What I’ve Been Reading

The Secret War with Iran: The 30 Year Clandestine Struggle against the World’s Most Dangerous Terrorist Power, by Ronen Bergman (2008)

Bergman, an Israeli journalist, reviews the hostile relations of Iran with the United States and Israel since the dawn of the Islamist Revolution in Iran in 1979. While the book includes some sensationalist claims (such as with Iranian – al-Qaeda ties), much of the remaining narrative is corroborated by other works. Bergman emphasizes the ties between the Shia regime in Iran and Sunni Islamists in the region, including HAMAS and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, rejecting the still-popular although long-disproved notion that Shia and Sunni extremists will not work together against the West. Much of the book focuses on the Hezbollah threat to Israel, as Bergman makes clear the level of control Tehran exercises over its Lebanese creation. He reveals his profound disappointment in European politicians who cut deals with Iran to ignore Iranian-sponsored terrorism in exchange for not being targeted. Bergman is highly critical of the 2006 war with Hezbollah, asserting Israel lost. He also alleges Iran, Syria, and North Korea acted in concert to build the nuclear reactor at al-Khibar that was destroyed in a 2007 Israeli strike. Given the North Korean nuclear developments in 2016 and the Iranian agreement to the JCPOA, this gives rise to new questions about Iranian-North Korean cooperation in the nuclear realm today.


Haynes asks why China has quantitatively increased its strategic nuclear arsenal while the other four “legal” nuclear weapons states (US, UK, Russia, and France) have been reducing their own. Looking at Chinese government, military, and academic sources, she concludes that China is in the midst of a shift from a minimum deterrence strategy to a more robust strategy she terms “limited deterrence.” While this may be so, the evidence presented in the book is rather thin and seems to support a minimum deterrence strategy on its face. Haynes asserts the shift is due to China’s perception of an increased threat to strategic stability from the United States, based on US missile
defense developments and emerging global strike capabilities, coupled with the enhanced prestige attendant to a more sophisticated arsenal. Interestingly, she dismisses other threats, including Russia, Pakistan, and most startlingly, India, as playing significant roles in China’s nuclear policymaking. Overall, the book points to the threat of an expanding Chinese nuclear arsenal, although its theoretical claims invite skepticism.

High Table Diplomacy: The Reshaping of International Security Institutions, by Kjell Engelbrekt (2016)

This work compares the role of formal institutions, represented by the UN Security Council, and informal institutions, represented by the G7, G8, and G20, reviewing how these actors handled traditional conflict management, counterterrorism, and climate change from 2009-2014. He suggests multilateral diplomacy’s failures have caused the rise of minilateral diplomacy (a smaller group of just the most important states). While multilateral groups have greater innate legitimacy, minilateralism seems to provide greater effectiveness. Engelbrekt finds some complementarity in how the institutions address counterterrorism and climate change, while the UNSC jealously guards its prerogative in traditional conflict management. The book is beset by academic jargon and acronyms in which the non-specialist will soon get lost.


In this book, Savage, a New York Times journalist, reviews the Obama Administration’s record regarding national security law, covering topics such as drones, wiretapping, detention of terrorism suspects, the Snowden leaks, and war powers. Savage displays the bias one would expect of an investigative journalist, arguing in favor of complete government transparency in almost every circumstance. Never missing a chance to criticize the Bush Administration, he nonetheless argues that the Obama Administration has largely failed to roll back what he describes as the Bush “security state.” The book’s most interesting sections revolve around internal arguments within the Obama Administration as the principals struggle to reconcile policy preferences with the constraints of law. Having come to office with a naïve idealism about the sanctity of law, the administration is shown to reverse course following the failed 2009 “underwear bomber’s” attack, as it begins to increasingly craft legal judgments to fit its policy desires. While longer than necessary at over 700 pages, the book fills a niche with its
focus on the intersection of policy and law. Overall, this book will appeal to a limited audience, but for that audience, it is worthwhile.


Tierney, a political scientist, argues that when the United States finds itself stuck in a war where it has only limited interests and lacks the political will to commit the resources necessary to unambiguous victory, it should accept a loss. To minimize the harm, he offers a generic strategy of “surge, talk, and leave.” While the premise is reasonable and parts of the argument are well-made, other parts of the book are facile, biased, and naïve. Tierney appears unwilling to consider that less-than-satisfactory endings in Korea and Vietnam actually prevented even worse outcomes. His plans also fail to appropriately consider the effects of the hyper-partisan domestic environment within the United States. Little in the book is original. The basic strategy is nothing more than trying to improve one’s negotiating position before entering into serious talks. Why the adversary would not recognize this and simply refuse to negotiate – given that the premise is the US cannot sustain committing resources to win – is glossed over. Tierney makes clear his belief in training for COIN types of conflict, but does not address how keeping a peer-competitor focus in the military may be key in deterring this far more dangerous type of conflict. Given the resource constraints on the US, training for both of these missions is unlikely. Overall, this is a so-so book that collects some good ideas and makes some good points, but assumes away the most difficult problems.

Good Hunting: An American Spymaster’s Story, by Jack Devine with Vernon Loeb (2014)

In this memoir, Devine, a CIA officer who rose to the position of Acting Director of Operations before retiring in 1998, discusses his involvement in CIA operations opposing Allende in Chile, assisting the mujahideen in 1980s Afghanistan, and countering narcotics traffickers in Latin America. Devine provides a largely self-serving narrative, describing his opposition to endeavors such as Iran-Contra while in the Agency and to enhanced interrogation techniques subsequent to his leaving. Indeed, the last quarter of the book is little more than a commercial for Devine’s post-CIA commercial intelligence business. The book offers a view of covert operations that is much more risk averse and mindful of bureaucratic compliance than that put forward in the memoir of one of Devine’s contemporaries, Duane “Dewey” Clarridge (see below). One suspects
that the Agency and the country are best served when each of these viewpoints is given a full hearing and allowed to push/pull its opposite toward the center.

A Spy for All Seasons: My Life in the CIA, by Duane Clarridge with Digby Diehl (1997)

Clarridge, a beloved figure in CIA history as one of the most daring operations officers of the Cold War era, offers an entertaining memoir, pulling no punches. He recounts his early years spent trying to recruit agents, before detailing his involvement in supporting the Contras in Nicaragua and his later development of the trend-setting ops/analysis integration at the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center. Clarridge praises former CIA Directors Bush and Casey, while slamming others such as Colby, Turner, and Webster, for their risk aversion and failure to understand CIA culture. Clarridge also targets individual Congressmen, such as former Senator Daniel Moynihan, as “liars” who knowingly misled the public about their knowledge of covert operations. While supportive of covert action as a key tool, Clarridge is clear that covert action “cannot and should not stand as the sole element of foreign policy.” Clarridge’s bitterness at the Independent Counsel process and the lack of CIA legal protection for individual officers is apparent, although he separates his love of the CIA from the bureaucratic problems. Overall, this is an interesting book for those interested in what the CIA actually does.

The Secretary: A Journey with Hillary Clinton from Beirut to the Heart of American Power, by Kim Ghattas (2013)

This book covers Hillary Clinton’s time as Secretary of State, as seen through the eyes of a member of the traveling press pool. The author is a Lebanese-born reporter for the BBC, who makes the book as much about her own perception of U.S. diplomatic power as it is about Hillary Clinton. Ghattas is clearly a big fan of Clinton, praising the Secretary’s admission that sometimes the United States has to prioritize its own interests over “feel-good” measures that benefit others. For Ghattas, this rather obvious truth appears to be an epiphany, helping her understand U.S. foreign policy both in the Middle East and more broadly. While the book is well-written and entertaining, there are few new insights regarding Clinton. What does come across is the whining, entitled, self-important nature of the press, seemingly focused on their own personal comfort as much as on performing their professional duty. Overall, this is light reading that is both enjoyable and insignificant.
The Envoy: From Kabul to the White House, My Journey through a Turbulent World, by Zalmay Khalilzad (2016)

Having served as Ambassador to Afghanistan (2003-05), Ambassador to Iraq (2005-07), and Ambassador to the United Nations (2007-09), Khalilzad occupied key seats of power in the George W. Bush Administration. This autobiography provides few new details of policy debates, instead offering a view of the difficulties of policy implementation in Afghanistan and Iraq. As a student of Professor Albert Wohlstetter at the Univ. of Chicago, Khalilzad evinces an understanding of realist strategic planning; as an Afghan-born immigrant to the United States, he displays an idealist’s optimism. Together, these traits made him an easy fit within the neoconservative power structure present in the Bush Administration. Much of this book focuses on his postings in Kabul and Baghdad, where he recounts the problems faced executing American policy. Khalilzad provides sympathetic treatment of Hamid Karzai, insisting the United States mishandled this relationship by emphasizing Karzai’s weaknesses while failing to take advantage of Karzai’s strengths. Likewise, Khalilzad casts Nuri al-Maliki in a positive light, asserting that al-Maliki’s sectarian impulses could be contained as long as al-Maliki had confidence that the U.S. government would support him. He is critical of the Bush Administration for failing to act against Pakistan when Pakistani aid to the Taliban was made evident and for a similar failure to act against Iran when Iranian aid to Shia militias in Iraq became clear. He also condemns American unwillingness (due to domestic legislation) to provide financial support to liberal parties in newly democratizing states when American enemies are providing millions of dollars to proxies in the same elections. Contrasting this current policy with U.S. policy at the outset of the Cold War, Khalilzad argues that funds helped liberal democratic parties repel Soviet-funded challengers at a far cheaper price than that associated with military deployments. Overall, this is a relatively innocuous book, devoid of sensationalist details and indicative of an author who retains future political ambitions.


