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REVIEW ESSAYS

BRINGING DOMESTIC POLITICS BACK INTO GRAND STRATEGY

Michael O'Hara

American Pendulum: Recurring Debates in U.S. Grand Strategy, by Christopher Hemmer. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2015. 224 pages. \$29.95.

Is the American Century Over?, by Joseph S. Nye Jr. Malden, MA: Polity, 2015. 146 pages. \$12.95.

Having to answer such questions as how to maintain primacy and how to wield such power illustrates the luxury of exercising hegemony and the challenge of being a superpower. But it was not always thus for the United States. In the late nineteenth century, as the country rose and began to surpass Great Britain, the Naval War College's own Alfred Thayer Mahan advocated a powerful vision of American growth by looking outward. Mahan's grand strategy was inherently maritime, and he proposed an "expansion of national influences" through not only military means but also commercial trade and other tools of statecraft. To Mahan, American grand strategy required deep engagement in the world.

Of course, Mahan was not the first to preach this gospel. Decades earlier, John Quincy Adams had guided the fledgling state in feeling out the extent and limits of American power. Many European states viewed jealously the endow-

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ment of resources and demography of the United States. Foreign powers understood immediately the potential for American power—and the need to check it before its inevitable rise. According to historian and former Naval War College professor Charles Edel, Adams recognized the hostility of the continental powers, and he understood his "special duty" to pursue peace. Intent on securing

America's rise, Adams conceived of a grand strategy to guide his nation toward power and, more importantly, toward justice.

Two recent works by Christopher Hemmer and Joseph Nye examine the challenges of acquiring power and holding on to it. Hemmer and Nye address the problems of American statecraft through the twentieth century until the Obama era. Today, as the presidential campaign season begins and we continue the perpetual debate over America's role in the world, these books are timely and relevant. The analyses from these two scholars, one a dean of the U.S. Air War College and the other a former dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, indicate that American preeminence will extend far into the twenty-first century. However, the character of that power may look very different and will require the United States to make smart strategic choices at home and abroad.

At its outset, Christopher Hemmer's *American Pendulum: Recurring Debates in U.S. Grand Strategy* asks, "Should a state invest more in its armed forces, its health-care system, the education of its young, its economic infrastructure, or its diplomatic apparatus?" (p. 4). For many, the answer to this question depends not only on how the state conceives of power but on whether one accepts the author's definition of grand strategy. Hemmer frames his analysis using Barry Posen's theory of *security*: that it is "national, comprehensive, and long term" and "advanc[es] some conception of a state's national interests as a whole" (p. 2). This broader definition puts Hemmer into the conversation with other scholars such as Hal Brands, John Gaddis, Paul Kennedy, Christopher Layne, and John Mearsheimer. If Hemmer casts grand strategy as a guns-or-butter problem, Nye offers a sensible solution: both.

Hemmer's chapters detail eight episodes in the last century. Beginning with the American rise to power under Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, Hemmer discusses the expanding security perimeter of the United States. He looks beyond the Monroe Doctrine to the dilemma facing a nation with increasing means and ambitions. For readers with an interest in the policy of containment, Hemmer discusses its origins, implementation, extensions, and culmination over the four central chapters of the book. Here readers will enjoy a rich discussion of the Truman Doctrine, the competing visions of George Kennan and Paul Nitze, *détente*, and the "end of history." The chapters provide ample citations to a breadth of scholarship. For those who argue that strategy requires an adversary, Hemmer's chapter titled "Grand Strategy in the Absence of a Clear Threat" examines the shift from containment to "enlargement" and the challenges that faced decision makers during the period to which Charles Krauthammer referred as "the unipolar moment"—from the fall of the Soviet Union until 9/11. The war on terror and the rise of China receive treatments in the final two chapters.

Hemmer frames the recurring debate in American grand strategy as the challenge of striking the right balance between unilateralism and multilateralism. From the Farewell Address of George Washington, who advocated for “as little political connection as possible” in commercial relations, to Thomas Jefferson’s warning about the dangers of “entangling alliances,” the American tradition is replete with skepticism about foreign engagement. The crucial debate for Hemmer, however, is “not about whether to be internationally involved, but about how to be internationally involved” (p. 7). Therefore the question Hemmer poses is not about American isolationism, but rather about how—and on what terms—the United States should engage in the world.

In *Is the American Century Over?*, Joseph S. Nye Jr. argues that multilateral engagement in the world was an essential element of the “American Century” and a fundamental feature of American power. The book’s title begs the question in a period of increased American unilateralism. Nye frames American power in terms not only of the sticks and carrots of hard power but of the attraction and persuasion of soft power—the latter being a term he coined. For Nye, America was at the height of its power when it led the club of nations that enjoyed unprecedented security and prosperity.

