

Pat Proctor. *Lessons Unlearned: The U.S. Army's Role in Creating the Forever Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.* Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2020. 500 pp. \$42.55, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8262-2194-0.

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In his book *Lessons Unlearned, the U.S. Army's Role in Creating the Forever Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq*, Pat Proctor does a masterful job arguing that the United States Army has overfocused on potential high-intensity conventional conflicts at the expense of properly preparing for the far more likely low-intensity wars that have proved so difficult for US forces since the Vietnam War. Among the Army failures that Proctor cites, one theme that returns throughout the book's fifty-year walk through the Army's performance is the consistent refusal of its leadership to tackle the important internal political issues that are key to solving most, if not all, low-intensity conflicts. Furthermore, even when battlefield commanders tackle the thorny diplomatic challenges, they are very reluctant to take sides. He also faults a succession of senior Army leaders who, since the fall of the Soviet Union, has continued to organize, train, and equip the Army for a great-power war that Proctor believes to be highly unlikely, rather than the inevitable series of unconventional small wars that the United States has fought and will continue to fight into the future.

Lessons Unlearned takes us on a four-hundred-page historical journey beginning with Vietnam and concluding with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, including all the conflicts of the twenty-five-plus years in between. Proctor's focus is not

only on how the Army performed during these conflicts, but even more so on the unlearned lessons from these operations that set up the Army for failure in follow-on low-intensity operations. He accepts the Army decision to refocus on high-intensity major combat after the Vietnam War because the Soviet Union still presented an existential threat to Western Europe and had hundreds of thousands of forces with modern conventional equipment poised for combat against US and allied forces. But he is very critical of the Army for not adapting to the new world order that followed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The primary assumption that supports Proctor's focus on a low-intensity Army is that, as he puts it, "there will never be another great power war, at least as long as nuclear weapons remain the dominant feature of the strategic landscape" (p. 402).

Proctor's harshest criticism for senior Army leadership covers the period from 1990 to 2006, after which the Army finally adopted Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, and implemented its doctrinal approach in Iraq in what became known as "The Surge." It is during this period that many military writers and civilian pundits debated with Army traditionalists on the question of what the primary future focus should be. Should the Army continue to organize itself for high-end conflict or instead shift away to a force that is at least par-

tially organized, trained, and equipped to conduct peace enforcement, stability operations, and, eventually, counterinsurgencies, along with other types of low-intensity operations? Proctor begins his case for the latter by highlighting Army missteps in Panama in 1990, when, after the major combat operations were over, conventional Army leaders tried to hand off the stability mission to military police, civil affairs officers, and civil engineers to stabilize the tumultuous situation post high-intensity conflict. The preponderance of these forces were in the Reserve component, and given the delays in getting them fully mobilized and deployed for the overwhelming task of trying to help provide security to a nation of more than two million people, the mission was fraught with failure from the get-go. With the Panama operation wedged between the fall of the Soviet Union and the start of Operation Desert Shield/Storm against Iraq, the stability operations lessons from Panama were quickly overshadowed and went unheeded.

Proctor then discusses the low-intensity conflicts that occurred throughout the 1990s, including Somalia, Haiti, and the various operations in the Balkans during the last half of the decade. He meticulously lays out the case that despite these operations, senior Army leaders, and in particular Army chiefs of staff, ignored the obvious trends toward small wars and continued to push to maintain the Army's ability to fight large conventional wars. The book details how Army leaders recognized that the legacy equipment from the Cold War was too heavy, too slow, and too hard to deploy for the modern battlefield. However, their attempts to modernize had little to do with low-intensity conflict lessons learned from the 1990s, and instead were primarily designed for victory in great-power wars or at the very least designed to dominate the brief high-intensity combat phase of an operation against a regional power. Additionally, Proctor insists that throughout the period just described, Army leaders were steeped in the tradition and culture that the primary responsibility of

the Army was to win the high-intensity phase of a conflict, and then transition the operation to a stability phase led by the Department of State or other diplomats. After this handoff, Army leaders believed they should then enter a supporting role where conventional forces kept belligerents apart and did not take sides in any postconflict political disputes. However, Proctor maintains that the State Department does not have the capacity to enforce a postcombat stability operational phase, and it is only through the threat of force that a political solution can be successfully implemented. Thus, he believes that Army leaders must buy in to the cultural change and embrace the idea that they should be prepared to deal with the inevitable political problems that will arise following the brief high-intensity phase of a combat operation. The Army began to finally acknowledge this through the difficult insurgency years of Iraq, and published Field Manual 3-24 to codify counterinsurgency lessons into doctrine in 2006. However, Proctor fears that now that the Army has withdrawn from Iraq, and as of the writing of his book, mostly withdrawn from Afghanistan, the Army will once again throw out the "baby" with the "bathwater" of those two conflicts, and that the low-intensity conflict lessons will once again go unlearned.

