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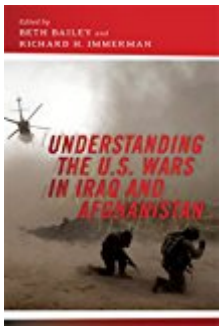

Beth Bailey, Richard H. Immerman, eds.. *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.* New York: New York University Press, 2015. 368 pp. $89.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4798-7143-8.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

On the recent fifteenth anniversary commemorating September 11, 2001, the pain of remembering the attacks, and the memory of avowals for justice, converged with two, intractable, still unfinished wars. Remnants of Al-Qaeda and its mutation into the Islamic State are major security challenges and the Taliban, which protected Al-Qaeda within Afghanistan, continues to undermine stability in South Asia. In the United States, it is difficult to forget the societal shock of 9/11, which changed much of the world. Additionally, it is perhaps more difficult to revisit the rationale for war as a means to defeat terrorism, particularly as it relates to Iraq and efforts in the Global War on Terror. How, if at all, did war in the early twenty-first century improve security for the United States?

Unquestionably, the memory of 9/11 deserves perpetuity in our national consciousness. Yet it also requires, perhaps even demands, circumspection concerning the United States' response to attacks by Al-Qaeda through military action. Additionally, it is critical to reexamine the pathos of that historical moment in which the choice for war was decided, especially in the case of Iraq. Untangling and assessing a multiplicity of knots on this complex set of subjects is the focus of this outstanding edited collection, *Understanding the U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*.

Beth Bailey (Kansas University) and Richard H. Immerman (Temple University and US Army War College) manage an impressive set of scholary contributions. In collective efforts, the contributors were typically given a series of arguments, themes, or questions to consider when embarking on this project. Although it is highly unlikely that George F. Kennan served as a source of inspiration, Kennan's analysis of "double-think"—in the conduct of war between the United States and Japan during World War II—might have potentially, and relevantly, contributed as an applicable starting point for Bailey and Immerman's collection. According to Kennan: "There is, let me assure you, nothing more egocentrical than an embattled democracy. It soon becomes the victim of its own war propaganda. It then tends to attach

to its own cause an absolute value which distorts its own vision on everything else. Its enemy becomes the embodiment of all evil. Its own side, on the other hand, is the center of all virtue."[1]

In many respects, Kennan's point characterizes how the United States responded to Al-Qaeda through the Global War on Terror. The studies and debates surrounding the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars historically echo an enduring problem Kennan identified in 1960. None of this is to say that Al-Qaeda was and remains—along with its spawn, ISIS—an embodiment of evil. Kennan's statement, rather, is valuable as an assessment concerning how the United States responds when confronted with radicalization, whether it be the Rising Sun of Imperial Japan, communism, or radicalized Islamic organizations. In their excellent volume, Bailey and Immerman historicize Kennan's point—along with much else—as a result of the United States' conduct of war in the Middle East and South Asia.

The book is organized into four thematic parts explored through a range of two to four essays each. The sections include the wars and their origins; explorations into the limits of American military and diplomatic strategy; the conduct of the wars and its many costs, both in human and social terms; and lessons and legacies of the wars. If there is a single volume that cogently and concisely addresses the multiplicity of issues concerning contemporary war in the countries assessed, as well as the intent behind choosing to go to war, ***Understanding The U.S. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan*** is it.

For example, in examining veterans' needs and the United States' obligation to meet them, David Kiernan identifies the contested legacy of social policies and how they overlap with past wars. The G.I. Bill, created after World War II—one of the great government programs of the twentieth century—sparked controversy in some quarters at the time it was initiated. The program clearly helped millions of veterans, but it also "collided with claims about the need to reign in government spending, to promote personal responsibility, and to eradicate fraud" (p. 263). Kiernan usefully suggests that wars force inconsistencies and paradox upon governments and constituents alike: How does the government assist deserving veterans with painful conditions while obstructing attempts by fakers seeking to take advantage of the "system"? What about the documentation and validity of invisible wounds, such as posttraumatic stress and others? How can the government protect privacy—such as veteran records—while also ensuring, or fixing, the competence of such institutions as the Veterans' Affairs (VA) to administer its efforts effectively? Is it possible to tax the American people fairly for the cause of maintaining massive spending on defense while national infrastructure falls into disrepair and important social needs, such as education and other sectors, deserve increased funding?

For his part, Kiernan sets an exacting and readable benchmark in his essay, "Veterans' Readjustment after the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars." As the editors apparently ensured, Kiernan's solid effort is matched by the thirteen other scholars in the collection. Each essay is written with objective balance while retaining awareness of the human costs associated with military service. Collectively, the authors demonstrate nonpartisan academic critiques of American actions that are often provocative, and their essays contribute careful analysis to these long wars. Most usefully, the authors' arguments are amply and consistently supported with evidence guided and driven by pertinent and often unsettling questions.

None of this is to suggest that the book is a pacifist platform or an opportunity to bash neoconservatives cloaked as scholastic objectivity. Rather, the book squarely examines facts and the United States' relationship to war. For instance, an important and acknowledged factor in understanding the legacies of war in Iraq and

Afghanistan includes recognition of the US Army's aptitude and organizational design for long-term conflict and recognition that this is a highly contested subject. Readiness was certainly an issue early in the Iraq War. For example, the late development of Mine Resistant Armor Protected vehicles (MRAPs) was a critical effort in the attempt to replace insufficiently armored vehicles, namely High Mobility Motor Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWV), which were consistently targeted by insurgents using Improvised Explosive Devices (IED). Recruitment and retention of service personnel, such as the policy of stop/loss, also demonstrated many issues. In short, the US military does not get the wars it wants. Long wars, historically, have not been the forte of the United States Department of Defense despite repeated experience conducting them.