The strength of this book is the presentation of specific small-unit engagements. The weakness is the facile analysis offered regarding the book’s title. Bolger, a retired Army Lt. General, concludes that counterinsurgency cannot work unless foreign forces show the “will to remain forever” (429). Accordingly, Bolger suggests that U.S. forces should only be used in “rapid, decisive, conventional operations” at which they excel (433).
While this may be the ideal, it overlooks the rather obvious point that few adversaries are likely to adopt a strategy that will permit the U.S. to rely on rapid, decisive, conventional operations. State adversaries have learned from the asymmetric means of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and Daesh, evidenced by the Russian use of “little green men” in Ukraine and Chinese use of civilian white-hulls and fishing fleets in the conquest of the South China Sea. Bolger seems to forget that the enemy gets a vote. Unsurprisingly, given his conclusions, Bolger is critical of the “COINdinistas” and their leader David Petraeus, who is portrayed as a self-promoting media hog and charter member of the “Adjutants, Aides, and Assholes” club. Indeed, after reading Bolger’s analysis, one gets the impression that if a conflict doesn’t offer an opportunity to replay 1991’s Desert Storm, then the military will have little to offer. For a Lt. General, this extraordinarily limited view of strategic capability is disappointing.

Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror, by Michael V. Hayden (2016)

Hayden, former head of both the National Security Agency (NSA), 1999-2005, and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) 2006-2009, offers his perspective on the various controversies affecting the U.S. Intelligence Community (USIC) in the decade following 9/11. Throughout the book, Hayden discusses the tension between security and privacy, asserting that the United States has yet to address the proper balance in a reasoned manner. Rather, extremists from both sides have hijacked the argument, creating emotionally-driven straw-man arguments. He is highly critical of disingenuous politicians, who refuse to provide legal cover for effective programs, but expect the USIC to provide the intelligence derived from such programs. Although originally appointed to head NSA by a Democrat, Hayden presents a viewpoint much more commensurate with the Republican Party, as he blasts Obama Administration policies. Hayden defends the rendition, detention, and interrogation programs of the 2000s, as well as the metadata collection of US phone calls by NSA. He stresses that intelligence cannot be governed by the same standards as criminal justice, as the two have very different purposes. Ultimately, Hayden judges USIC actions by what it will be able to say after the next major terrorist attack – did we do everything within our legal power and operational capability to prevent it? While opinionated and clearly hostile to the Obama Administration, the book raises important questions. Overall, this is an interesting, albeit ordinary, memoir of a senior intelligence officer at a time of great change in the intelligence community.
The Craft of Intelligence, by Allen W. Dulles (1963)

Former CIA Director Dulles (1953-61), reviews the basic purposes and missions of an intelligence agency, arguing that “too much secrecy can be self-defeating.” Throughout the book, Dulles notes the tension between a democratic state that prizes transparency and the necessity for an intelligence organization. Written during the Cold War, the book contrasts the limits on Western intelligence compared to its counterparts in the Soviet realm. Dulles does his best to dispel the idea that intelligence work resembles James Bond adventurism, walking through the more mundane reality. The work is more a primer for those interested in understanding the intelligence profession than a compilation of breathless tales of intrigue. Thus, while it is not the most exciting book available on intelligence, it is nonetheless a useful reference for those unfamiliar with the history and daily tasks of American intelligence.

The Savior Generals, by Victor Davis Hanson (2013)

Hanson reviews the exploits of five Generals (Themistocles, Belisarius, Sherman, Ridgway, and Petraeus) who were given command in a losing situation and charged with reversing the tide. He compares the various cases, looking for common characteristics among the Generals. In each case, he finds an iconoclast who considered the political goal of the conflict first and developed a military strategy in accordance therewith. While this simple concept may seem like the first day’s lesson in Strategy 101, the regularity with which it is ignored is striking. Each General had limited resources and/or limited time with which to work, forcing hard choices. Following their greatest successes, each found fewer triumphs in more ordinary circumstances, due in no small part to the resentment and jealousy felt by their fellow Generals or political masters. Hanson’s work is popular history, with an easy flowing narrative aimed at the non-specialist. Overall, this entertaining book is as much a testament to the weakness of human character as it is to the contextual brilliance of a select few.

The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century, by Brad Roberts (2016)

This is one of the best books on contemporary nuclear strategy to be published since the turn of the century. Roberts, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Obama Administration from 2009-2013, provides a clear and sober argument as to why nuclear weapons remain relevant in today’s security environment. Rather than directly attack
the Global Zero movement as Pollyanna pie-in-the-sky dreamers, Roberts grants that the complete abolition of nuclear arms might someday be possible, but that day is not now. Indeed, he promotes the concept of nuclear disarmament as a legitimate objective (a point on which I would disagree), and highlights measures the Obama Administration has taken toward that end. Yet, given the current political climate in Moscow, along with the potential threats from Beijing and regional challengers, he concludes that additional moves in that direction at this time would threaten U.S. security. The strength of the book lies in its dispassionate analysis of the threat environment and how nuclear arms figure into the equation. Roberts walks through the “theories of victory” adopted by other nuclear-armed regimes in a potential confrontation with a “conventionally-superior, nuclear-armed” state like the United States. He convincingly demonstrates the fallacy of existential deterrence as argued by the late Kenneth Waltz, by explaining the importance of perceptions regarding the balance of interests and the difficulty of ensuring credibility. He then offers the components of what he sees as necessary to a modern deterrence strategy capable of preventing such theories of victory from being tested. While missile defense, conventional global strike capability, strengthened alliances, and deployed conventional presence all contribute to such deterrence, ultimately, a contextually tailored nuclear deterrent force is also imperative. Roberts also points to the role America’s nuclear arms play in reassuring allies of American will and strength, and thus, through extended deterrence, of the role these arms play in preventing additional nuclear proliferation (among both friends and potential enemies). As the fight over funding modernization of the strategic triad gears up, this book is a timely, non-ideological, analysis that should be required reading for all sides of the debate.


Gall, a New York Times reporter, makes the case that the true enemy of the United States in Afghanistan has been Pakistan. She asserts that Islamists, including al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Haqqani network among others, continue to be supported by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate, with the knowledge and backing of the top officials in Pakistan’s military. The logic is that Pakistan’s military leaders see Islamists as a useful tool in countering secular Pashtun nationalism that might otherwise pursue a Pashtunistan that would include part of Pakistan; in sustaining the Indian threat (by provocation when necessary) and thereby sustaining the privileged position of the Pakistani military domestically; and in ensuring Pakistani influence in Afghanistan so as to permit strategic depth for Pakistan in event of war with India. Gall finds that the ISI
remains supportive of Islamists even where it cannot completely control them and even where Islamists have attacked the Pakistani state. The book is critical of US efforts in the region, from feckless diplomacy with Pakistan to reckless military endeavors that alienated the Afghan population. It is also critical of Hamid Karzai as being politically astute, but incompetent with respect to substantive governance. Gall commends the Afghan local police initiative, but notes the lack of central government support for such in Kabul. Ultimately, she argues that without increased restraints on Pakistan, there is little hope for stability in Afghanistan.

American Spartan: The Promise, the Mission, and the Betrayal of Special Forces Major Jim Gant, by Ann Scott Tyson (2014)

After serving in Afghanistan, Major Jim Gant authored an influential essay entitled “One Tribe at a Time” in 2009, advocating a counterinsurgency approach focused on empowering local tribally-based security forces. The paper fit well with the COIN principles embraced by Gen. David Petraeus and raised Gant’s profile well above the norm for an officer of his rank. When he returned to Afghanistan, he attempted to further his ideas; however, both his reputation and his willingness to ignore Army rules and regulations he found cumbersome created difficulties with some officers in his chain of command. Unfortunately, Gant also improperly used pain medications and perhaps steroids, as well as bringing his newspaper reporter girlfriend to come live with him in the field and sharing classified information with her - blatantly improper conduct that justified his immediate relief from command. This book is written by the news reporter girlfriend who went on to become his wife. As such it is heavily biased, dismissing Gant’s misconduct as minor and asserting his relief was due to petty jealousy by bureaucratic desk-bound officers. Nonetheless, if one cuts through the over-the-top tributes to Gant’s “warrior” ethos, the book implicitly raises interesting questions. Gant believed that the Afghan central government was corrupt, incompetent, and unsupported by the majority of Afghans; thus, he saw development of local security forces and cooperation with tribal elders as the only path to stability. To create these forces, Gant provided arms, ammunition, and fuel rather than relying on the Afghan logistics systems. Undeniably, Gant’s approach showed tremendous tactical success. Explaining and demonstrating this is the strength of this book. Yet, the book fails to consider whether this was a sustainable strategic model. Creating heavily-armed local security forces with few ties to a central government seems highly likely to return Afghanistan to regional warlordism. Without U.S. logistical support, these local forces would likely either collapse or be bought by wealthy strongmen. Provided such forces remained antagonistic to Islamist extremism, this outcome could be satisfactory with
respect to American interests; however, this is the situation that led to the development of the Taliban in the first place. Overall, this is an interesting book regarding COIN, and a sad story of an officer’s personal failures.

Company Man: Thirty years of Controversy and Crisis in the CIA, by John Rizzo (2014)

A career attorney at CIA who rose to head the Agency’s Office of General Counsel, Rizzo recounts his experiences under a variety of Agency Directors. In particular, Rizzo recounts his role in approving the CIA’s enhanced interrogation techniques (EIT’s) and the disingenuous response by Congressional leaders when the techniques became public. Rizzo castigates politicians such as Nancy Pelosi, Dianne Feinstein, Ron Wyden, and Carl Levin for their duplicity and public posturing while refusing to attend closed hearings to get the answers to questions they asked in open hearings. In addition, he offers unqualified support regarding the efficacy and importance of EIT’s. Finally, he is very critical of Attorney General Eric Holder for reopening investigations into CIA conduct, forcing CIA employees to hire private counsel, only to close all the investigations after years of wasting taxpayer resources when he failed to find anything different from the prior investigations of the Department of Justice. Yet, Rizzo’s failure to support the destruction of videotapes revealing the identities of CIA employees involved in interrogating terrorist suspects ultimately forced another official to take the lead and destroy the tapes, for which the employee was later reprimanded. This moral failure of Rizzo helps define the difference between the bureaucratic side of the Agency and the actual operators. Overall, this book is interesting but of little consequence.


