America’s recent wars in South Asia and the Middle East have inflicted extraordinary physical damage and wreaked seemingly endless havoc. Operations in Afghanistan and Iraq during 2001–2014 totaled $1.6 trillion.¹ Once long-term veterans’ care, disability payments, and other economic effects are included, estimates rise to $4–$6 trillion.² Related reports count over one million Americans wounded in Afghanistan and Iraq, in addition to nearly seven thousand killed.³ A conservative tally of local civilian casualties in these countries reaches the hundreds of thousands. Mass destruction has not brought political order to Kabul, Baghdad, or (if one adds the 2011 Libya war) Tripoli.

Dictatorship has been followed by civil war and interstate conflict among regional powers.

These conflagrations present a historic opportunity for correcting US policy, but mainstream critiques have been stunningly myopic.

At the peak of government, foreign policy learning remains more self-exculpatory than self-reflective. The cutting-edge diagnosis is that proper “counterinsurgency” requires a more serious political commitment than what Washington made in 2001–2016. Take, for example, the argument of President Donald Trump’s Deputy National Security Adviser Nadia Schadlow. In her 2017 book, *War and the Art of Governance: Consolidating Combat Success into Political Victory*, Schadlow faults civilian and military leaders for ignoring history and not learning that they must bridge the gap between conquest and governance. Her remedy: US leaders must utilize “ground forces” not only to wage war but also to “set a foundation for the development of longer-term strategic outcomes.” This approach, when “done well,” can produce stable democratic allies such as Germany and Japan; when “done poorly,” it leads to fiascoes like Afghanistan and Iraq. While she condemns historical amnesia, though, Schadlow barely mentions Vietnam or, more recently, how US leaders pondered America’s failure there as they hatched the abortive 2010 troops surge in Afghanistan. With wildly tendentious recall, she then blames the gap between firepower and authority on a lack of technical erudition — a conclusion not unlike the Vietnam War autopsies she fails to cite.

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6 Ibid., 272.


The inclination to fault the execution of US regime change wars, rather than their conception, extends well beyond Trump’s councilors. Barack Obama, who famously called Operation Iraqi Freedom a “dumb war,” was unwilling to repudiate the premise that the United States should try and “consolidate” its battlefield victories into overseas rule. The Afghanistan surge was Exhibit A, but there was also Libya. Reflecting on his role in catalyzing a civil war by intervening in Libya in 2011, Obama remarked:

[W]e [and] our European partners underestimated the need to come in full force if you’re going to do this … it’s the day after Qaddafi is gone … At that moment, there has to be a much more aggressive effort to rebuild societies that didn’t have any civic traditions.

In 2016, he told documentarian Greg Barker: “[T]he lesson we learned from Iraq and Afghanistan is that, in the absence of our willingness to govern these areas, often our intervention doesn’t solve the problem and in fact can make it worse.”

Such a “lesson” would hardly deter advocates of the next invasion. On the contrary, regime change hawks can tote Schadlow’s book and vow — sincerely but unoriginally — “This time, we’ve got to govern.” Scholarly critics of US foreign policy tend to be more insightful than Beltway intellectuals. But even their theories can be deceptively reassuring.

In the fall 2017 issue of Catalyst, Richard Lachmann identifies many pathologies in America’s military apparatus. In particular, he provides a well-researched discussion of how military-industrial corporatists siphon US tax revenue and foreign resources. While usefully tracing such corruption, his article understates the scope of the problem behind

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11 The Final Year, directed by Greg Barker (2018).
America’s latest wars. Specifically, Lachmann underestimates just how willing and capable US officials have been at putting American bodies and revenues into lethal ground operations and profligate overseas occupations that enrich local and foreign capitalists.

In this response, I situate Lachmann’s criticism in a larger reinterpretation of the record of US military interventions that reflects the enduring difference between military power and political power. America has failed at imposing its preferences in South Asia and the Middle East not for lack of enormous human and economic commitments, but despite them. My argument underlines many of Lachmann’s points, takes issue with certain claims, and provides Catalyst readers an alternative to the worldview of Schadlow, Obama, and leading interventionists.

Lachmann contends that the United States has failed to achieve its objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq because US military forces have not had the domestic support, the armaments, and the overseas partners necessary to defeat insurgencies. Fearing domestic outrage over casualties, US officials have been reticent to order troops to work or fight closely with Afghans and Iraqis. Pentagon welfare has funded big-ticket, less-needed projects like the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II (an air-to-air fighter) and siphoned spending from weapons that are used against Taliban or Islamic State fighters. Finally, while US officials and private contractors profited from military occupation, their crony capitalism excluded and alienated the local elites they needed as partners. Lachmann suggests in closing that the United States went nearly thirty years after Vietnam before launching an “invasion or counterinsurgency war.” Therefore, another such operation is not likely in the near future.12

Lachmann frames his article as a counterargument to Niall Ferguson and like-minded imperialists. But much of it reads like a variation on Ferguson’s theme that “Americans are unwilling to pay the financial or

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human cost of maintaining their empire.” Lachmann does not dispatch the premises to which Ferguson and fellow interventionists subscribe. Instead, he faults the Pentagon for not marshalling the resources to accomplish the task. His essay implies that foreign military occupation and “counterinsurgency” are viable, so long as US officials surmount certain technical problems. (The term counterinsurgency has been employed as a euphemism for counterrevolution that, in the words of Eqbal Ahmad, “serves to conceal the reality of a foreign policy dedicated to combating revolutions abroad and helps to relegate revolutionaries to the status of outlaws.”)