Whereas Hemmer focuses on American power in terms of the country’s economic and military might that came to the fore at the turn of the last century, Nye argues that the American Century began in 1941 as the United States assumed the central role in maintaining a global balance of power. Nye’s analysis proceeds from this foundational question about the start date of the American Century to ask whether the United States is in decline, in either absolute or relative terms. Ultimately, Nye concludes that the United States has passed its peak; nevertheless, he argues that the United States will remain the most powerful nation in the world. America will maintain its preponderance of power, but in less dominant proportions. Thus, even amid concerns about the rise of China and the supposed danger of Graham Allison’s “Thucydides trap,” Nye remains optimistic.

Yet immediately after his consideration of hegemonic transition and America’s responses to this challenge, Nye curbs his enthusiasm about American power by considering the problem of strategic overstretch. A concise examination of the culture, society, economy, and political institutions of Rome provides a brief but sobering lesson. In this analogy, Nye concludes that the key to America sustaining its strength lies in its political unity, a renewal through immigration and entrepreneurial innovation, and its political institutions. Whereas many strategists look beyond their borders for answers to American security within the international system, Nye focuses on internal factors as the means to maintain our place in the world.

Domestic politics, it turns out, is key to grand strategy both for Nye and for Hemmer—just as it was for the great Cold War strategist George Kennan. To the author of the containment strategy, domestic vitality was the key to successful foreign engagement. In his 1947 “long telegram,” Kennan urged the United States to “create among the peoples of the world generally the impression of a country which knows what it wants, which is coping successfully with the problems of its internal life and with the responsibilities of a world power, and which has a spiritual vitality capable of holding its own among the major ideological currents of the time.”¹ For the grand strategist, whose concern is to leverage the elements of national power to attain a political aim, both Hemmer and Nye might agree with Kennan that the theory of American security begins and ends—as it did during the competition with the Soviet Union—with “a nation dependent on pulling themselves together and accepting the responsibilities of moral and political leadership that history plainly intended them to bear.”² Hemmer and Nye complement each other well, and they remind us that the most important recurring discussions about grand strategy begin at home—wise words too often left out of the debate on statecraft.

NOTES

1. X [George F. Kennan], “Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs* (July 1947), p. 867.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 868.

WILL THE UNITED STATES LEARN FROM THE IRAQ WAR?

Daniel J. Cormier

The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, ed. Joel D. Rayburn [Col., USA] and Frank K. Sobchak [Col., USA]. Vol. 2, *Surge and Withdrawal, 2007–2011*. Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2019.

The U.S. Army's unofficial two-volume history of the Iraq War offers a critical examination of the conflict, one that is illuminating and controversial. In 2013, while serving as the U.S. Army's Chief of Staff, General Raymond T. Odierno commissioned a team of Army warrior-scholars, all of whom had served in Iraq during the war, and asked them to conduct a candid examination of the conflict. He wanted to ensure that the Army and the nation grasped the war's implications for the future. The study accomplishes this goal. It escapes the pattern of most official histories by openly addressing contentious topics. It is an engaging read that includes critiques of the decisions of senior military and civilian leaders as well as instructive lessons from the conflict.

But critics of the study are also accurate in pointing out that the work is not definitive. The complexity, scope, and duration of the conflict will foster a variety of interpretations. In the foreword, another Army former Chief of Staff, General Mark Milley, highlights this reality. He describes the history as an "interim" report that is intended to "sharpen thinking, and promote debate." That description is accurate, and it underscores the study's value. This history shines a light on the need for a national dialogue about how the United States understands, prepares for, and conducts war.

These goals challenge many of the current efforts in Washington to move on from the conflict and focus on the business of great-power competition. This desire, the authors correctly point out, epitomizes the type of conceptual failure that happened after Vietnam. It allowed the wrong "lessons of Vietnam" to take

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hold, leading the Army and the nation to over-value technology and to focus, almost exclusively, on high-end conflict. The emphasis on tactical excellence created military leaders who were ill prepared for the complexities of modern war. It took several years for the United States to comprehend the fallacy of this outlook, as it had to relearn the same lessons in Iraq. That learning curve required a price that was paid in blood and treasure.