Hill, a U.S. Ambassador to Macedonia, Poland, South Korea, and Iraq, describes his life in the Foreign Service, including significant involvement in the Dayton Accords ending the Bosnian War, negotiations with Serbian President Milosevic in the Kosovo Crisis, leading the U.S. delegation from 2005-2009 in the 6-Party Talks aimed at North Korean denuclearization, and overseeing the U.S. Embassy in Iraq from 2009-2010. A protégé of
both Lawrence Eagleburger and Richard Holbrooke, Hill advocates a pragmatic, non-ideological view of diplomacy, accomplishing what is possible and willingly taking a “kick the can down the road” approach to seemingly intractable problems. He subscribes to a personalistic focus of building relationships with foreign interlocutors. Hill is highly critical of the neoconservatives in the first George W. Bush Administration, although, puzzlingly, he excuses Bush from any criticism. Highly sensitive to criticism of diplomats and the Department of State in general, Hill comes across in this book as a prime example of the very stereotype he despises – the elitist, self-important bureaucrat who feels chronically under-appreciated. His last posting to Iraq seems to have been poorly considered, given his lack of Middle East experience, background knowledge, or familiarity with the military. Within the section of the book relating his experience in Iraq, he confuses details and demonstrates misunderstanding of the military. Having supported the candidacy of Nouri al-Maliki to a second term as Prime Minister, he tries to defend al-Maliki’s tenure, denying al-Maliki’s ties to Tehran and culpability in the increased sectarianism occurring after U.S. troops withdrew. Overall, this is a fairly average memoir, of interest primarily for showing how a senior U.S. diplomat perceived his own situation.

The Impossible State: North Korea, Past and Future, by Victor Cha (2012)

Stemming from his academic study of North Korea, his experience in the National Security Council from 2004-2007, and his time as member of the U.S. government delegation negotiating with the North Koreans, Cha offers his understanding of the North Korean regime. He contends that the regime, under Kim Jong-Un, is taking a harder line in an attempt to return to the policies of the country’s most successful era during the Cold War. Cha calls this “Neo-juche revivalism” in that it returns to the self-reliance of the juche ideology dominant in the 1960s and 1970s, while maintaining the military-first character introduced by Kim Jong-Il in the 1990s. However, he contends that the brief introduction of economic reforms in the early 2000s brought irreversible change to North Korean society, despite the regime’s retraction of the reforms. Thus, he argues that government and society are moving in different directions, which will lead to a crisis sooner rather than later. Cha rejects the notion that U.S. intransigence led to North Korea’s nuclear program, painstakingly walking through the history of the regime, its use of terrorism, its disregard of human rights, and its long record of duplicity, crossing every U.S. administration since the regime’s founding. He also is skeptical that China will be a positive influence in helping to moderate, much less remove, the Kim regime, as China engages in economic exploitation of North Korean mineral wealth.
without responsibility for the environment or the people so long as the Kim regime remains. Overall, this is a well-written, if somewhat redundant, book that provides a right-of-center view to balance the typical left-of-center tenor found in many academic works.

**Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis, by Mike Chinoy (2009)**

This work recounts U.S. efforts to deal with the North Korean nuclear program during 2000-2009. Chinoy, a former CNN reporter, makes clear his belief that the proper policy should have been direct bilateral negotiations with the North Koreans to keep the Clinton-era Agreed Framework alive, regardless of whether North Korea was clandestinely pursuing a uranium-based weapons program. He demonizes hardliners in the Bush Administration, asserting they are to blame for North Korea’s actual production and testing of nuclear arms in 2006 and 2009. Chinoy cheers on State Department officials who consciously tried to obstruct Bush’s policy, demonstrating an apparent belief that unelected elites should ignore democratically elected policymakers. Substantively, Chinoy never addresses the argument that offering North Korea benefits to give up its nuclear program incentivizes other states to pursue nukes as bargaining chips as well. Despite the heavy bias, the book does offer a useful glimpse into U.S. policymaking and the internecine bureaucratic fights that shape it. In addition, the book does a god job showing how other members of the 6-party talks had their own independent agendas. Still, the presentation by Chinoy reflects a journalist who has been captured by his subject (North Korea) and adopted its perspective. Overall, this is an entertaining and useful work, as long as it is taken as a point of view rather than a factual history.

**Iran’s Political Economy since the Revolution, by Suzanne Maloney (2015)**

This book tackles an often-covered subject, Iranian political history since the Islamic Revolution of 1979; however, it approaches it from an economic perspective. Maloney argues that while religious ideology is clearly a vital part of understanding the regime’s politics, economics is also an important factor in understanding Iranian politics. She contends that the multi-faceted coalition that came together in opposition to the Shah established a foundation of varied economic perspectives that survived even after the Islamists seized control and purged other elements from power. As a result, she argues
that an Islamist faction preferring socialist policies has engaged in a long-running competition with an Islamist faction favoring private property rights, albeit under the greater goal of Islamicization of society. By the end of the Iran-Iraq War, a third Islamist faction dedicated to pragmatic economic policies implemented by technocrats in a relatively non-ideological fashion rose to power, generating blowback from both prior groups. Overall, whether the reader agrees with Maloney’s interpretation of events or not, the book is a welcome addition to the literature covering the Islamic regime.


Woods, a British journalist and television producer, provides a “60 Minutes” style attack piece condemning the American use of drones. From the introduction, where he suggests the CIA has committed “war crimes” and the United States engages in regular “assassination,” Woods makes clear his viewpoint. His central thesis is that because civilians have been killed in drone strikes, use of drones is “wrong.” Yet, this conclusion seems illogical given that Woods admits that drone strikes are typically more precise than other air strikes and cause less damage than a large ground force would. Woods presents a false dichotomy by framing the issue as a choice between striking terrorists while accepting some civilian deaths and not striking so that no civilians die. He never considers the possibility that not striking will allow the spared terrorist to kill civilians in the future. It is impossible to know how many civilians these men would kill in further terrorist attacks; yet, this is not justification for ignoring it in considering whether to risk civilian deaths in an attack on a known murderer. The book is marked by skepticism of US government sources coupled with blind acceptance of sources such as Taliban officials, Yemeni tribesmen, and retired Pakistani Generals. There are serious questions regarding drone strikes, from strategic, legal, and moral perspectives. While this book does raise some of these questions, it does little to advance the discussion.


Known for geopolitical work, Kaplan contends the United States is a modern imperial power due to its deployment of military forces in areas across the globe. Defining empires as a condition in which “the demand for absolute...security at home leads one to conquer the world,” Kaplan claims that American imperialism is marked not by colonies, but by providing security assistance to regimes so as to develop dependence. Fortunately, the book is not tied to this highly debatable proposition. Instead, Kaplan
describes his visits to U.S. military detachments in such varied locales as the Philippines, Mongolia, Colombia, Yemen, Djibouti, Afghanistan and Iraq. What emerges is a portrait of relatively junior American officers and staff NCOs conducting practical boots-on-the-ground diplomacy in an effort to shape the environment in dangerous areas. Kaplan praises the pragmatic approach that eschews idealistic notions of bringing Western democracy and embraces realistic goals of working with people as they are, warts and all. He is critical of an overly bureaucratic Washington that limits local commanders’ flexibility, arguing that small bands of Special Forces contribute far more by training indigenous trainers than do larger deployments encumbered with a bloated chain of command. Overall, this is an interesting journalistic account of small unit deployments from 2001-2005.


Ricks, a columnist for Foreign Policy and former reporter for the Washington Post, who wrote a devastating critique of the first few years of US military strategy in Iraq in his book Fiasco, then followed up with praise for Gen. Petraeus’s COIN strategy in The Gamble, takes on the subject of current American Army Generalship. He argues that Gen. George Marshall set the gold-standard in World War II by giving subordinates a chance to succeed without micromanagement, but relieving them from command if unable to produce desired results. Such relief was not career-ending, but rather a recognition that the relieved commander was not performing to standard in the particular position. Ricks argues that since World War II, the quality of US Army Generalship has steadily deteriorated as a bureaucratic, conformist culture that retards innovation has arisen. Generals have failed to relieve poorly performing subordinates as a focus on protecting individual careers has transcended accountability. Proficiency in tactics has been rewarded, while strategic thinking has been neglected, resulting in Generals such as Tommy Franks and Ricardo Sanchez. Ricks calls for a return to prior practice of “swift, but not terminal relief” for poor performers, broader education for senior leaders, reforms in officer promotions, changes in rotation policy, and rewarding merit rather than standing in line for command assignments. While Ricks is not shy from introducing his personal biases into this work, it nevertheless demands serious consideration as a legitimate critique. Overall, this is a very strong book that should accompany H.R. McMaster’s Dereliction of Duty as indispensable reading for today’s professional officer corps and civilian strategists.
The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq, by Emma Sky (2015)

Recounting her personal experience in Iraq, Sky offers a critique of the U.S. effort that levels blame at both the Bush and Obama Administrations. A British national who opposed the war and originally came to Iraq to help rebuild, Sky found herself working alongside the American Army in Kirkuk. Developing a grudging respect for the soldiers, she progressed to become political advisor to General Ray Odierno during his time commanding MNC-Iraq. In this position, she participated in top level political and military discussions, making a name for herself as someone who brought a different perspective to the typical conservative military view. Sky is critical of the Coalition Provisional Authority, contending it provided little useful guidance and few resources, resulting in the US military taking responsibility for governance, economic development, and political reconciliation by default. Sky deftly uses her British nationality as a means of distancing herself from the US military in order to gain the confidence of Sunni Iraqis, while also exercising patience and understanding with sectarian Shias. The book displays how Sky began highly biased against the US military, only to find that her beliefs about the military were not only wrong, but often simple-minded caricatures. Contrary to some accounts of what went wrong in Iraq, Sky looks to the 2010 elections as the turning point. When Ayad al-Allawi’s Iraqiya party won more seats than Nuri al-Maliki’s State of Law list in the elections, Sky argues the US should have backed the election result. When the Obama Administration failed to support Allawi, Sky claims non-sectarian groups were cast aside and American claims of support for democracy were invalidated. She contends the election was perceived across Iraq as a contest between Iran and the United States, yet the US seemed oblivious, failing to act while Iran actively pushed to build support for al-Maliki. In turn, when Maliki was allowed to prevail, he paid his debt to the Iranians by rejecting a follow-on agreement to allow US troops to remain in Iraq after 2011 and by adopting anti-Sunni measures that destroyed chances for reconciliation. Overall, this is one of the stronger memoirs to emerge from the Iraq War, offering a balanced critique that assigns blame to Americans (Republicans and Democrats) and Iraqis alike.