Lachmann maintains the United States can win its counterinsurgency wars (i.e., counterrevolutionary wars) under three conditions: 1) if the US government neutralizes or ignores Americans’ aversion to US casualties and sends its servicepersons further into harm’s way; 2) if the Pentagon receives enough money to buy its soldiers and Marines the tools for decimating indigenous revolts; and 3) if America’s viceroy’s share the spoils of occupation with local intermediaries who can control the general population. Further, Lachmann’s closing argument implies that if the US government overcame these challenges and waged counterinsurgency appropriately (or avoided it completely), the United States would deter Russia and regional powers from spreading into nearby countries.

While I agree with many elements of Lachmann’s account, I disagree with his diagnosis of the US “record of military defeat since the end of the Cold War.” America is not losing wars because of glitches in its counterinsurgency apparatus. Rather, the United States has suffered staggering costs with limited gains because imposing US preferences through force has long been, and remains, normatively and politically bankrupt. Recent interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan again exposed this deficiency; they did not produce it.

13 Ibid., 117.
There was no historical basis for expecting firepower would produce influence; that violence would yield control. When it comes to the United States provoking and besieging indigenous movements for self-rule, armed supremacy has periodically concealed — but never filled — a void of authority.

The United States has enjoyed supremacy of arms over indigenous nationalist movements since 1898, when US forces took the Philippines and Cuba from Spain. The capacity to physically decimate revolutionary movements never went away, even in Vietnam and other quagmires. Meanwhile, political power, in the Arendtian sense of mobilizing people toward shared goals, has persistently eluded US commanders. This is the “governing” authority that Schadlow and Obama dream of in better-designed, future wars.

Historically, the power to govern has only manifested when US officials surrendered primary control to the local society, as they did in Germany and Japan. Such deference in South Asia and the Middle East is functionally inconceivable for today’s policymakers. Citizens in Afghanistan, Iraq, and most nearby countries repudiate Washington’s interventions. If seriously consulted, they would demand the United States withdraw or radically retrench its forces. Hence, US soldiers and Marines continue trying to impose Washington’s designs through force. That they have done so in vain does not mean they have wanted for materiel, training, contact with their targets, or local cronies.

**AMERICAN EXPERIENCES WITH VIOLENCE AND POWER**

America’s unrivaled levels of military spending and its prolonged series of defeats looks less puzzling if one recalls the ontological distinction Hannah Arendt drew between violence and power. Violence is the

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application of force to inflict physical damage; power mobilizes human bodies to accomplish shared goals. Violence can eliminate power but not replace it:

The head-on clash between Russian tanks and the entirely nonviolent resistance of the Czechoslovak people is a textbook case of a confrontation between violence and power in their pure states... Violence can always destroy power; out of the barrel of a gun grows the most effective command, resulting in the most instant and perfect obedience. What never can grow out of it is power.16

Often a surfeit of violence belies a lack of power. Looking at Vietnam, Arendt wrote “the allegedly ‘greatest power on earth’ is helpless to end a war, clearly disastrous for all concerned, in one of the earth’s smallest countries.”17 A half-century later, the description fits US campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan, “graveyard of empires.”

Arendt’s insights help make sense of what Lachmann calls the “dichotomy between unparalleled [US] military advantage over all rival powers and a virtually unblemished record of military defeat since the end of the Cold War.”18 America’s “military advantage” is an advantage in violence, in destructive capability, like the Soviet Union’s advantage over Czechoslovak protesters. Its record of “military defeat” is a record of political defeat. It is a defeat in the contest for power, like the United States’ defeat in Vietnam. (For the purpose of maintaining this distinction, I will refer to violence as “military power” and to the Arendtian sense of power as “political power.”)

America’s most infamous defeats have often followed a string of battlefield “victories.” Lachmann rightly notes the United States “failed to achieve its objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan.”19 However, that failure

16  Ibid., 52-53.
17  Ibid., 86.
19  Ibid.
came after US forces overwhelmed enemy platoons and claimed their territory. In Afghanistan in 2001, US forces won the Battle of Mazar-e-Sharif, the Battle of Kabul, and the Battle of Kandahar. In Iraq in 2003, they triumphed in the Battle of Najaf and the Battle of Baghdad, leading President George W. Bush to trumpet the end of “major combat operations.” Americans soon learned these military successes did not cinch the political task of establishing self-sustaining, peaceful governments in Kabul and Baghdad.

Further examples of military power and political weakness can be found in Obama and Trump’s interventions. US forces and local surrogates won the Battle of Tripoli and the Battle of Sirte (in Libya 2011), as well as a second Battle of Sirte (in 2016) against the emerging threat of Islamic State (IS). Other tactical victories against IS include the Nangarhar Offensive (in Afghanistan 2016), the Third Battle of Fallujah and the Battle of Mosul (in Iraq 2016–17), and the Battle of Raqqa (in Syria 2017). The peak of military power and political impotence came when the US Air Force reportedly killed several dozen IS fighters in Nangarhar, Afghanistan in April 2017 with the GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast. Carrying the power of eleven tons of TNT, the “MOAB” (aka, “Mother of All Bombs”) is one of the most destructive conventional weapons in the Pentagon’s arsenal.20 That violent spectacle belied Trump’s desperation to stabilize Afghanistan by sending thousands of more troops.21

America’s ample overseas capacity for physical violence and its shortage of political power is vivid in the post–Cold War period, but hardly new. Earlier experiences in East and Southeast Asia, for example, presaged today’s patterns.22 Between 1898 and 1975, the United States


applied historic levels of military power against the people of the Philippines, Japan, and Vietnam. But the US government also discovered that decimating these countries was simpler than subduing them. In order for US diplomats and generals to exercise authority, they needed to compromise with the people they had recently been killing. In effect, they had to submit to the societies they sought to mold. Where US administrations deferred to indigenous ideas about independence and self-determination (in the Philippines and Japan), they were able to follow military victory with varying levels of political success. Where they did not make such concessions (in Vietnam), the devastating application of US weaponry could not stop the drive toward national liberation.