On the basis of a survey of recently declassified military records, as well as oral history interviews, the authors provide an unclassified account of how America's senior military leaders in Iraq understood the conflict and reacted to the complex mosaic of challenges they faced. The second volume begins by summarizing the flawed decisions made by senior U.S. government leaders early in the war that were detailed in the first volume of the work. These included the proclamations that excluded Baath Party members from the new Iraqi government and disbanded the Iraqi army, as well as constraints that Washington placed on American troop levels. Those choices disenfranchised Iraq's Sunni population and created a security vacuum. The former Iraqi soldiers and leaders became the backbone of insurgent movements that resisted efforts to establish a new government in Baghdad. The decisions also revealed an American strategy for the conflict that was overly ambitious. For example, the objectives for the war were poorly aligned with the resources provided. Additionally, the U.S. administration failed to sustain American public support or to create the international cooperation on which success depended. The administration never effectively responded to Syria's direct support of Sunni insurgents and Iran's sponsorship of Shia attacks on U.S. forces. This lack of a coherent regional strategy ceded the initiative early to "Syrian and Iranian proxies," making the accomplishment of America's "political and military objectives almost impossible" (pp. 620–21).

The study also makes clear that, from beginning to end, U.S. actions in Iraq suffered from naive assessments at the highest levels of the U.S. government. These included a "short-war assumption" and the superficial belief in the transformative power of democratization, specifically elections (p. 619). The authors detail how the parliamentary elections in 2005 chiefly served to empower a new Shia elite that was beholden to the interests of religious and tribal-based factions. This led Iraqi government officials to pursue efforts to control the nation's security forces to dominate their Sunni rivals. A Kurdish push for semiautonomy for Iraq's northern provinces further demonstrated the scramble for power that American decisions unleashed. Instead of rebuilding a new nation-state, the quick return of authority to the Iraqi government produced a new era of sectarian strife.

Additionally, the authors avoid re-creating the Vietnam myth that the U.S. military could have won but for the decisions of its civilian leaders. There was no dereliction of duty in Washington, DC, where national leaders simply pursued narrow interests over the advice of the military. In fact, the authors argue that several of America's military leaders supported the decisions made in Washington—and thus helped lose the war (pp. 9–10). The faithful adherence to policy guidance by General George W. Casey, the U.S. Multi-National Force–Iraq (MNF-I) commander from 2003 to 2007, translated into a coalition strategy oriented toward quickly training and transferring responsibilities to indigenous forces in

Iraq. These choices squandered precious time and allowed the security situation to deteriorate (p. 618). By 2006, Iraq effectively was divided along sectarian lines, jeopardizing its survival as a unitary state.

The preponderance of volume 2 details the efforts of American forces to reverse this severe situation, from 2007 until they withdrew in 2011. The authors include a summary of the debates, critiques, and studies that took place in Washington, such as the congressionally appointed Iraq Study Group findings in 2006 that included seventy-nine recommendations and emphasized the need for bipartisan cooperation in Washington, DC, unity of effort by U.S. government agencies in the Middle East, and enhanced diplomatic efforts with Syria and Iran to produce the support required to stabilize Iraq. Several of the perspectives from academia and think tanks and from within the U.S. government are examined also. These include Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's support for a steady transfer of control from American to Iraqi forces (pp. 10–16). But President George W. Bush decided on a different course. He replaced Rumsfeld with Robert M. Gates, overruled many of his principal military advisers, and agreed to a "surge" of U.S. troops that others proclaimed offered a chance for success (pp. 17–24).

The study posits that the steps taken in Iraq after 2007 ushered in a new era of the war. General David Petraeus, who replaced Casey as the MNF-I commander, and Lieutenant General Raymond Odierno, the day-to-day commander of all coalition troops in Iraq, implemented several changes that transformed the security situation. For example, they ensured a more coherent U.S. whole-of-government effort and repositioned military units from large bases to small outposts. These shifts permitted counterinsurgency (COIN) techniques that improved understanding of Iraq's sociopolitical challenges. The authors also highlight that the new approach enhanced the integration of U.S. conventional and special forces efforts, leading to significant improvements in the security situation in Iraq.

The study's positive portrayal of the effectiveness of COIN operations is balanced by several sobering revelations. Chief among these is that the Iraqi prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, never subscribed to the U.S. goal of reconciling with the disenfranchised populations of Iraq (p. 432). While America fought battles to rebuild Iraq, al-Maliki postured for a sectarian confrontation and continued his well-established pattern of marginalizing the Sunni factions (pp. 472–76). His unwillingness to embrace political compromise meant that the gains in security that the U.S. surge produced were temporary and indecisive.