Naylor, a long-time Army Times reporter who previously wrote the defining account of Operation Anaconda, provides a comprehensive review of Joint Special Operations
Command (JSOC) from its founding in 1980 through 2014. Originally envisioned as an organization dedicated to small direct-action missions, such as hostage-rescue or counterterrorist raids, JSOC has evolved into a much larger entity with advance force operations, indigenous intelligence collection, and interagency coordinating capabilities, in addition to its direct action focus. Naylor’s account focuses on tactical missions – the stuff of Hollywood blockbusters. Yet, he also traces the organizational evolution and the political battles both within the special operations community and between the community and conventional armed forces. Naylor pillories former JSOC commander Dell Dailey, portraying him as risk averse and overly concerned with image. Conversely, he lauds Dailey’s successor, Stan McChrystal, as an unrelenting force who turned JSOC into a highly efficient machine. McChrystal’s successor, William McRaven, is characterized as generally following McChrystal’s playbook, but being a micro-manager who holds too tight a leash. Overall, this is a good review of JSOC missions, compiled in a single volume, meant to appeal to the action-focused voyeur more than the professional strategist.


This book fits within the “critical theory” category, with the authors attempting to apply discourse constructivism in explaining Japanese security policy. Hostile to the traditional concept of state-centered national security, the authors plead instead for a human-security approach that prioritizes universal social welfare. The book argues that state policymakers perceive threats and allocate risks in a subjective manner, resulting in over-emphasizing foreign state threats and under-emphasizing everyday threats to the social welfare of particular domestic groups. The book explores three subjects, Japanese policy toward China, North Korea, and US bases in Okinawa. Unfortunately, the book is more normative screed than scholarly research. By the third section (Okinawa), discourse constructivism is barely in evidence. Relying heavily on liberal assumptions, anecdotal evidence, and simplistic logic, the authors decry policies that they assert unfairly harm subgroups within Japan. For example, they contend the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands have strategic value as it is unlikely China would occupy the islands, much less attack Japan (p. 65). On this assumption, they assert Japan can discount the threat from China. The authors insist North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons is solely for deterring foreign invasion, that the threat of North Korea launching ballistic missiles is “statistically miniscule,” and that chances of Japanese citizens being abducted by North Korean agents is “negligible.” Yet, while these threats are minimized by the authors, they contend the threat of harm from US military aircraft
accidents in Okinawa are substantial – despite the absence of any civilian injuries from such in over 45 years (whereas in the same period there were multiple ballistic missile launches and Japanese citizen abductions). Identified “unfair harms” include “stress,” “anxiety,” and disproportionate “noise pollution.” There is no recognition that all policies have opportunity costs that will affect various domestic subgroups unequally. Overall, the primary redeeming feature of the book – its attempt to apply discourse constructivism – is unevenly executed, leaving little but an ideologically charged diatribe against traditional national security.

Dining with Al-Qaeda: Three Decades Exploring the Many Worlds of the Middle East, by Hugh Pope (2010)

Pope, a long-time newspaper reporter, recounts his many years reporting from the Middle East. Much of the book is spent complaining that Americans do not understand the Middle East and are reflexively pro-Israel. Pope, an Englishman, takes a consistently liberal approach, arguing against all military action, advocating a one-state solution for the Israeli-Palestinian Arab conflict, supporting the removal of travel restrictions to the US for Middle Easterners, and insisting on greater engagement with Iran. Although he contends other reporters do not stick to the facts, his own stories seem problematic in this regard: for example, he claims to have seen Marines arriving in Lebanon after they had taken part in action in Grenada in 1983, prior to the Beirut airport bombing (p. 44). However, this could not be, as the Marine barracks bombing at the airport occurred on Oct. 23, whereas the Grenada invasion occurred Oct. 25. There are parts of the book that are illuminating as to Middle Eastern perceptions. Unfortunately, these tend to be overwhelmed by Pope’s constant moralizing.

You Run the Show or the Show Runs You: Capturing Professor Harold W. Rood’s Strategic Thought for a New Generation, by J.D. Crouch II and Patrick Garrity (2015)

(In the interest of full disclosure, I had the good fortune to learn from Professor Rood as a student and was honored to have him serve on my Master's Thesis Committee).

Professor Harold Rood was an iconoclast and a provocateur par excellence. He would challenge students by constructing elaborate theses of strategic action by America’s adversaries that would strain credulity – while doing so with a slight smile and a steely gaze that left the uninitiated unsure if he was joking, brilliant, or positively mad. With
some deeper thought given to his presentations, one would often realize that the arguments advanced were based on a series of clear strategic principles. Undoubtedly, Dr. Rood enjoyed tweaking academic sensibilities and using extremes to make his points, but his points were indeed made. In this book, two of his former students – accomplished scholars and practitioners in their own right – bring together some fifty years of Roodian strategic thought. Beginning with a simple definition of politics, from which a series of principles are derived, the authors work through Professor Rood’s analyses of major global and regional issues. While he would not, perhaps, have agreed to (or cared about) the notion, these principles provide a concise, yet powerful formulation of classical realist thought. At the heart of this was Dr. Rood’s central tenet: “Sooner or later, there will be war.” Thus, how states prepare in the meantime for this inevitability will greatly influence the regularity of their involvement, the conduct of the war itself, and the aftermath thereof with the attendant re-shuffling of the international political organization. For Professor Rood, strategic superiority is often obtained in the accumulation of incremental advantages that together provide the freedom and flexibility to prevail. Coincidences do not exist; if something requires effort, there is purpose behind it. “Cui bono?” he would ask. As relevant to the emergence of ISIS as to the Napoleonic Wars or the advances of the Kaiser’s Army, the ideas presented in this book illuminate strategic thinking. Whether one agrees with Professor Rood’s conclusions or not, an understanding of the logic presented is essential to an understanding of International Relations. Overall, this is a terrific work that educates, provokes, and stimulates in the spirit of its protagonist.

The Fourth Star, by David Cloud and Greg Jaffe (2009)

This book chronicles the careers of four American Army Generals - David Petraeus, John Abizaid, Peter Chiarelli, and George Casey – who came to play leading roles in the Army’s efforts in Iraq during the first decade of the 2000s. While the book follows the rise of these four officers in a chronological fashion, the underlying theme is the development of the Army’s counterinsurgency strategy. Casey and Abizaid are linked to the “minimize the American footprint in foreign lands” school that seeks to train host nation forces quickly so as to enable American withdrawal. Conversely, Petraeus and Chiarelli prioritize securing the civilian population, using an expansive American presence that spread U.S. troops among the people, while building the host nation economic and political capacity. Whereas the deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq completed the retreat from the Powell Doctrine begun in Bosnia, Somalia, Haiti, and Kosovo in the 1990s, the book makes clear that the Army has yet to agree on how to fight small wars. With its focus on individuals rather than doctrine directly, this book is a
good complement to Fred Kaplan’s *The Insurgents*. The authors, newspaper writers, do an admirable job of telling the story without editorializing. Overall, this is a well-conceived and well-executed book for those interested in counterinsurgency.

**Angler: The Cheney Vice Presidency, by Barton Gellman (2008)**

Written by a former Washington Post journalist, this book is little more than a hatchet job portraying Cheney and his counsel, David Addington, as the “dark side” (a phrase Gellman uses) in the first few years of the George W. Bush Administration. Cheney is accused of lying about the purpose of war in Iraq, arranging the NSA surveillance program, developing harsh interrogation techniques, keeping Guantanamo Bay’s detention center running, destroying the environment, disregarding the judiciary, alienating Congress, and nearly causing most of the Department of Justice to resign. By the end of the book, Gellman abandons any pretense of objectivity, choosing to directly offer his own opinions in rebuttals to Cheney. Throughout the work, Gellman slants the narrative so as to portray Cheney as an all-powerful genius, subtly inserting his own agenda unbeknownst to the President. A better author would have presented the events and the logic of the parties in more objective fashion, letting the readers draw their own conclusions. Unfortunately, Gellman is a classic case of an Ivy-League elitist overly impressed with his own views and endowed with the certainty that those who disagree are simply too dumb to understand. Overall, this book is a waste of time; those interested in Cheney’s influence are far better served by Peter Baker’s *Days of Fire*.

**America’s Victories: Why the U.S. Wins Wars and Will Win the War on Terror, by Larry Schweikart (2007)**

This is a sweeping review of how American culture contributes to American military success. Unabashedly conservative, Schweikart defends American exceptionalism, repudiating the leftist narrative of American imperialism. Schweikart argues that American cultural attributes including respect for life, willingness to learn from experience, promotion of individual initiative, innovativeness, and economic productivity, coupled with the citizen-soldier ethic create a military capable of adapting and succeeding across time and space. At times, the book’s focus on military success overwhelms the more important measure of whether the military success led to political success. Particular scorn is reserved for the liberal Hollywood establishment, “mainstream media,” and academia; however, Schweikart contends
that anti-war protestors have actually strengthened America’s military by causing it to pay additional attention to training and casualty minimization. Overall, the book offers some interesting arguments, but its partisanship will cause it to be dismissed by liberal academics.


Somewhat mistitled, this book spends an equal amount of time on Operation Just Cause – the 1989 Panama invasion – as it does Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Woodward focuses on the political decision to employ force, providing an insider’s account of the build-up to these deployments. Dick Cheney and Colin Powell are the stars of the book, with lesser attention paid to President George H.W. Bush, Brent Scowcroft, Jim Baker, Max Thurman, and Norman Schwarzkopf. The primary value of the work is to see how individual personalities influence policy-making.


