

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Andrew J. Polsky. *Elusive Victories: The American Presidency at War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. Illustrations. vii + 445 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-986093-7.

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Published on H-War (March, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey

United States Grand Strategy, 1860-2012

The rise of the United States as a global power and the policies American leaders have implemented to maintain that supremacy has been a topic widely discussed and debated by historians and political scientists. The writings of John Lewis Gaddis, Henry Kissinger, and Paul Kennedy, just to name a few, have contributed insightful remarks on America's ability to shape global policies in an area of history that has become known as "Grand Strategy," which is an overarching concept that guides how nations employ all of the instruments of national power to shape world events and achieve specific national objectives.[1] Andrew J. Polsky, a professor in the Department of Political Science at Hunter College, has entered this Grand Strategy dialogue with his book *Elusive Victories*.

Elusive Victories explores seven U.S. presidencies and the wars through which those administrations led the nation from 1860 to 2012. He examines Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War; Woodrow Wilson and the Great War; Franklin D. Roosevelt and World War II; Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon, and Vietnam; George W. Bush and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and a concluding chapter on Barack Obama's inheritance of the Afghan and Iraq wars. Polsky argues that these leaders lost their freedom of action over the course of the wars they faced. At the beginning of a conflict, each president had a wide range of choices: defining national objectives, choosing military commanders, deciding how many troops to commit, defining or approving strategies, and building international coalitions. But each choice closed off other avenues and made reversing course much more difficult. By the end of the conflict, the president led with his hands tied with the American people demanding attention to domestic issues, Congress reasserting its authority and denying the president resources to help him seek postwar goals, and allies pursuing their own national interests.

Polsky narrates in seven lengthy chapters the trials and tribulations of our major wartime presidents. In all of these chapters, he addresses the ability or inability of each president to devise military strategy, the successes and failures of implementing that strategy in mobilizing the home and war fronts, his level of control of the politics of war, and his ability to accomplish American goals in multinational coalitions. Here, Polsky concludes that of the seven presidents discussed only Lincoln and Roosevelt successfully navigated the currents of wartime leadership. Both men managed to keep their vision of victory intact and successfully shaped political and military policies. Additionally, they both died following their wars, which makes evaluating their postwar policies difficult. The others fell short either in devising military strategy, conducting the war, or achieving postwar goals. He concludes that Wilson failed to assert American wartime goals following World War I in getting the United States in the League of Nations and lost the political war with Republicans led by Henry Cabot Lodge. Polsky evaluates the leadership of Johnson as a failure during the Vietnam conflict because he failed to mobilize the American public behind the war and he did not establish a clear military objective. He is less critical of Nixon because most of the decisions behind how the Vietnam War developed were already decided by the time he took office. The final major analysis is on George W. Bush's handling of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. He believes that Bush had too much of a hands-off approach and delegated too much authority to Donald Rumsfeld. Polsky concludes his book with a chapter on President Obama and the lessons he can learn from previous wartime presidents.

Polsky's research is not primary source driven; instead he creates a masterful synthesis of major secondary books and articles written on the various wartime presidencies. *Elusive Victories* is a wonderful example of how