Additionally, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq remind us that conflict exemplifies complexity—versus being complicated—in terms of vast social, political, religious, and geographical factors. Fast-paced adaptation in social environments are difficult to penetrate through political-military means. Assessments of war are elusive and solutions, even if they exist, which rarely is the case, are consistently untenable.[2] In one ***War on the Rocks*** analysis, contemporary conflict often demands multi-year operations requiring consistent presence with only very brief periods of high intensity combat. In a study conducted at the Army War College, in a ratio of 18:1, the overwhelming majority of operations undertaken since 1868 consists of long-term operations versus high-intensity, combined arms maneuver.[3] The cost and challenges this ratio elicits is one of many problems explicated in Bailey and Immerman's collection, and several essays address deep-rooted institutional challenges for the US military.

The volume certainly hits multiple nerves, at least among veterans. In my case, as an officer in the US Army Reserve currently pursuing a PhD in history, I read Bailey and Immerman's collection while also rereading William Lederer and Eugene Burdick's ***The Ugly American***, originally published in 1958. As the United States absorbed the shock of the Korean War, while also peering into the unknowns of Indochina, Lederer and Burdick provided their perspective through lessons and warnings: if you go to war, go with clear objectives, put personnel in place who know the language in which operations are conducted, meticulously discern military versus political objectives and ensure that the host nation or government the United States seeks to support is capable of gaining its population's support and that the supported government is able to handle the weight of outside interference and assistance. Regrettably, in the case of Vietnam, ***The Ugly American***'s lessons fell by the wayside. The analysis and critiques of many astute scholars on Indochina—notably Bernard Fall, the subject of my academic work—were often ignored by policymakers. In an echo—perhaps this was the echo chamber Kennan identified—the problem reverberated in 2003, particularly as the United States chose to go to war in Iraq.

As far as ***The Ugly American*** is concerned, the book was brought to the attention of my cohorts during my Captain's Career course in military intelligence at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. The instructor rightfully—if not also righteously—told our class that we were stupid if we did not read Lederer and Burdick's book. As the son of a Vietnam veteran, as well as a student of the French Indochina and Vietnam War, the warning left me concerned over how much I had yet to learn. It also reminded me of issues processing my own past experience from a deployment in Afghanistan. What, if any, did my effort, let alone that of NATO, matter? On an even larger scale, after the initial defeat of the Taliban, how would the United States fix Afghanistan, let alone Iraq? As Afghanistan War veteran and Naval Academy-based scholar Aaron B. O'Connell asks in his chapter, "The Lessons and Legacies of the War in

Afghanistan": at what point was the job done, if ever? (p. 326).

In terms of the *US Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (FM 3-24) (2007), for example, O'Connell assesses that the lessons and legacies of war in Afghanistan must be based on understanding the importance of the supported state's perceived legitimacy among local citizens and international audiences. This first principle of counterinsurgency gaining governmental legitimacy is a challenge that is notoriously difficult to establish through external support. In O'Connell's convincing assessment, it is not possible for "foreign security forces and advisers, speaking foreign languages and carrying with them both guns and foreign cultures," to establish sustainable legitimacy. Indeed, the notion that the United States could somehow shore up the legitimacy of a government from the outside, a concept the United States demonstrably failed to learn in Vietnam, let alone Iraq or Afghanistan, "lacks a foundation in history and logic" (p. 322). O'Connell, like his counterpart Robert K. Brigham in chapter 12, "Lessons and Legacies of the War in Iraq," demonstrates that such misconceptions on the fundamental nature of supporting a partnered nation through counterinsurgency "reflect a failure of imagination that stems from the common human habit of assuming one's own values are universal truths rather than locally constructed norms" (p. 322). Understandably, this demonstrates one facet of the many problems associated with the employment of counterinsurgency doctrine. In context of these observations, O'Connell and Brigham provide pithy analysis that helps readers gain better perspectives in forming interpretations, if not conclusions, regarding war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Out of fairness, Bailey and Immerman's volume cannot get to everything. In some respects, there are several gaps deserving further exploration, and this highly readable and outstanding collection is not without issues. The editorial choice to select only scholars, or veteran scholars, for individual essays is understandable but weakens the book's potential breadth. This is an issue most noticeable in essays reflecting on the experience of combatants' and veterans' postwar struggles. For instance, although Lisa Mundey's essay, "The Combatants' Experiences," is highly commendable, Mundey did not—as far as I know—fight in Afghanistan or Iraq, nor did she cover events in these countries first-hand as a journalist. While this is no indictment on Mundey's strong scholarship, one wonders why authors with first-hand and formidable experience, such as Sebastian Unger (*War* [2011]), Dexter Filkins (*Forever War* [2009]), David Finkel (*Thank You for Your Service* [2014]), or another author-veteran such as Nathaniel Fick (*One Bullet Away: The Making of Marine Officer* [2006]), were not selected to compose on the topic.

These concerns aside, Bailey and Immerman's collection nears the categorization of indispensable. Understanding the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, at this historical point, is the best single volume for both students, service personnel, and serious readers, on the subject of these contentious wars. Gaining a more informed sense of what these wars accomplished in the past decade is a critical step toward doing better, a goal the United States sorely needs to attain, in the decades ahead.

Notes

[1]. George F. Kennan, quoted in Edmund Wilson, *The Bit between My Teeth* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 510.

[2]. See Leo Blanken and Hy Rothstein, *Assessing War: The Challenge of Measuring Success and Failure* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015).

[3]. James King, "Why Unloading Wide Area Security on the Reserve Component Will Not Work," *War on the Rocks*, May 18, 2016, http://warontherocks.com/2016/05/why-unloading-wide-

area-security-operations-on-the-reserve-component-will-not-work.

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