Burns, a retired historian from California State University – Los Angeles, and Coyle, a political appointee in the Carter, Clinton, and Obama administrations, offer a basic summary of nuclear nonproliferation efforts. This book is primarily of use to those who are just beginning to study nonproliferation as it simply catalogs the various elements of the nuclear nonproliferation regime. The authors explicitly reject any effort to apply any scholastic theory to aid understanding, preferring to give their own interpretation of history in narrative form. The book is far from a partisan screed; however, the authors’ political views do color their presentation of facts. Regular factual or editing errors are annoying: e.g. the authors claim that Iran signed the NPT, but never ratified it (p. 13), only to state later that Iran did ratify it (p. 108); the authors claim that “technically the United States and North Korea are still at war” (p. 17, 19) – a claim that is wrong as the United States never declared war on North Korea; the authors credit the Clinton Administration for getting Belarus to join the Cooperative Threat Reduction in 1992 (141), apparently ignoring the fact the Clinton Administration did not assume office until January 1993. While not fatal, this type of sloppy editing does diminish the book. Overall, it is an adequate introduction to the topic; for those more enmeshed in the subject, it is a book to skip.
One Million Steps: A Marine Platoon at War, by Bing West (2014)

This book covers the deployment of a Marine infantry platoon in Sangin, Afghanistan (northeast Helmand province) during 2010-2011. West recounts the daily toll of constant patrolling in an area rife with IED’s and bereft of popular support, basing his account on interviews, logs, and his own short-term embedding with the Marines of 3/5. The overarching theme of the book is that the Marines performed heroically, but ultimately in furtherance of a fatally-flawed strategy. West is highly critical of the COIN strategy emplaced, arguing that the need for security demanded traditional war-fighting tactics aimed at killing the enemy rather than engaging in civil state-building. He is particularly critical of Gen. McChrystal’s tactical directive setting forth ridiculously constrained rules of engagement, Secretary of Defense Gates’s failure to reconcile a flawed strategy with his own observations of ground-truth, and President Obama’s inane decision to commit troops to COIN with a pre-ordained withdrawal point. With the corrupt Karzai government, sanctuary in Pakistan, and incompetent local forces, COIN had little chance, even if it had been properly resourced. West highlights the tight bonding that occurs within small combat units, demonstrating that the Marines fought not out of political conviction, but out of professionalism and brotherhood. Overall, the book is a dis-spiriting reminder of the truism that brilliance in tactics or operations is meaningless in the face of bad strategy.

The Great War of Our Time: The CIA’s Fight against Terrorism from Al Qa’ida to ISIS, by Michael Morell (2015)

The former Deputy Director of the CIA, and twice the Acting Director, Morell provides nothing new in this book. The majority of the book recounts Morell’s take on well-known counter-terrorism operations against al-Qaeda. There is very little discussion of ISIS – and what little is there is wrong (he denies ISIS has a different vision than al-Qaeda - an assertion that flies in the face of both ISIS’s claims and actions). Indeed, inclusion of “ISIS” in the subtitle of the book is misleading. Morell defends the CIA as would be expected given his position: 9/11 was a “national failure,” not an intelligence failure; the CIA did not engage in torture; the CIA rendition and interrogation programs provided vital intelligence; CIA drone strikes have been very effective with estimates of collateral damage “wildly inflated”; CIA did nothing wrong in Benghazi; the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report was biased and flawed; Edward Snowden is a “traitor” whose actions may cost American lives. While his arguments are cogent and well-stated, at times he drifts into blaming everyone but himself for anything that has
Wrong Turn: America’s Deadly Embrace of Counterinsurgency, by Gian Gentile (2013)

Gentile, a U.S. Army Colonel, refutes the Petraeus-Kilcullen-Nagl counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy, arguing that it has never worked in the past and is unlikely to work in the future. He asserts that British firepower was decisive in Malaya, that COIN techniques were implemented in Vietnam and failed, and that the turn-around in Iraq in 2007 was due to the Sunni Awakening rather than the surge in troops or the adoption of a new strategy. Gentile contends that COIN supporters over-simplify things and ignore context in their belief that a properly focused General (Templer in Malaya, Abrams in Vietnam, Petraeus in Iraq) can implement “armed state building” successfully. He emphasizes that all war, including COIN, is deadly and unpredictable, making it unlikely to result in winning the hearts and minds of the civilian population. Interestingly, he compares a COIN-focused military to one that would be needed to implement the UN’s Responsibility to Protect (R2P), implying that any type of intervention against non-traditional forces is asking for trouble. There are three main weaknesses with this book. First, Gentile seems to rely on selective presentation of anecdotal evidence. For example, he relies on official reports of higher level commanders where such fit his argument, but dismisses such reports when they do not. Second, he seems to conceive of COIN solely as winning hearts and minds. I would suggest COIN is about appealing to the population’s self-interest – convincing it that your side will prevail – not about the secondary objective of developing democracy. Third, there is no clear alternative proposed. Gentile’s implicit answer seems to be the US should not get involved in such undertakings. While many, including many COINdinistas, would agree with this as a general principle, there will be occasions when vital US interests are at stake. The book is silent as to strategic direction in those cases. Overall, the book has many strong arguments to make; unfortunately, its presentation of these arguments is weak.


gone wrong (he throws Bob Walpole, the official responsible for CIA’s assessment of Iraq’s WMD program, under the bus, while suggesting his own assessment of Iraq’s connections to terrorism was far more accurate). Morell refuses to overtly criticize Presidents Bush or Obama. Overall, the book is pedestrian – a bureaucrat’s tale.
Nagl, whose influential *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* was one of the key works behind renewed interest in counterinsurgency (COIN) theory in the early 2000s, uses this book to recount his battles in Iraq and in Washington to change Army thinking. More of an autobiography than a scholarly work, it offers a readable and interesting account, but little that is new. Fred Kaplan’s *The Insurgents* covers the same ground more thoroughly. At times, Nagl seems to offer inconsistent critiques. For example, he blasts Paul Bremer for his early move to “outlaw local elections” upon coming to Iraq, calling the decision “disastrous.” Yet, later, he blames the Bush Administration for pursuing elections too soon in Afghanistan, arguing that holding elections prior to developing appropriate institutions simply allows the “most ruthless and best-organized thugs” to “seize power.” Indeed, the latter part of the book adopts a partisan tone, in keeping with his post-Army appointment to a Democratic think tank. He concludes that COIN is a tough, expensive, slow, unsatisfying task, but one that may be “the least bad option” in some cases. Accordingly, he asserts that the US should only get involved in COIN where its vital interests are threatened. Strangely, he then asserts that COIN was proper in Afghanistan. (Some, including me, might wonder what country is less important to US vital interests than Afghanistan). Overall, this book is ordinary, at best.

**Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam, by H.R. McMaster (1997)**

In this methodical, detailed account of the 1964-65 decisions in Washington D.C. that led to the progressive commitment of US ground troops in Vietnam, McMaster provides convincing evidence of deliberate deceit perpetrated by President Johnson, Secretary of Defense McNamara, Ambassador (Gen.) Maxwell Taylor, and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Earle Wheeler. Based on his dissertation and published when he was a mid-level officer, this book by McMaster, currently a Lt. General, is an unusually direct indictment of senior level political and military leaders by a serving officer. The thesis – that Johnson feared attention to events in Vietnam could jeopardize passage of his domestic legislative programs – is not particularly novel; however, the clear evidence of Johnson and McNamara’s blatant lying to congress, disregard for professional military advice, and strategic incompetence, is eye-opening. McMaster takes the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) to task for failing to overcome inter-service rivalries and acquiescing to Johnson’s and McNamara’s deceit. Johnson is portrayed as unwilling to face unpleasant facts and make tough decisions, attempting to find a “middle way” between escalation in Vietnam while avoiding defeat. Adopting Taylor’s “graduated pressure” concept, Johnson and McNamara sought to use military force as
a means of communicating resolve to the North Vietnamese rather than as a means of compelling behavioral change. As things progressed, the JCS focused on trying to remove the constraints imposed by gradualness, ignoring the fact that there was no consensus on a theory of military victory and no reasoned analysis of how US military operations would achieve strategic political goals. Johnson, in his desire to avoid political exposure, and aided by the arrogant yes-man McNamara, allowed conditions to develop where he felt compelled to commit US troops, without any clearer objective than avoiding losing. This work is useful for numerous purposes: revealing how domestic politics influence international interactions; explaining how individual personalities affect events; establishing the responsibility of the JCS to not only the President but also the Congress; and demonstrating the absolute necessity for clear strategic thinking.

No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah, by Bing West (2005)

West, author of the classic Vietnam-era study The Village, describes the battle for Fallujah, lauding the bravery of the individual Marines and soldiers, while criticizing the poor leadership of civilian policy-makers and CENTCOM Commander General Abizaid. Following the murder and desecration of 4 Blackwater security guards in Fallujah in April 2004, Marine leaders warned against proceeding on an emotionally-driven offensive into the city. Rather, they advocated a slower approach that relied on joint operations with Iraqi security forces, arguing that a rapid US offensive could take the city, but would alienate the civilian population and serve minimal strategic purpose. Bremer, Sanchez, and Abizaid disagreed, as did Rumsfeld and Bush, ordering an offensive.

However, biased media reports from sources such as al-Jazeera, which were repeated by many Western media outlets, outraged the Sunni Arab community, causing Bremer, Abizaid, and Bush to agree to halt the offensive – again over the objection of the Marine commanders in the field, who argued that suspending the operation once started would result in a perceived victory for the insurgents. Civilian leadership rejected restarting the offensive, but offered no clear directive on what to do, leaving the Marines with an unsustainable commitment of troops in defensive positions around the city’s edge. MEF Commander General Conway introduced the Fallujah Brigade option, which few civilians embraced, but lacking better suggestions, allowed to proceed. It quickly failed, however, agreement among Iraqi officials and US policymakers for a renewed offensive took until months. Finally, in November, a new Marine offensive cleared the city, at greater cost for all concerned. West points to several errors: lack of unity of command in Iraq, flip-flopping by US policymakers, failure to appreciate the power of the media, and the lack of a clear long-term US strategy.
While more of a combat account than a policy exploration, the book is still useful for detailing how strategic confusion results in human tragedy.