After the United States defeated Spain in 1898, US presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt refused to recognize the new Philippine Republic led by President Emilio Aguinaldo. US forces targeted Aguinaldo and his followers in a vicious campaign of mass execution and torture.23 The Philippine-American War of 1899–1902 killed tens of thousands of Filipinos outright while contributing to the deaths of some hundred thousand more, in a conflict-related cholera epidemic.24 Force of arms brought the archipelago country under American control, as a US territory. In the decades that followed, however, the governors-general sent from Washington found themselves relying on the same indigenous administrative class McKinley and Roosevelt had rejected. Land redistribution and elections amplified the power of Aguinaldo’s fellow “illustrados” (educated ones).25

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Eventually, an ex-rebel and Aguinaldo protégé, Manuel Quezon, led the country toward becoming a semi-autonomous commonwealth (in 1934) and a free nation-state. US administrators were impelled to work with Quezon and his fellow oligarchs, effectively striking the modus vivendi they had earlier fought to avoid.26

Japan is described by intervention advocates as the high-water mark of US “nation-building,” but that narrative inverts the historical record. The occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1952 showcased not the reach of US influence, but its boundaries. The grim backdrop to reconstruction, of course, was Japan’s near-total demolition. During World War II, the United States laid waste to sixty-seven Japanese cities with fire bombs, all before dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.27 However, in Japan (unlike in the Philippines and Iraq), the end of the war meant the end of fighting. There was no “insurgency” to counter; US servicepersons suffered no postwar combat fatalities. Even in such favorable circumstances, US officials did not try to build a new nation or a new state. Instead, they refurbished indigenous institutions and reemployed their former foes. America’s suzerain of the Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur, retained the emperor as a symbolic figure, revived the Japanese parliament, preserved some 99 percent of Japan’s bureaucracy, and allowed conservative parties to retake control of government. America’s efforts in Japan certainly compare favorably to its mixed legacy in the Philippines and the debacle that would follow in Vietnam.28 But success was predicated on local qualified personnel and social traditions that supported an orderly government.29


America’s experience in Vietnam could not have been more different than its project in Japan. In Vietnam, the US government would not peacefully acquiesce to the popular wish for independence. Instead, US commanders followed the Japanese and French empires in a doomed bid for geopolitical control. After French forces withdrew from Vietnam in 1954, the White House tried in vain to shore up the “Republic of Vietnam,” a puppet regime led by the aristocratic Ngo Dinh Diem and, after his assassination in 1963, a succession of military dictators. Simultaneously, the Department of Defense tried to weaken the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam. US bombers dropped an estimated 4.6 million tons of ordnance (over 50 percent more than what all Allies in World War II had dropped) in the country’s north and south. In addition, the Pentagon deployed some nine million servicepersons. At the peak of fighting in 1968, over half a million US men in uniform were serving in the country. Even as the American force grew, though, so too did the resistance of Ho Chi Minh and his fellow revolutionaries. One of the hottest zones of the Cold War, Vietnam subdued a military juggernaut at a devastating price. Estimates from the government of Vietnam count 2 million civilians and 1.1 million soldiers, of both north and south, killed.

SEARCHING FOR EFFECTIVE COUNTERREvolution

The record of these cases indicates the limits on American power are more severe than Lachmann acknowledges. Even at the apex of its post-wwii influence, the United States was not “able to … select the governments of countries it dominated, or at least remove governments

32 https://www.britannica.com/event/Vietnam-War
it did not like, [and] defeat all major Third World national revolutions.”33 Rather, the country’s political and military emissaries always worked interdependently with the societies they were charged with governing. The more they compromised — and the less “counterinsurgency” they attempted — the more successful they were.

It is important to grasp this larger pattern if one wants to dispel the bromides of Schadlow, Ferguson, and other interventionists. These hawks do not infer from the Philippines, Japan, and Vietnam a set of enduring structural constraints, which will shape the efforts of even highly talented, well-equipped occupiers in future missions. Instead, they see a record of good and bad choices. The best methods (see Japan) can be emulated. The worst practices (Vietnam) can be avoided to deliver better outcomes the next time. This approach also provides a self-reassuring explanation for failure. When an intervention goes awry, it was because of lousy execution, not fatal assumptions.

In US policymaking, this mindset is pernicious and strongly bipartisan. After first supporting the Iraq War, many liberal commentators and Democratic Party politicians blamed the ensuing fiasco on poor planning by the Bush administration. Their explanation for Iraq’s implosion was that Bush had not listened to the State Department, had not deployed the half-million troops that would have stabilized Iraq, and had not sent a more qualified proconsul than Paul Bremer. Under Obama, mainstream liberals continued to believe in the political viability of counterinsurgency wars. They supported a larger increase in the number of uniformed personnel sent to Afghanistan, which failed to impart a stable government in Kabul, defeat the Taliban, or deprive non-state militants of a safe haven. The same crowd endorsed regime change in Libya in 2011, then, after civil war engulfed the country, rued the absence of a stabilizing US-EU occupation.34

The temptation to treat America’s wars as a technical challenge

is pervasive and the rebuttal must be equally thorough. I address Lachmann’s thesis point by point but my basic claim is this: When locals don’t want to be ruled and Americans don’t want to stop ruling, there is no technical panacea for the contradictions of military counterrevolution. Specifically, there is no way to force an independence-yearning population to accept US dominance through the methods Lachmann’s article implies: 1) by deploying more-skilled, better-equipped soldiers, 2) by minimizing troop losses and rallying support at home, or 3) by paying off more local cronies. All three of these approaches were tried with the Afghanistan and Iraq wars (including during both “surges”). They had little effect swinging events in the promised direction.

MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL WELFARE

Lachmann devotes nearly half the article to “the conflicting requirements of the military-industrial complex and of winning wars in the early twenty-first century.” The gist is that “US troops arrive with the wrong weapons and without the extensive training needed for counterinsurgency.” Much of the section lucidly traces corporate welfare in the defense budget. It does not establish, however, that these inefficiencies limit military power in the field.

The article’s first tables illustrate that the US military has far outspent OECD countries and, “[t]he American military has not had to restrict war plans in the post–1945 era due to budget constraints.” When it comes to counterrevolution, though, Lachmann feels that the Army and the Marine Corps have been hamstrung. Perverse incentives drive officers and corporate CEOs to waste money on the F-35, a jet meant to fight other jets, not for stopping rebels with IEDs. The point is valid and the waste Lachmann describes has reached satirical levels. Private lobbyists and their partners in Congress have not just developed unneeded

36  Ibid., 119.
warplanes, they have also foisted hundreds of M1 Abrams tanks on the Army that the top brass does not want.\textsuperscript{37}

While highlighting the profligacy of US defense spending, Lachmann risks misgauging the scope of money thrown at the Pentagon. There is little basis to believe that, on the battlefield, the personnel fighting America’s wars are underfunded.\textsuperscript{38} Moreover, it would be unreasonable to infer that US soldiers and Marines would wield more political power if fewer resources went to the F-35 and more money went to counterrevolution. In terms of military capability, it does not matter if the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter is “the most expensive weapon in development” — unless we assume that spending on that fighter drains money away from soldiers and Marines and impairs their ability to apprehend or shoot people. Given the size of the Pentagon budget, it would be a stretch to make that assumption. The National Liberation Front in Vietnam did not win because US forces ran out of bullets or bombs. Similarly, Taliban and Sunni Arab fighters have not persisted because US forces wanted for night-vision goggles, vehicles, and bullets to maim and kill them. As I describe below, they possessed the materiel for pursuing up-close, lethal missions.

According to Lachmann, US servicepersons lack not just gear, but expertise. Again, one can question whether it makes sense to fault the Pentagon for not gathering the “extensive training needed for counter-insurgency.”\textsuperscript{39} US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have employed countless local interpreters, as well as top academics, and they have been spearheaded by the nation’s leading warrior-scholars.\textsuperscript{40} It strains


\textsuperscript{38} Of course, this does not imply that the US government sufficiently funds services for military personnel after they return home. See David Finkel, \textit{Thank You For Your Service} (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013).


credulity to imagine that the secret to future success lies in recruiting more figures in the mold of David Petraeus or, from an earlier time, Roger Hilsman.

As much as Lachmann criticizes waste in the military-industrial complex, his discussion implies that (even) more money — for counterinsurgency weapons and specialists — would deliver better results in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. An alternate reading would be that the US armed forces have been very successful at getting the hardware and people they request for fighting purposes. Despite being showered with resources, they have failed to achieve the political results that foreign policymakers envision.

**CASUALTY TOLERANCE**

Just as Lachmann misjudges the scope of funding and training for US counterrevolutionary forces, he underestimates the willingness of politicians and officers to send US servicepersons on dangerous missions. Historical evidence supports Lachmann’s claim that the American public does not tolerate high levels of casualties. This perspective, however, did not dramatically rise after the end of the Cold War, as he contends. The concerns Americans have today about losing their men and women in uniform were present in the Vietnam era as well. Opinion surveys during the Korean, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq wars reveal a consistent, logarithmic pattern: with each tenfold increase in US military deaths (from ten to one hundred, from one

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41 Lachmann’s claims about US presidents deferring to the military are also debatable, but less germane for the present discussion. He claims, for instance, that the 2003 Iraq War was “the single occasion when civilian officials were more eager to fight a war than the generals.” Lachmann, “The US Military: Without Rival & Without Victory,” 125. Prominent counterexamples would include the 1990-91 Iraq War and the 2011 Libya War. Bartholomew Sparrow, *The Strategist: Brent Scowcroft and the Call of National Security* (New York: Public Affairs, 2015); Michael Hastings, “Inside Obama’s War Room,” *Rolling Stone* (2011).
hundred to one thousand, etc.), the public’s approval of US involvement dropped by 15 percentage points. This correlation is remarkably robust given the recent upticks in media coverage and troop veneration described by Lachmann. Overall, decades of polling data do not indicate Americans were previously cavalier about servicemembers dying, then after the mid-1970s became unusually intolerant of soldiers dying. Throughout the post-wwii period, the public has harbored qualms about uses of force that imperiled Americans. Meanwhile, the policymaking elite has, just as steadily, ignored those qualms and pursued high-risk warfare.