By the end of 2008, as President Bush was preparing to leave office, the United States signed a strategic framework agreement with Iraq. The accord moved American forces out of Iraq's cities in the summer of 2009 and included a pledge to

withdraw them completely by 2011. These steps undermined any remaining U.S. influence in Iraq; U.S. forces found themselves watching from the sidelines in 2010 as al-Maliki refused to relinquish power after a new round of parliamentary elections. The Iraqi prime minister also thwarted the final attempts of the United States to build a strategic relationship with Iraq through a status of forces agreement that would have allowed a residual American advisory presence. Instead, Iraq's Shia-dominated government developed a closer relationship with Tehran (pp. 414–20). The report concludes that Iran was the “only victor” from the war (p. 639). But global affairs are rarely resolved. In 2014, American troops returned to Iraq to help it fight the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria—a mission that continues today.

In the last chapter, the authors catalog several of the major insights that permeate the study. These include identifying the ways that the Army culture and bureaucracy detracted from the war's efforts. For example, Rayburn and Sobchak reject the prevalent view in Washington that technology can replace the troop-intensive requirements of modern combat operations. They emphasize that human interaction remains indispensable to understanding and addressing the sociopolitical dynamics of any war (pp. 615–16). Their study also contends that the U.S. government's management of the war did not encourage American commanders to be innovative. The Washington culture and bureaucracy prefer compliance, centralize decision-making, and discourage risk taking. The authors argue that the nation must escape this pattern, prevalent since Vietnam. Instead, military commanders must share responsibility for ensuring the quality of decision-making and strategy formulation. They also must be able and willing to adapt rapidly as conditions on the ground change (p. 621).

Another major concern the study illuminates is that America's senior commanders relied on “overly optimistic planning” and failed to reassess several assumptions adequately (p. 625). Among these assumptions was a reliance on the metric of violent incidents, particularly against their own forces, to measure stability and progress in Iraq. Commanders repeatedly and erroneously judged that Iraq was more stable than it was and that a rapid transfer of power was possible (p. 619). This confusion also was seen in Vietnam. Additionally, the nation's generals never were able to anchor military coalition efforts successfully to the political goals of the United States in Iraq. This gap in strategy occurred in part because of a failure to discern the sociopolitical dynamics of Iraq and the Middle East, such as the rivalries that existed in Iraq and their link to its national politics. Instead, the U.S. generals continually were surprised that Iraqis and regional players were pursuing their own interests and remained focused “on the comfortable tactical and operational tasks that were necessary but not sufficient” to address Iraq's challenges and accomplish American strategic objectives (pp. 619–20, 625–26).

The authors also illuminate gaps between how U.S. leaders conceptualized the conflict and the war's realities. They cite the failure to appreciate that a "sovereignty dilemma" existed in Iraq, where gains in security led to a decline in American influence over government leaders in Baghdad, who became empowered to consolidate their political positions. They argue that a "counterintuitive application of U.S. national power" often is needed, such as the requirement for increases in economic and diplomatic commitments as security improves or the withholding of American capabilities in the absence of political progress (p. 619).

It is important to note that the Army's narrative history is not the final word. The research for the study was limited primarily to American, allied, and recently unclassified sources. As more documents are released and additional perspectives are assessed, such as Iraqi and Middle Eastern views, a different and more comprehensive picture of the Iraq War likely will emerge. The authors also could have engaged more thoroughly with several analytical inquiries. For example, their examination of the value of COIN operations is focused too narrowly against the presurge strategy inside Iraq and at the operational level of war. They also could have examined whether America's COIN approaches were misaligned with the sociopolitical context of Iraq, such as privileging centralized Western conceptions of governance. Other pertinent factors that are worthy of consideration include whether and how the undertow of global geopolitics, regional perceptions that America's actions were neocolonial, and the challenges presented by tribal culture affected America's application of COIN concepts. These types of investigations may paint a different picture about the course and lessons of the war.

But this history of the Iraq War illuminates several problems that must be addressed if the United States is going to avoid repeating the same mistakes in future conflicts. For the military, there is a need for substantive changes in how leaders are prepared to serve at the strategic level. This includes reconsidering how the context of modern war affects the efficacy of military force and conceptions of success, as well as how hybrid warfare techniques and disruptive technologies—such as information, cyber, space, artificial intelligence, and robotics—challenge traditional preparations for conflict and competition. Importantly, the military needs senior leaders who are capable of wrestling with this complexity and linking the use of martial means to the context of the environment, as well as the political ends desired. They also must serve as custodians of competent and responsible strategic thinking. The "best" military advice is irrelevant if it is not tied to achievable political objectives. These considerations could impel a profound change in how the Army and the nation develop the talent, technology, and concepts of operations they will need to be successful in the future. But whether this study achieves its goal of producing the burst of introspection that Washington requires remains to be seen.