This collection of essays offers a variety of options for US policymakers to consider for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The editors begin by asking the authors whether the US should adopt a grand strategy for the IOR or whether the current collection of sub-regional approaches is satisfactory. Authors are then tasked with recommending specific policies. While some contributors advocate a unified IOR strategy requiring greater US leadership, others contend the US interests in the IOR are both limited and diverse, such that a single over-arching approach is unnecessary. Nearly all of the authors advocate improving military interoperability with regional democracies, including India, Australia, and Indonesia, although there is disagreement on the possibility of developing strong multilateral institutions to help with this. Some attempt to link the IOR with the Obama Administration’s pivot to the Pacific, describing an Indo-Pacific theater – an approach consistent with the description of an “Indo-Asian-Pacific” region in the Navy’s March 2015 strategic update, “A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower.” Befitting the practical tenor of the volume, each of the chapters recognizes the limited resources likely to be available, building such limitations into the respective strategic analyses. In sum, this book is a timely and thought-provoking work that is relevant to anyone interested in near-term US security policy.

War Comes to Garmser: Thirty Years of Conflict on the Afghan Frontier, by Carter Malksasian (2013)

Malkasian, a U.S. State Department Political Officer who served in Afghanistan from 2009-2011, provides an in-depth look at the Garmser District in Helmand Province. Stretching from the Soviet invasion, through the Afghan Civil War, the initial Taliban era, the U.S. invasion, and to the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2012, the book details the political intrigue occurring in Garmser. Infighting among tribal leaders, ambitious Mullahs, and government officials, combined with irrigation projects that attracted immigrants from outside the province and disrupted social order, have left the district vulnerable to the Taliban. Malkasian suggests that the only realistic counter to the Taliban is to work through the tribes, but notes that over-strengthening the tribes results
in warlordism. Ultimately, he finds that accepting some measure of corruption, bias, and lack of democracy is necessary in order to empower leaders who will aggressively confront the Taliban. While he does not claim that his observations apply beyond Garmser, one can draw general lessons nonetheless. Overall, this book is a strong addition to the COIN literature drawing on the Afghan and Iraq wars, explaining the real-world difficulties that textbook theories tend to overlook.


Long-time nuclear analyst Paul Bracken discusses how and why nuclear weapons remain relevant in the modern era, contrary to the preferences of the U.S. government. Dismissive of the possibility of nuclear-zero, Bracken argues that American strategic nuclear analysis has been deficient since the end of the cold war and has contributed to a diminished state of nuclear readiness in the U.S. armed forces. Bracken points out that other nuclear states are continuing to modernize their arsenals/delivery systems and think about how such weapons can be used, irrespective of U.S. actions. Free of the bipolar constraints that marked the “first nuclear age,” smaller nuclear states can now create regional threats that vary by context. Accordingly, the “second nuclear age” promises to introduce new strategic concepts and greater complexity. Overall, this is an interesting and highly readable book, but one with few clear prescriptions beyond demanding greater strategic thought.


Rodriguez, the former head of the CIA’s National Clandestine Service and a top official in the CIA’s Counterterrorism Center, takes the offensive in this book against those who condemn the CIA’s enhanced interrogation program. He rejects the label of “torture,” provides specific evidence of how the program produced information that helped prevent further attacks, and points out the duplicity of various Congressmen and women who voiced no opposition to the program when briefed, but later claimed they were not informed. While accepting that some may have honest objections to the measures used in interrogating prisoners, Rodriguez simply notes that these people must acknowledge that they would risk the lives of thousands of innocents in a potential attack due to their unwillingness to use hard measures. Rodriguez is clearly bitter about what he perceives as political gamesmanship in pursuing investigations of CIA conduct
and officers, including himself, and contends the enormous amount of time and effort spent on such things have detracted from American counter-terrorism efforts. Like all such books, this is self-flattering; nonetheless, it is the best book available on the interrogation program from someone with firsthand knowledge and a useful corrective to the highly biased declassified Senate Intelligence Committee Report that it predates.


This 600+ page tome from the long-time political columnist and CNN personality is basically an “homage to me” memoir. However, nuggets of unusual honesty appear throughout the book, exposing both personal and professional flaws. The most important of these are the frank admission by Novak to engaging in unethical favoritism. Speaking of Bob Haldeman, Novak explains that he “was treated more harshly because he refused any connection with me. He made himself more of a target than he had to be by refusing to become a source.” (p. 189). Conversely, Novak discloses that others, including John Lehman, Alexander Haig, and David Gergen, who became sources, were able to avoid becoming targets. Throughout the book, Novak comes across as arrogant and egotistical, highly critical of every American politician he covered, with the exception of Ronald Reagan. Hammering conservatives as much as liberals, Novak labels Barry Goldwater a “lightweight” lacking loyalty, consistency, and organization; Nixon as “non-ideological” and lacking true toughness; Kissinger as adopting concessionary policies to the Soviet Union and “doubt[ing] the West’s moral fiber;” George H.W. Bush as lacking conservative principles; Bob Dole as not a true conservative; and George W. Bush and neoconservatives in general as wrong about the war in Iraq. Novak’s advice of “Always love your country, but never trust your government” claims to encompass his idea of conservatism. Perhaps this simple rhetoric accurately captures the limited theoretical depth of Novak’s thought.

The Way of the Knife: The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth, by Mark Mazzetti (2013)

The thesis of this book is that during the current Long War, the CIA and the Department of Defense (DOD) have each taken on missions more properly suited for the other. The CIA has expanded its hunting and killing operations (primarily through operation of armed drones and use of private contractors) at the cost of reduced attention to traditional intelligence work, whereas DOD has expanded its independent intelligence-
collection capabilities, while ceding control over certain paramilitary operations. Mazzetti, a New York Times reporter, contends that this blurring of the lines makes the use of violence less subject to thorough consideration, risks unity of effort in intelligence collection, and creates unnecessary redundancies. He further suggests that the discomfort with Bush-era secret prisons, enhanced interrogation techniques, and the Guantanamo detention facility has ironically made officials more willing to engage in lethal drone strikes. While Mazzetti raises reasonable points, the modern environment demands immediately responsive tools be available to the security leadership. Failure to adapt to this changed environment would leave the United States with bureaucratically-constrained options unable to meet the opportunities presented by actionable, but rapidly perishable, intelligence. Moreover, Mazzetti over-reaches when he argues that the CIA’s focus on hunting-killing operations was to blame for its inability to predict the Arab Spring. There are few new facts in the book, but it is a well-written summary of the CIA’s publicly revealed operations in the Obama era.

**Worthy Fights, by Leon Panetta (2014)**

Panetta’s memoir received substantial media attention for comments regarding President Obama’s lack of passion, mishandling of Iraq and Syria, and adoption of an overly-centralized, micro-managing White House. While he does offer these criticisms, overall Panetta is laudatory of Obama both personally and professionally. The work as a whole is a fairly bland recounting of Panetta’s career in government. Forty percent of the book covers his time in Congress, as OMB Director, and White House Chief of Staff. The pages covering his more recent posts as CIA Director and Secretary of Defense provide few new facts, but are instead filled with Panetta offering his views on various policy issues. Panetta’s dislike of former DNI Dennis Blair comes through clearly, as does his distaste for Newt Gingrich, but he generally avoids personal potshots. Lacking in detail, the book relies on generic policy positions interspersed with personal anecdotes. It is not the worst memoir ever written, but aside from the brief passages questioning Obama, there is little of lasting significance to make it noteworthy.

**Little America: The War within the War for Afghanistan, by Rajiv Chandrasekaran (2012)**

Chandrasekaran, a Washington Post reporter, focuses on the deployment of Marines to Helmand and Kandahar provinces in Afghanistan from 2009-2011. The author paints a picture of an incompetent American government, unable to establish cooperation
between or even within various departments and agencies, and a wholly corrupt Afghan government lacking authority beyond Kabul. He claims the Obama Administration developed a strategy that called primarily for counter-terrorism (CT) rather than counter-insurgency (COIN), but failed to insist that the military follow this strategy when it began to implement COIN. With a corrupt Afghan government partner, a double-dealing ally in Pakistan, a U.S. bureaucracy so tied up in red tape that it could not perform its assigned tasks, and a military unwilling to stick to the script, the United States had little chance of succeeding – whatever the goal.

Chandrasekaran is both laudatory and critical of Marines, blaming them for demanding autonomy from larger commands and for deploying troops to strategically unimportant locales while key urban areas were undermanned; yet, praising the Marines’ initiative and the local success they achieved. The book raises salient points throughout and offers telling anecdotes, but the author’s conclusion is somewhat inconsistent. He suggests that COIN was never possible and that a more limited goal was necessary, but continually asserts that success was dependent on convincing people that U.S. troops would remain there for the long term (this of course is COIN 101). Overall, the book is definitely worth reading as it highlights key issues that should have been addressed in a more competent White House.