Proctor concludes by recommending that the Army divide its force into a "high-intensity Army" and a "low-intensity Army." He contends that the high-intensity Army should include two corps and four division headquarters, with each division having a light brigade combat team (BCT), a Stryker BCT, and a heavy armored BCT. The low-intensity Army should have two corps and six division headquarters, with each division having one light infantry BCT, and three hybrid BCTs containing light infantry, civil affairs, psychological operations, public affairs, military police, engineers, and logistics forces. To ensure that this new structure does not lead to an A-team versus B-team mentality, Proctor recommends that officers and soldiers transfer back and forth between the

high-intensity and low-intensity Army throughout their careers. He states that only a radical organizational change like this will cement a culture that elevates the importance of the most likely future scenario, which is a continuation of short, limited high-intensity battles that resolve into lengthier and more manpower-intensive low-intensity conflicts.

While Proctor's arguments are very compelling, there were a couple of areas where he could have provided more context to the reasons Army leaders continued to focus on high-intensity conflict following the fall of the Soviet Union. First, there were two significant military conflicts that reinforced the belief that a large conventional force was still required. The first was the execution of Operation Desert Storm against Iraq in 1991, and the second was the US debacle in Somalia in 1993. In Iraq, the successful four-day ground war following forty-one days of air attacks seemed to validate the Powell Doctrine (named for then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell) of overwhelming force. The fact that US ground forces pulled out almost immediately after the high-intensity combat phase seemed to reinforce that the Army organizational structure and cultural posture should remain relatively unchanged other than a natural downsizing of overall forces due to the fall of the Soviet Union. The lesson many military leaders took from Somalia was that the US president and citizenry had become very casualty-averse, and thus had no appetite for long, drawn-out low-intensity operations such as peace enforcement, stability operations, or counterinsurgencies which, if a side were taken, could result in mission "creep" and high casualties. These two operations validated those who believed that the Army needed to keep a large "Sunday punch" capability and should avoid low-intensity conflicts such as those described above if possible.

Another critique of Proctor is that it is arguably easier to pivot from an Army organized,

trained and equipped to fight a high-intensity conflict to one that fights a low-intensity conflict than it would be to do the reverse. This was somewhat proven in Afghanistan and Iraq, albeit in a costly manner, as conventional US forces gradually shifted to a counterinsurgency force, embedding with host nation forces, and patrolling the cities and towns in Iraq following the "surge" of forces. However, if the Army ever finds itself in a fight where it needs more heavy, high-end weapon systems, these cannot be generated quickly, and as Defense Secretary Rumsfeld once said, "you go to war with the Army you have, not the one you want." As a result, if national survival is the number one priority of a nation, then Army leaders could justify the idea that the United States should prepare for the most dangerous potential scenario over the most likely, arguing that an Army built to do the former could also do the latter, even if imperfectly at first.

As a final critique, Proctor could have strengthened his argument for the Army shifting its focus to low-intensity operations by focusing on the rising effectiveness of airpower integration with ground forces over the period he covers in the book. Assuming that a large number of conventional forces would not be fighting without at least air superiority, joint airpower and other joint fires could likely make up for any Army loss of conventional weapons systems as it shifted to the light versus heavy proportions recommended by Proctor. Additionally, given the nature of any potential conflict scenarios against China, the likelihood of a large-scale land battle involving US ground forces is remote. This is not necessarily because of the threat of nuclear war, but simply because it's hard to imagine operational scenarios where large numbers of US land forces would be fighting on land in East Asia, other than possibly a Korean War scenario following any initial North Korean attack on the peninsula. Had Proctor used this as more of a practical, real-world, require-

ments-based argument it would have further strengthened his overall point.

Notwithstanding the minor critiques noted above, Pat Proctor delivers a meticulously sourced, powerful argument that the United States Army was slow to recognize the changing strategic landscape and did not pivot quickly enough to effectively fight the low-intensity conflicts of the last thirty years, and he warns against the possibility that it might happen again. While this book is a convincing indictment of senior Army leadership's inability to adapt quickly enough, it is a valuable resource to the leaders of all of the military branches. Proctor's insightful walk through the last fifty years of Army operations is a must-read for those attending the intermediate and senior military colleges. If *Lessons Unlearned* is assimilated and debated among future senior leaders in the United States military, perhaps its lessons will finally be learned after all.

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