Surveys of elites in government and the private sector establish that these figures tend to be significantly more hawkish than ordinary Americans. Chicago Council on Foreign Relations polls in 1998 showed that “opinion leaders” were more than twice as likely as members of the general public to favor a unilateral response to an international crisis (44 percent vs. 21 percent). They were also more inclined to send US troops if Arab states attacked Israel (69 percent vs. 38 percent), North Korea invaded South Korea (74 percent vs. 30 percent), or Iraq attacked Saudi Arabia (79 percent vs. 46 percent). Analyzing decades of such data, Benjamin Page and Marshall Bouton concluded that regular citizens tend to be more focused on “security of domestic well-being, especially job protection” and “year after year ... have been less eager


than decision makers to commit US troops to major combat abroad, where loved ones may become casualties of some official’s geopolitical calculations.”

This gap in attitudes extends to actual policy, where the top military authorities have not balked at deploying their men and women into the kinds of hazardous missions Lachmann recommends. Casualty tolerance, among the nation’s decision-makers, cost Americans dearly in Iraq and Afghanistan.

SURGES AND LOSSES

The US government’s aversion to incurring casualties hampers its counterrevolutionary wars, according to Lachmann. This reluctance to imperil service members has isolated US forces from vital indigenous allies, “reducing the possibilities of accumulating the intelligence and local goodwill necessary for winning counterinsurgency wars.”

The result is a disengaged, undermanned presence and a precipitous retreat. Lachmann also figures that the media’s coverage of US combat fatalities has forced the use of less proximate, less discriminating methods of violence, e.g., rockets and missiles, rather than rifles and mortars. This “risk transfer warfare” is supposed to keep US casualties low but “at the cost of increasing the deaths of civilian noncombatants ... [and] further angering the local population.”

Recent history from Iraq and Afghanistan shows US presidents and generals bucked public disapproval of the wars and ordered soldiers and Marines into the very kinds of dangerous, close encounters with civilians and combatants that Lachmann argues are “necessary for winning counterinsurgency wars.” In particular, the Bush and Obama national security teams seized on “clear-hold-build” as a method for

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47 Ibid., 141.
bringing US troops into contact with local Iraqis and Afghans, presumably the kinds of engagement Lachmann favors.\textsuperscript{48} This approach took many lives without eliminating armed opposition to the governments in Baghdad and Kabul.\textsuperscript{49}

As US forces pioneered clear-hold-build and disseminated it from 2005 to 2009, they exposed themselves to some of the heaviest fighting of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. In 2005 then-colonel H.R. McMaster devised the approach as he sought to gather intelligence and allies in the northwestern Iraqi town of Tal Afar.\textsuperscript{50} In 2007, Bush ordered twenty thousand additional troops to Iraq and sent counterinsurgency guru Petraeus to expand McMaster’s model. The work of US troops intensified as they sought to apply clear-hold-build in the recalcitrant Sunni Triangle. The surge peaked with a total of around 170,000 by the middle of June 2007. April-June had been the deadliest quarter for US military forces in Iraq (331 killed) and 2007 would be the deadliest year for them (904 killed).\textsuperscript{51}

These losses confound any claims that Bush and the Pentagon were afraid of putting more men and women into combat. Notwithstanding the sacrifices that were made, the uptick in violence did not grant the United States a new ability to shape events. US military and Iraqi civilian deaths declined in subsequent years, feeding debate over whether the surge had reconciled Sunnis and Shias or simply produced a temporary détente.\textsuperscript{52} As it happened, Obama’s attempt to replicate


\textsuperscript{49} Lachmann discusses the Iraq surge but does not reconcile its empirics with his argument that US wars would be more successful with better-trained, more-engaged forces on the ground. Lachmann, “The US Military: Without Rival & Without Victory,” 142.


this shift in Afghanistan suggested events in 2007–8 had had more to do with relations among Iraqis than with the addition of two US divisions protecting/battling the locals.

By January 2009 Americans were starting to tire of war in Afghanistan, but Obama took office set on reversing the Taliban’s gains. To execute a new strategy, he tapped General Stanley McChrystal, a West Point graduate and former Green Beret who had overseen clandestine missions at the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) from 2003 to 2008. JSOC is credited with capturing Saddam Hussein and killing Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, secretive assaults that differ from the “risk transfer warfare” Lachmann describes. Defense Secretary Robert Gates claimed McChrystal’s appointment would help the administration get “fresh thinking, fresh eyes on the problem.”

Fresh thinking soon yielded a familiar approach. In December 2009, Obama announced he would send an additional thirty thousand troops to Afghanistan. The aim was for US forces to clear the Taliban from “eastern and southern Afghanistan” then “hold and build” those areas. Just as the plan was getting underway, Obama replaced McChrystal with Petraeus, in one of the war’s most melodramatic turns. Notwithstanding the spectacle, McChrystal’s exit did not disrupt the flow of soldiers into and across Afghanistan.

The McChrystal-Petraeus period lasted from mid-2009 to mid-2011 and involved some of the fiercest fighting in America’s longest war. The death toll for US service members went from 317 in 2009 to a peak of


499 in 2010, then to 418 in 2011 and 310 in 2012. In total, more than twice as many Americans lost their lives in Afghanistan during Obama’s first term than perished in that country under George W. Bush.\(^{59}\)

In summary, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars involved numerous junctures when US presidents and generals could have behaved in the ways Lachmann ascribes to them: bowing to public opinion, refusing to risk more troops, and insulating servicemembers from harm. Instead, they maintained the longstanding trends by which US elites are more hawkish and more tolerant of casualties than average citizens. The conductors of these wars overrode the public’s weariness and caution; they embraced more aggressive counterrevolutionary measures; and they increased the scope and hazards of ground intervention.