With the U.S. Marine Corps Special Operations Command (MARSOC) stood up in 2006, this book is one of the first books discussing MARSOC operations. Written by a MARSOC Joint Terminal Air Controller, the book details his unit’s deployment in 2009 to northwest Afghanistan near the Turkmenistan border. While entertaining, the book is basically just a recount of firefights, interspersed with tales of bonding that occurs in combat. The book is silent as to larger questions of how MARSOC adds to existing Special Operations capabilities or what MARSOC does differently. The author adds to the chorus of criticism of Gen McChrystal’s rules of engagement (ROE), asserting that prohibitions and restrictions meant to protect civilian lives and property became counterproductive. Specifically, he claims Taliban fighters quickly adapted to the new ROE, as fighters fled to civilian compounds as safe zones, while terrorizing Afghan civilians into collaboration. Golembesky also claims the COIN focus of pursuing close U.S.-Afghan cooperation endangered U.S. service members by permitting corrupt and untrustworthy local leaders to leak classified information to the enemy. Overall, it is a good account of combat from the small-unit level, with the focus on drama rather than strategy.
Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam, by Frances Fitzgerald (1972)

*Fire in the Lake* is a period piece reflective of virulent anti-War sentiment. Fitzgerald takes an unapologetically biased view, blaming the United States for every ill to befall the Vietnamese nation. Her rendition of the war’s history suggests a wholly nationalist liberation movement fighting valiantly against an imperialist invader, despite the long odds against it. Mysteriously absent from her narrative are the Chinese and Soviet Union. Hidden among the pseudo-scientific gibberish and pompous Shakesperean references that litter the book, elements of rational criticism do appear. Unfortunately, the author carries her arguments to extremes that render her assessments shrill and unconvincing. Given the myriad flaws in U.S. strategy and operations, such an approach is unnecessary: the worthwhile points Fitzgerald makes become masked by her zealotry. As a factual history or analytical assessment of the war, the book is of little value. As a view into the mindset of American liberalism in the early 1970s, the book is much more useful. Perhaps what is most disappointing is Fitzgerald’s 2004 Afterword refuses to correct any of her fawning over the gentle communists from the north or to recognize the bankruptcy of her insistence that capitalism destroyed the social fabric of the Vietnamese.


This book walks through the American government’s reactions to terrorist incidents from the 1960s through 9/11. Naftali’s main thesis is that, prior to 9/11, the government generally treated terrorism as a relatively minor issue and was slow to adopt protective measures. Referring to Mancur Olson’s classic work on the difficulty of mobilizing support for measures that have highly concentrated costs but diffused benefits, Naftali suggests the airline industry, gun lobby, and privacy watchdogs, all lobbied against various acts that might have enhanced public safety, due to their own parochial interests – whether economic or ideological. Meanwhile, prior to 9/11, the public at large, increasingly skeptical of big government, lacked motivation to mobilize in support of these acts. Naftali notes the paucity of military retaliation for terrorism prior to 9/11, with the exceptions of Reagan’s 1985 attack on Libya and Clinton’s 1998 cruise missile launches on Afghanistan and Sudan. Although he questions the effectiveness of either of these exceptions, the failure of the United States to respond to the various Hezbollah attacks beginning in the 1980s and the al-Qaeda attacks of the 1990s
undoubtedly contributed to the growing boldness of terrorists in attacking America. Well-sourced, this is a solid, if somewhat plodding, book.


Boot, a prominent neoconservative author, provides a sweeping review of American use of military force outside of declared wars. More popular history than critical analysis, the work nonetheless presents a clear thesis: use of limited force is a necessary and appropriate political tool. Boot is particularly approving of the U.S. Marine Corps history of small wars, although he finds the more recent failure to apply the lessons contained in the 1940 Small Wars Manual disturbing. The book is very good as an introduction to America’s lesser known 20th century engagements in China, Russia, and the Caribbean. Coverage of American counterinsurgency efforts in the Philippines following the Spanish-American War and in Vietnam is also included. Boot’s writing style makes for an entertaining read, distinguishing his books from more staid, ponderous academic efforts. Multilateralists and cultural relativists will find plenty to dislike in this book, while advocates of American international leadership will find plenty to applaud.

The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War, by Fred Kaplan (2013)

This book tells the story of the challenges faced within the Army by advocates of COIN, highlighting the roles of individuals such as David Petraeus, John Nagl, David Kilcullen, H.R. McMaster, Conrad Crane, and Jack Keane. Kaplan paints a picture of a somnambulent Army leadership, married to big-budget weapons systems and the idea of major power war, unwilling to awaken to the reality of ongoing asymmetric wars. Casting Don Rumsfeld, George Casey, and Paul Bremer as villains, Kaplan recounts the partnership of COIN advocates in the military, academia, and other parts of government, fighting to bring COIN principles to fruition in Iraq. Although the book offers little new as far as the details of COIN strategy, it does emphasize an often overlooked factor in COIN success or failure – whether the host nation government shares major strategic goals with the COIN force. Where it does not and cannot be changed, COIN cannot win. While this book was written prior to the ISIS resurgence in Iraq, it is on point with respect to the Maliki government. The same obstacle exists in Afghanistan. Ultimately, the book argues that Petraeus and his merry men did not change the
American way of war, but may have succeeded in at least institutionalizing the lessons of COIN for the next, inevitable, American involvement in such wars.

**Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House, by Peter Baker (2013)**

Organized around the way the Bush-Cheney relationship changed over the course of the Bush presidency, this book, by Peter Baker of the *New York Times*, does an admirable job of maintaining objectivity. Baker convincingly repudiates the myth that Cheney lurked as the mastermind behind the throne, manipulating a simpleton frontman. Instead, Baker tells the story of a new president lacking in foreign policy experience who brought in a seasoned and well-respected Washington hand to provide counsel. When 9/11 pushed foreign policy front and center nine months into the new administration, Cheney played a central role in advising Bush. Yet, as Bush gained experience over time, Cheney’s influence decreased. During Bush’s second term, many key conservatives and neoconservatives left the administration, resulting in the ascent of more moderate officials and the adoption of more constrained foreign policy. Despite this loss of power, Baker portrays Cheney as a loyalist who publicly supported the President’s policies notwithstanding his own misgivings. Meanwhile, Bush is painted as a shrewder character than his public image suggests – confident in his own judgment and willing to allow both friends and adversaries to underestimate him in order to turn this to his own advantage. Much of the work is based on personal interviews and memoirs, giving the reader an insider’s view of the Bush White House. While both Bush and Cheney emerge as sympathetic figures, the same cannot be said of Rumsfeld, Rice, or Senator McCain. For those interested in recent political personalities, it is worth plowing through the 650 pages; for those looking for policy analysis, other books would be a better investment of time.

**Every War Must End, by Fred Charles Ikle (1971, 2005)**

This short book highlights the imbalance between the exhaustive planning for military operations at the outset of wars and the relatively limited political planning for ending wars. As Ikle notes, national interests are generally dependent on the outcome of wars, not the outcome of operations or campaigns. In other words, combat which fails to advance the strategic plan for ending the war on favorable terms is pointless. Ikle’s analysis foreshadows the rationalist literature of academics a generation later by insisting on the constant need of belligerents to reassess whether war promises a
superior outcome to war termination. Yet, Ikle emphasizes the difficulties statesmen face, including uncertainty, psychological bias, bureaucratic politics, and parochial political concerns, thereby avoiding the sterility of pure rationalist analysis. Although there is no magic bullet answer provided in the book, it raises fundamental issues of concern. Gideon Rose’s *How Wars End* (2010), and Matthew Moten’s *Between War and Peace: How American Ends Its Wars* (2011) are more modern works and both valuable in their own right, but this classic is as relevant today as it was 40 years ago.

**Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb, and American Strategy, by Kenneth M. Pollack (2013)**

Pollack, a former National Security Council official who is now at the Brookings Institution, authors a reasoned consideration of U.S. policy alternatives for dealing with Iran’s pursuit of nuclear capability. While admitting there are no good choices, Pollack favors containment over any type of military option. Although he notes that a full-scale invasion is readily within U.S. capabilities, he dismisses it due to the difficulty of occupation (requires too many troops, too fiscally expensive, too many second-order uncertainties, lack of domestic support). He rejects air attacks targeting the nuclear program as merely a temporary delay that would likely be followed by Iranian reconstitution of the nuclear program – only without IAEA inspectors. Thus, he ends up supporting negotiations that would permit Iran to retain uranium enrichment capability but submit to intrusive inspections aimed at preventing weaponization. This would be accompanied by long-term containment efforts, which could be scaled up or reduced as needed. Overall, the book does an excellent job highlighting the various arguments and issues on all sides. In particular, he explains why continued U.S. involvement in the region is necessary for global economic stability. Pollack avoids hyper-partisan rhetoric and straw-man arguments, admitting that assumptions and limited information make conclusions subjective.

I disagree with Pollack’s conclusion as I think he underestimates the danger of a nuclear-armed Islamic Iran and overestimates the necessity for a long-term occupation. I do agree that air-strikes alone will accomplish little: the choice is between a ground invasion bringing regime change and acceptance of a nuclear Iran. Although he denies it, Pollack’s confidence in deterrence and the rationality of the Islamist leadership logically echoes Kenneth Waltz’s position that nuclear proliferation is not a bad thing. I suspect that a nuclear-armed Iran would quickly lead to additional nuclear proliferation in the region, driving crisis management to a new level of difficulty – especially where identity for some of the relevant actors is based on religious extremism.
Nonetheless, the balanced presentation of Pollack makes this among the better works on the issue, regardless of the conclusion.

Sino-Japanese Relations after the Cold War: Two Tigers Sharing a Mountain, by Michael Yahuda (2014)

In a short but still somewhat repetitive book, Yahuda outlines why he thinks China and Japan are likely to avoid military conflict and instead settle into a version of peaceful co-existence. Yahuda accurately notes that the Chinese Communist Party has replaced Maoist ideology as its primary source of legitimacy with the twin pillars of economic growth and nationalism. While nationalism exacerbates the potential for conflict, Yahuda contends that conflict’s damaging effects on international trade will likely cause China to control its nationalist excesses. To his credit, Yahuda recognizes that Sino-Japanese strategic rivalry will continue regardless of economic interdependence. Yahuda generally fails to consider that Chinese economic growth has already begun to decline, meaning nationalism will become even more important – as we are currently seeing in the territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. While Yahuda’s predictions might reflect a rational policy for a regime focused on furthering state interests, it underestimates the parochial interests of a regime confronted with its own obsolescence. Party elites will sacrifice state interests in order to safeguard their own individual and organizational interests, meaning military conflict is more likely than Yahuda suggests.

