

The author also spends a good deal of time in *American Force* discussing the ongoing problem of organized terrorism, which he argues has become the national security threat of choice since no other country has the ability to confront America militarily with any reasonable chance of success. He begins by taking issue with other observers who, in his opinion, have dismissed the threat of another major domestic terrorist threat. Betts contends that while Islamic terrorist organizations have been diminished as a result of aggressive counteraction by the West in general and the United States in particular, it is premature to write off Al Qaeda; in his opinion, “the major risk is not that Al Qaeda will make another attempt tactically identical to the last one, but that it will find a way to bring off some other spectacular initiative” (p. 107). Moreover, any attack does not have to be devastating in numbers of casualties because the psychological and economic impact of any such action could be even more damaging, much as it was following September 11th. In sum, he notes that these modes of action “make the cost exchange ratio favorable to the attacker,” thus mitigating U.S. conventional military superiority (p. 110).

The overriding operational issue is that there are only two methods for dealing with organized terrorism in Bett’s opinion: attrition and democratization. The former approach was most succinctly expressed by former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld: can we kill them faster than the madrassas can churn them out without causing massive collateral damage? The other solution depends on being able to provide political and economic incentives to peel away active or potential terrorists from the overall movement. However, the author notes that the September 11th hijackers were from the most affluent Muslim country in the Middle East. Moreover, as

Betts correctly notes, two of the biggest sources of terrorist support, financial and otherwise, are (or at least were) Saudi Arabia and Iran, and they have the highest standards of living in the Muslim world. To that end, while poverty might be a root cause of terrorism, Islamic fundamentalists have other grievances with the West as well.

He suggests one initiative that would make sense would be to adopt a foreign policy supportive of Palestinian interests, reducing the unpopularity of pro-American governments while not compromising Israeli security. Betts notes, however, not only that there is no constituency in the United States to support such a move (as President Barack Obama found out when attempting to reach out to disaffected Middle Eastern political movements at the beginning of his term in office) in light of the recent events of the so-called Arab Spring and the attack on the American Embassy in Libya, but also that one would have to believe such an approach has become even more politically untenable. To that end, economic vulnerability, according to the author, is a greater threat than outright military confrontation. Betts observes that Osama Bin Laden's strategic rationale behind the September 11th attacks was identical to that of the Allies in World Two: by attacking the German economy through massive conventional bombing, the Nazi regime would collapse from within. This of course did not occur; if anything, the Germans became even more imaginative in maintaining and increasing their industrial output. It wound up taking a massive ground assault from multiple directions to finally end the conflict.

The author also examines the role that China will play in the coming years. To his credit, he notes that China, while the world's fastest growing economy, has had its share of problems: poor economic data that may be disguising less robust growth than publicly reported and that will inevitably slow due to the law of large numbers; demographic pressures of the sort currently being experienced by Japan and its aging, less productive population; and environmental degradation. One could add a smoldering Islamist insurgency and ethnic tensions to the list as well. However, Betts also makes the logical argument that China does not need to surpass the United States globally in order to challenge America's unipolar superiority, given the amount of Chinese investment in U.S. government financial instruments, thus funding our massive budget deficits.

Moreover, China has been quite aggressive in both securing overseas commodity-based resources through joint ventures and outright acquisitions of foreign com-

panies while building a stronger conventional force, in particular, a "blue water" naval capability that would allow China to protect these resources while in transit to the mainland. However, building ships and aircraft requires a command and control system that is currently beyond Chinese means; it remains to be seen how China will acquire these sorts of capabilities in the short run, given that Western technological development will not stand still. Nonetheless, Betts makes the logical argument that, absent a strong U.S. presence in Asia, China has the potential to become the dominant economic and military power in the region, a development not unnoticed by the United States (see the above comment of re-orienting American military forces away from Europe to the Austral-Asian region).

In sum, the author correctly notes, despite our military success over the years, our greatest strategic triumph since the end of World War Two was the relatively bloodless triumph over the Soviet Union. He argues that our other military adventures (with the exception of the first Persian Gulf War) have generally not been worth the cost in blood and treasure expended. Moreover, the United States, following the end of the Cold War, has failed to take advantage of the opportunity to reduce its military expenditures, and just as important, refused to alter its strategic approach to applying force. In other words, the American love affair with military technology, aided and abetted by a political system unduly influenced by a strong industrial base, ignores the most likely threat that we will face in the future: insurgencies and terrorists capable of acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

Dealing with these sorts of threats, in the author's opinion, "must work on terms set by the enemy, benefits little from technological superiority, is labor intensive and demands extraordinary effort and skill in integrating military and political instruments in strategy over long periods of time," conditions under which, historical experience has shown, America does not excel (p. 150). Moreover, in Bett's opinion, the threat environment does not end there. The aforementioned Arab Spring has the potential to expand into a conflict with "a coordinated international coalition of revolutionary Islamist regimes" (although, given the ongoing balkanization of Syria into Sunni and Shia enclaves, coordination does not seem a sure thing), thus threatening American energy interests in the Middle East, as does a potential conflict with a rising power, such as China, that may take place far away from the Asian mainland (p. 286).

In sum, the author identifies a number of weaknesses in American strategic policy: dependence of military force as the expense of diplomacy; profligate spending by successive American administrations, abetted by the legislative branch more interested in its own interests as opposed to the country as a whole; and a divisive political environment that in all likelihood will not change, no

matter who wins an election. This is a dismal scenario to be sure. One takes away the impression that the author is not holding out much hope for significant change anytime soon, but *American Force* is a well-reasoned and thoughtful critique of the current U.S. national security environment, one that policymakers should not ignore.

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