**TRANSNATIONAL LOOTING**

Regarding the economics of counterrevolution, Lachmann suggests an especially ruinous form of “plunder neoliberalism” cost the United States potential victories.\(^{60}\) Essentially, crony capitalism overseas funneled wealth to US firms while depriving Afghan and Iraqi elites their expected share of the lucre. These disgruntled compradors then stood aside (or joined in) as militias targeted the occupation.

Lachmann’s account both condemns neoliberal plunder and suggests that more corruption, among high-level Afghans and Iraqis, might have helped Americans buy partners and steer events. Plunder neoliberalism “robs local elites of opportunities for enrichment that were available to their Cold War counterparts in Vietnam and elsewhere,”\(^{61}\) a statement that implies White House collaboration with Diem was a model to emulate:

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\(^{59}\) Nearly 75 percent of US military fatalities in Afghanistan in 2001-2016 occurred on Obama’s watch.


\(^{61}\) Ibid., 143.
[In Afghanistan and Iraq] private firms ... are able to import employees and goods and ... bypass the local politicians, landowners, and businessmen with whom corrupt American officials in Vietnam had to deal. Thus, privatization removes the paths through which the US government in Vietnam, Korea, and elsewhere in the twentieth century offered stable and enduring opportunities for local collaborators to enrich themselves.  

The putative result is “a zero-sum redistribution” that serves American CEOs by depriving local elites and motivating them toward “allying with insurgents, or at least standing back and allowing insurgents to push the US out of Iraq and Afghanistan ...” Had those same elites been allowed to partake in the plunder, so the logic goes, counterrevolution would have been more successful. Such an argument is implausible and the underlying account is incomplete.

Lachmann draws attention to one component of wartime profiteering: foreigners ripping off the indigenous population. He does not discuss other components, though, and he thus understates the scope of the graft.

The mass and inequitable transfer of wealth did not amount to a sweeping expropriation of the Afghan and Iraqi owner classes: occupation made segments of the population rich — or, typically, richer. These money flows did not, contrary to Lachmann’s contentions, turn the affluent against the US occupation or make them indifferent to Taliban and Sunni Arab fighters. Unsurprisingly, many aristocratic Afghans and Iraqis supported counterrevolution. In short, Lachmann’s framework merits significant revision. The plunder was not a zero-sum conflict between US and non-US elites but a rip-off, by those elites, of ordinary citizens. It was cross-border upward redistribution — transnational looting — with winners and losers in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the United States. 

62 Ibid., 144.
63 Ibid.
taxpayers, in all three countries, to top figures in government and the private sector, also in all three countries.

Figures on the US missions in Afghanistan and Iraq show far more loot was available than even what Lachmann describes, particularly relative to earlier occupations. The US spent roughly $53 billion total on reconstructing Japan and Germany during 1946–1952. The price tag of Iraqi reconstruction for 2003–2012 was $213 billion, mostly covered by the Iraqi government (through oil sales), and $61 billion (29 percent) paid for by the United States.⁶⁴ US reconstruction projects in Afghanistan are ongoing. By the end of 2014, the cost to American taxpayers was $109 billion, more than the total Americans spent on the sixteen countries of the Marshall Plan during 1948–1952 ($103.4 billion, adjusted for inflation).⁶⁵ These comparisons to post-WWII expenditures do not even include offensive military operations. On top of the main Pentagon budget, military spending for Iraq and Afghanistan in 2001–2016 approached $1.6 trillion.⁶⁶

Where did these titanic sums go? Only a sliver materialized in infrastructural improvements. Ten years after US forces invaded Iraq, the public power grid was supplying Iraqi households only six to eight hours of electricity per day and millions of Iraqis had only two hours of potable water per day.⁶⁷ One former US ambassador to Iraq observed, “There were many development problems, and we didn’t get much in

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return for the $50 billion-plus that we spent.”  

Fifteen years on, Afghanistan also suffered from severe utility shortages and had struggled to productively absorb the post-2001 injection of money. “We, along with other international donors, put too much money, too quickly, into too small an economy, with too little oversight — all of which contributed to the problem,” rued the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction.  

As rents gushed chaotically through Afghanistan and Iraq, firms and officials with access could make a killing from neoliberal plunder. First in line were Bush-friendly US companies like Bechtel, Halliburton, and DynCorp, which snatched no-bid contracts for Iraq and made off with tens of billions of dollars. Even these excess profits, though, amounted to a small fraction of the total amounts at play. While enriching American contractors, the US government also rained dollars upon many Iraqis and Afghans.

“MONEY IS AMMUNITION”

As with clear-hold-build and the surges, the record of events in Iraq and Afghanistan resembles Lachmann’s prescribed counterfactual: US policymakers have already done what Lachmann recommends they should have done. Massive reconstruction and military spending from the US Treasury benefited American firms, but also enriched Afghan and Iraqi capitalists. While waging counterrevolution, the Pentagon instructed its soldiers to liberally bribe potential and actual insurgents.

71 Lutz, Reconstructing Iraq: The Last Year and the Last Decade, 5.
These cash flows mitigated fissures between US and local elites (as Lachmann expected). They did not, however, empower the US occupation or end the civil wars.