Obama and the Middle East: The End of America’s Moment, by Fawaz A. Gerges (2012)

Gerges contends that Obama is a non-ideological realist who has adopted inspiring rhetoric but whose administration has demonstrated continuity in U.S. policy in the Middle East. This unremarkable observation is the sole value of this book. Although portrayed as a scholarly work, the book is little more than a shrill polemic. Gerges argues that the United States no longer has influence in the Middle East, yet simultaneously criticizes the United States for not solving the region’s problems. At various points Gerges characterizes Sayyid Qutb as a “mainstream public intellectual,” describes pro-Western Arabs as “lackeys of the United States,” insists the 1991 Gulf War was done to “consolidate American control of oil fields,” and contends Iran is “a threat that has failed to materialize in any significant way.” Such ideas are patently absurd. Gerges goes on to say terrorism is not a major threat to the United States and has been
overblown, implying American economic problems are the result of over-spending on national security. He avoids offering hard evidence to back such claims, relying instead on citations to other radical authors. Overall, this book is a huge disappointment. It offers no insight on the Obama Administration or its policy-making; it presents no coherent analysis, providing only bombastic prose; it contributes nothing to advance understanding in any area whatsoever.


This book recounts Herrington’s tour as a US Army intelligence advisor to South Vietnam in Hau Nghia province (WNW of Saigon, adjacent to the Cambodian border) during 1971-72. Herrington was assigned to work within the Phoenix program, attempting to bring together intelligence from various Vietnamese organizations in a type of early fusion cell. Yet, the dysfunctional Vietnamese government led to bureaucratic rivalry, lack of trust across organizations, desire to claim credit for successes, refusal to honestly report bad news, and fear that success would lead to targeting for assassination by the Viet Cong. Accordingly, Herrington found little enthusiasm among the different Vietnamese entities for working together. This quickly frustrated U.S. Herrington, leading him to take direct operational control in order to bypass local obstacles. Yet he recognizes that in the long-term this defeats the advisors’ purpose, pursuant to the old adage that “it is better they do it tolerably well than you do it perfectly.” The similarity to the frustrations of American advisors in Iraq is unmistakable. While in the province, Herrington shifts the focus of the program from hunting guerrillas outside the villages to uncovering the VC support network and propagandists living legally within the villages. Again, similar to what was needed (and ultimately practiced) in Iraq, Herrington promoted a strategy aimed not at killing enemy fighters, but at building public security in the village. With respect to gathering intelligence, Herrington outlines a strategy of exploiting defectors and prisoners by treating them humanely, exposing them to the true conditions in the South, and establishing a personal rapport in hopes of overcoming communist propaganda. As was true in Iraq, Herrington laments the lack of language capability in the US military, stressing its importance for intelligence operations. Also similar to Iraq, Herrington bemoans the Vietnamese version of catch and release – noting that many of the detainees rounded up as VC supporters were subsequently released due to either lack of evidence or to the interference of well-connected relatives.
Among the interesting aspects of the book is Herrington’s depiction of the fighting spirit of the popular militia and the positive view of some ARVN units. Pointing to the devastation inflicted upon the VC during the 1968 Tet Offensive and the impact of the Cambodian invasion in 1970 which destroyed both sanctuaries and supplies, Herrington counters the common myth that the VC were steadily strengthening and that the South Vietnamese forces were in hapless disarray once Vietnamization began. Thus, the NVA’s Easter Offensive of 1972 met a determined adversary that was able to impose terrible casualties on the NVA and repulse the attack. In turn, Herrington identifies the biggest problem of the South as the corrupt government. Even the best fighting forces fought not so much FOR the Republic’s government as they did AGAINST the communists.

Overall, this book has much to offer for those thinking about counterinsurgency. Along with Bing West’s The Village, Owen West’s The Snake Eaters, and Jim Michaels’ A Chance in Hell, this offers lessons that every junior (as well as senior) commander should take to heart.

Baghdad at Sunrise: A Brigade Commander’s War in Iraq, by Peter R. Mansoor (2008)

Col. Mansoor, who commanded a Brigade Combat Team in Iraq from July 2003 to July 2004, offers a critique of US efforts during the time that is firmly in line with the Petraeus view of counterinsurgency (COIN). Mansoor notes a flawed strategy that prioritized minimizing the US footprint over provision of public security; an insufficient number of troops; lack of unity of command; failure to establish consistent engagement with tribal leadership; and mismanaged media relations. He criticizes the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) for its bad decisions, over-centralization, and lumbering, bureaucratic response to the insurgency. Arguing in favor of a bottom-up approach, Mansoor contends the CPA took the opposite tack, thereby preventing commanders at the local level fromheading off the insurgency before it could take hold. To defeat insurgents, Mansoor highlights the need for improved human intelligence and better language capability. This book is a solid descriptive account of the frustrations of a Brigade Commander operating under a defective strategy. Overall, Mansoor does a reasonably good job of avoiding the “hearts and minds” drivel that some have adopted as the key to COIN. Just like any other military strategy, COIN is designed to serve political ends. As such, the dominant factor is interests. Soccer balls and candy may win hearts, but there is no gratitude effect in terms of drawing the population to

Professor Nichols from the U.S. Naval War College argues that U.S. nuclear doctrine has remained basically the same as it was during the Cold War, despite the quarter-century that has passed since the Soviet Union’s demise. Nichols argues that nuclear weapons have no use beyond deterrence of other nuclear weapons. Discounting the likelihood of major power war, asserting all great powers these days are dependent on the stability of the international system, he contends that a small arsenal will be sufficient to deter Russia or China. Of course, Nichols wrote his book prior to Russia’s seizure of Crimea, so with hindsight he might be more circumspect. Nichols argues that U.S. nuclear weapons have no utility against smaller states—even if those states have nuclear arms themselves. He reasons that nuclear weapons are indiscriminant and thus, immoral per se. Accordingly, he reject any military use. He believes any small state that used nuclear weapons would surely use their entire arsenal in their initial strike, as they would know that any nuclear arms they saved would be destroyed by U.S. military retaliation. Thus, he argues, there would be no compelling need for U.S. nuclear retaliation as U.S. existential security would not be imperiled; therefore, conventional force could be used to respond. While moral positions can be argued ad infinitum, Nichols’ strategic reasoning depends on a number of unstated assumptions. His assumes there will be no future technological innovations of note for either offense or defense (an ahistoric assumption); he assumes a political status quo (already seen to be a flawed notion); he assumes universally similar perceptions of the utility of nuclear arms (flawed in that deterrence is inherently psychological, so perceptions are reality in this regard). Overall, the book does a good job of presenting the anti-nuclear argument; however, it fails to address the counter-arguments adequately and thus is merely a restatement of existing positions rather than a novel entry in the nuclear strategy literature.


This memoir by a former French intelligence officer involved in counterterrorism (CT) efforts in Algeria in the late 1950s is not your usual “win hearts and minds” rhetoric. Aussaresses not only admits to using torture and summary executions, but defends such as necessary to successful CT. Arguing that the civil judicial system is not structured to
handle the number of detainees or apply the type of standards appropriate in a fragile CT environment, Aussaresses contends that information must be extracted quickly to be of use. The government must not shy away from the use of force if it is to credibly convince the population to resist terrorist operations. Along with Roger Trinquier’s *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, this book provides a different view than that publicly embraced by David Petraeus in FM3-24.


Levitt provides a review of Hezbollah’s activities around the world, correctly linking these to Hezbollah’s serving as a proxy for its Iranian sponsor. The book has thorough and meticulous citation to sources; however, at times, the work has the feel of a massive raw information dump with little regard for source credibility. For a Georgetown University Press book, this type of editing is somewhat loose. Nonetheless, the book does a good job cataloguing the historical reach of Hezbollah, to include the United States. The evidence of Hezbollah’s continuing operational activity dispels the notion that Hezbollah’s political participation will diminish its militant activities and lead to divergence from Iran. Of note, the book was written prior to Hezbollah’s massive intervention in Syria in May 2013 – an act that reinforces the basic message of the book.

**Duty, by Robert Gates (2014)**

This book is hardly the hatchet job it is presented as in the mainstream media. While Gates has more issues with Obama than Bush, he has far more praise for Obama than criticism. Congress is the main target for Gates, who accuses congressmen of hypocrisy, parochialism, and placing their personal fortunes ahead of the national interest. Gates also levels blasts at Obama’s White House staffers for interfering in matters in which they were ill-qualified to act. What comes through is a dysfunctional National Security Council, reminiscent of the Iran-Contra era.

Gates’s realist approach is readily apparent: “I have never believed that one should make national security policy on the basis of trust. I think you should make national security policy based on interests and realities.” (169) This approach contrasts with that of both Presidents whom Gates served. The Bush Administration was characterized by an idealist activism that sought to forcibly spread democracy, while the Obama Administration has adopted tentative policies inconsistent with the unmatched power at U.S. disposal.
The Strongest Tribe, by Bing West (2009)

West 2009 reviews U.S. policy in Iraq from after the invasion through the end of 2008. West, a former Marine infantryman who served in the Combined Action Platoon program in Vietnam and later as an Asst. Secretary of Defense in the Reagan Administration, made nearly fifteen visits to Iraq between 2003-08 observing both the commanders at the top and the grunts in the field. He walks through the disconnect between the Bush Administration’s political goals and the military strategy employed, doling out criticism for Don Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, Paul Bremer, and Ricardo Sanchez in particular. Interspersed with analysis of the political-military strategy are anecdotal stories of the efforts of Marines and soldiers at the tactical level. West highlights the dismal performance of Iraqi politicians and the destructive effect of the sectarianism throughout the Ministry of the Interior. While he attributes the turnaround in Iraq to the tribal Awakening in Anbar, he praises the surge as a necessary enabler. On the home front, West finds Congressional grandstanding and partisanship combined with an antagonistic media have resulted in weaker public support for U.S. military efforts abroad. Although he finds (as of 2009) that the United States defeated al-Qaeda in Iraq, he questions whether the United States can obtain success in future efforts absent changes in the domestic landscape.