Like the troop surge, the Pentagon’s brainchild regarding economic payouts was born in Iraq and then moved to Afghanistan. While serving in Iraq in 2003–4, Petraeus began having US soldiers dispense cash among Iraqi civilians. He later claimed that “money is ammunition … Once money is available, the challenge is to spend it effectively and quickly to rapidly achieve measurable results.”\textsuperscript{72} The Army codified this philosophy in the “Money as a Weapon System” (MAAWS) approach and the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP). CERP gave a pecuniary core to McMaster’s clear-hold-build. $4 billion of CERP funds in Iraq helped convince Sunni Arab militants to curb their attacks at the peak of the US military presence.\textsuperscript{73} The model was adopted in Afghanistan. A 2009 manual on MAAWS-Afghanistan stated, “CERP funds provide Commanders with a non-lethal weapon system for high payoff projects and services.”\textsuperscript{74} Once more, the key service the United States could buy was safety from local assailants.

In Iraq US companies dominated logistics and transport for the US military, but in Afghanistan the Pentagon depended on a non-American consortium, Host Nation Trucking (HNT), for those services. As a congressional subcommittee reported, HNT comprised “eight Afghan, American, and Middle Eastern companies” and handled “over 70 percent of the total goods and materiel distributed to US troops in the field, roughly 6,000 to 8,000 truck missions per month.” HNT’s work, under a $2.16 billion contract, was essential to US missions. Without it, the Pentagon would have needed to invest more of its own manpower into the task: “The HNT contract allows the United States to dedicate


\textsuperscript{73} Smith, “Waste, fraud and abuse commonplace in Iraq reconstruction effort.”

a greater proportion of its troops to other counterinsurgency priorities instead of logistics.” But there was a snag. The reason HNT could be such a reliable supplier, the reason the US government could delegate vital support to the consortium, was that HNT compensated the Afghans that US forces were supposed to be suppressing: “[O]utsourcing the supply chain in Afghanistan to contractors has ... had significant unintended consequences. The HNT contract fuels warlordism, extortion, and corruption, and it may be a significant source of funding for insurgents.”

For Afghans who got their hands in the till, neoliberal plunder could be a windfall. While the HNT contract lined pockets across the countryside, elites at the core lived like tycoons. Two of the main contractors for HNT were the Watan Group, led by cousins of President Hamid Karzai, and NCL Holdings, run by the son of Minister of Defense General Abdul Rahim Wardak. These companies reaped tens of millions in US contracts (an estimated tenth of which went to paying off insurgents that would otherwise target their convoys). The war turned the president’s brother Ahmed Wali Karzai into the de facto ruler of southern Afghanistan and helped him accrue “$250 million a year from ... various businesses” (until his murder in 2011). Meanwhile, another member of the presidential family, Mahmoud Karzai, drew millions from the Kabul Bank on outrageously generous terms, and contributed to the bank’s near-meltdown in 2010.

The financial crisis surrounding Kabul Bank illustrates how much the US occupation enabled local elites to cheat their fellow Afghans and US taxpayers simultaneously. Established in 2004, the private Kabul Bank was the main receptacle for US reconstruction funds. It also served as a virtual ATM for well-connected Afghans, like Mahmoud Karzai, who could obtain loans with no fixed repayment date and zero

interest. As these loans crept toward $900 million, Kabul Bank scrambled for deposits from ordinary Afghans to remain solvent. When the veritable Ponzi scheme came to light in 2010, concerned depositors rushed to withdraw their money.

Keen to preempt a total run, the Central Bank of Afghanistan bailed out the Kabul Bank, transferring $825 million to cover what Mahmoud Karzai and other kleptocrats had pocketed. “It was a glaring example of how the greed of a small cabal of relatives and political and business cronies had stolen from both poor Afghans and the US government,” wrote the Washington Post’s Joshua Partlow. “The scope of the fraud was enormous: the bailout represented 5 to 6 percent of the country’s GDP.” The emergency measure cost Afghan taxpayers, but the primary funder of the Afghan economy, the United States government, effectively bore the lion’s share of the Central Bank’s expenses.

In Iraq, politicians and businesspersons have done just as well as their Afghan counterparts. While Sunni Arab fighters could pursue ERP funds, Shia and Kurdish leaders in the country’s center and north could tap petroleum rents that dwarfed what the Pentagon could offer. In this respect, the main “zero-sum” redistribution was from tens of millions of ordinary Iraqis, who were entitled to a share of their country’s wealth, to Shia powerbrokers in Baghdad and Kurdish bigwigs in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Even after decades of devastating war and sanctions, Iraq currently has nine times the GDP, and eight times the GDP per capita, of Afghanistan. Where Afghan profiteers scooped up tens of hundreds of millions, their Iraqi counterparts absconded with billions. During the premiership of Nouri al-Maliki (r. 2006–2014) “billions

80 https://countryeconomy.com/countries/compare/afghanistan/iraq?sc=XE34
of dollars ... [were] embezzled from state coffers ....” Nepotism even
afflicted the Integrity Commission, whose mission was curbing abuse.81
Well-connected Iraqis pocketed state funds with impunity and sent
an estimated $40 billion of laundered money out of the country each
year.82 In northern Iraq, the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Regional
Government has become the dynastic fiefdom of Masoud Barzani.83
Barzani — along with relatives such as his son (and KRG intelligence
chief) Masrour Barzani and his nephew (and KRG prime minister)
Nechirvan Barzani — have controlled tens of billions of dollars from
KRG oil sales and, through those revenues, countless civil servants
and judges.84

There is little question that the United States has done grievous
harm to the Afghan and Iraqi economies, but transnational looting has
not excluded local magnates and their flunkies.

Contrary to Lachmann, neoliberal military occupation did “offer
paths to wealth for elites” in the subject countries.85 Often these paths
led to US coffers. The United States put more money in Iraq than it
invested in its most successful cases of nation-building. Expenses for
the ongoing war in Afghanistan have long since topped the costs of the
Marshall Plan. Much of this Pentagon welfare transferred existing and
future tax revenues to US weapons manufacturers and contractors. At
the same time, the White House and the Department of Defense did
not neglect their local clients. In Afghanistan, they even helped them
retain their ill-gotten fortunes.

81 International Crisis Group, Failing Oversight: Iraq’s Unchecked Government (New
82 Lutz, Reconstructing Iraq: The Last Year and the Last Decade, 6.
83 Greg Muttitt, Fuel on the Fire: Oil and Politics in Occupied Iraq (New York: Random
84 “Dream on Hold,” Economist, July 9, 2016; Erin Banco, “The curse of oil in Iraqi
COERCION NOT HEGEMONY

Counterrevolutionary wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have again exposed what violence can and cannot accomplish. US intervention forces can end dictatorships but not civil wars; they can uproot armies but not militias; they can deliver constitutions but not prosperity; and they can impose compliance but not submission. With a surplus of military force, and a shortage of political power, the United States exercises coercion but not hegemony.

It is difficult to square this reality with Lachmann’s closing tale of global assent to American dominance. He writes, “The US’s offer to serve as policeman of the world has been accepted by a majority of the world since 1945, and almost the entire world after 1991.” Is that so? The share of the world that supported the Non-Aligned Movement, anticapitalist and anti-imperialist revolutions, and non-American alternatives during the Cold War would likely disagree. In recent years, international dissent has been particularly stark.

Thus far in the twenty-first century there is considerable opposition to American “policing.” After worldwide protests slammed the approaching US invasion of Iraq in early 2003, the New York Times described “world public opinion” as a second “superpower.” This rival power is especially strong in the areas of South Asia and the Middle East targeted by US counterrevolution. In 2005, 69 percent of respondents in five Arab countries listed the United States as the greatest threat to them. Polls in 2006 showed that 62 percent of Shia Arabs and 92 percent of Sunni Arabs in Iraq supported “attacks on American forces.” These trends dispel any notion that the United States could defer to indigenous social forces, as it had in Japan, and still pursue occupation

86 Ibid., 147.
88 72 percent of respondents selected Israel. 3 percent identified Iran as the greatest threat to them. Shibley Telhami, “America in Arab eyes,” Survival 49, no. 1 (2007): 116.
89 Ibid.
and counterrevolution. Surveys in 2008, 2009, and 2010 showed Arab respondents prioritized the US withdrawing its military from Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula, plus ending its support for Israel.  

More broadly, a win/Gallup International poll of sixty-six thousand people across sixty-five countries in 2013 found that a plurality of the people interviewed (24 percent) considered the United States the biggest threat to world peace. Four years later, 35 percent of some forty-two thousand respondents across thirty-eight countries considered US “power … a major threat to our country.”  

Large portions of the world have not accepted America’s pretention to “policeman of the world”; they have repudiated it. Armed rebels in US-occupied countries present one facet of this larger disquiet with American militarism. Any critical treatment of counterrevolutionary wars must approach it in that light — as an archaic and globally despised imposition, rather than a rusty machine that needs a tune-up.

Lachmann’s prescriptions would not change the pattern of results in American counterrevolutionary wars. Yet they imply the exact opposite: victory is within reach. The notion that (even) better equipment and training, (even) more casualty-tolerant policymakers, and (even) better-paid local partners would have improved the course of the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts is an alluring fallacy. It suggests that the right recalibrations could help a future invasion — for instance, in Iran — succeed. Lachmann neither advocates nor anticipates such a war. But, paradoxically, his modest critique of US interventionism amounts to “lessons” that hawkish commentators could cite when claiming the next war will be nothing like Iraq.

As for the likelihood of such a conflict, I do not share Lachmann’s

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90 2010 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey (College Park, MD: University of Maryland with Zogby International, 2010).

91 The distant second and third choices were Pakistan (8 percent) and China (6 percent). win/Gallup, “win/Gallup International’s annual global End of Year survey shows a brighter outlook for 2014,” news release, December 30, 2013.

92 Jacob Poushter and Dorothy Manevich, “Globally, People Point to ISIS and Climate Change as Leading Security Threats,” news release, August 1, 2017.
apparent confidence in American restraint. US officials continue to try and bludgeon their way to hegemony — in ways that have alarmed the world. Therefore, it strikes me that the problem to interrogate is not “How can America fix its war machine?” but “Why do America’s leaders keep launching wars? And under what conditions will they stop?” I pose these questions to encourage an alternate debate beyond the present exchange. I suspect the answers will be found in a combination of political economy and social mobilization.

The costs of war have been astronomical but diffuse. The rents of war have been equally astronomical, yet they are concentrated among groups that shape policy. Further, as evidenced in the Obama and Trump eras, these groups extend beyond the neoconservative clique Lachmann primarily faults for the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. These broader circles of lawmakers, corporatists, and pundits show no sign of consequentially registering the human costs of US wars. Hence, it would be naive and ahistorical to think that a nationally costly, privately profitable “defeat” like Afghanistan or Iraq would deter US elites from pursuing another counterrevolutionary war. The lessons they internalize may be the exact opposite: launch overseas military intervention as often as market opportunities and domestic constraints allow.

If the smart money is on dumb wars, then meaningful course corrections will not emerge from the self-admonitions of a well-heeled policymaking class — only from concerted public pressure. ¶

Note: The author holds sole responsibility for the arguments expressed here. He thanks Mary Papadopoulos and Robert Vitalis for commenting on an earlier version of this essay.