Book Reviews

Elusive Victories: The American Presidency at War by Andrew Polsky. New York, Oxford University Press, 2012. 456 pp. $29.95.

American wars waged by American presidents have come at such great cost. Repeatedly, our commanders-in-chief have failed to deliver on their inflated promises when deploying troops abroad. The events of war regularly have overtaken even the most-meticulous planning, hemming in the military and frustrating civilian commanders. When choosing and then conducting wars, presidents have either ignored or misinterpreted historical precedents. Fixated on the prerequisites of victory, meanwhile, presidents have not planned adequately for the peace, and have then watched the unraveling of their wartime accomplishments acquired with so much blood and treasure.

Such is Andrew Polsky's telling of the Civil War, two World Wars, Vietnam, and the post-September 11 wars. It is a telling steeped in executive hubris, myopia, and, ultimately, tragedy. For all they did right, our wartime presidents too often misread the lessons of prior wars, mislead the Congress and the public, underestimated the fortitude of adversaries, and overestimated the goodwill of allies. In one instance, presidents may be waging the right war for the right reasons, but suddenly, in the next, they are trapped by past decisions and desperately looking for a way out. In all of these wars, even those that the United States ostensibly won, presidents have "become the victims of the force they set in motion, sometimes before the first shot is fired" (p. 30).

As a general accounting of the diverse and often devastating costs of war, *Elusive Victories* illuminates plenty. Polsky offers an even-handed if not especially original accounting of the wartime tenures of seven U.S. presidents. And along the way, he reveals many ways in which these presidents stumbled and sometimes fell when waging war either at home or abroad. We see Abraham Lincoln and Woodrow Wilson failing to plan adequately for the peace, Franklin D. Roosevelt trying desperately to keep pace with the events unfolding around him, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon sinking deeper into the quagmire, George W. Bush justifying an Iraq war on faulty intelligence, and Barack Obama left to clean up the mess.

It is below the summaries of the secondary historical literatures on these wars, though, that things get really interesting. And also, it is below that Polsky

runs into trouble, as his survey of presidential war making confronts, and in some instances propagates, deep analytic tensions.

Consider Polsky's variable depictions of the domestic politics of war itself. Intermittently, Polsky laments the rise of presidential imperialism, the unfettered ability of presidents to wage war when and how they choose, with the adjoining branches of government altogether abdicating their constitutional responsibilities. "On balance," Polsky concludes, "the power to go to war has come to rest entirely in the hands of the president" (p. 341). Such blanket claims, of course, ignore the rich empirical work done on the domestic politics of war, which received nary a mention in this survey. But no matter, Polsky himself goes on to offer a rather exhaustive accounting of the many ways in which Congress, the military, and the public frustrate presidential ambitions, sometimes by meddling in the conduct of war itself, other times by derailing cherished elements of the president's domestic policy agenda. In one instance, we see an all-powerful president that runs roughshod over his domestic political opponents; and in the next, we find that same president tied in knots, many of his own making, a pariah within his own party.

Then there are the standards to which we ought to hold wartime presidents. Polsky is at his best when he underscores the ways in which wartime justifications and objectives are politically construed. Rather than appearing amidst the crises themselves for all to see, set once and forever, wartime justifications and objectives instead are subjects of political manipulation and adaptation. When defining the justifications and goals of war, presidents anticipate how Congress, the American public, and foreign allies and adversaries are likely to respond, and adjust accordingly. In some instances, presidents may scale back their ambitions, worried about the reaction of a key political constituency. But in others, presidents may accelerate or augment their claims, either because they sense broad political support or because they anticipate the mere possibility of rallying the nation behind the cause of war.

Unfortunately, when assessing success and failure, Polsky takes presidents at their word, suggesting that the standards presidents invoke when waging war are the same standards we should invoke when evaluating their performance. Why should we not evaluate the president's performance on the president's terms? The answer is simple. Precisely because a president's justifications and goals are political contrivances, we, as observers, should look skeptically upon them when assessing presidential influence. It is quite possible, probable even, that wartime presidents who failed to realize their most lofty wartime objectives nonetheless accomplished a great deal. Indeed, in some instances, their accomplishments may have critically depended upon the articulation of lofty, even unattainable, goals.

Confusion about standards of evaluation raises deeper concerns about historical counterfactuals. On the basis of Polsky's historical accounts, are we to conclude that the costs of war are unavoidable, and hence war itself should be shunned? Or, that each of these wars could have been improved had, say, Congress played a more-prominent role in the planning stages, had the public been consulted, or had more-enlightened presidents waged them? Both possibilities raise nettlesome analytical questions, just as both place upon the author altogether new burdens of proof. But if we are to do more than just recount the costs of war, as Polsky plainly asks of us, then we must answer these larger and more-challenging questions.

For this book too, then, victory proves elusive. Like our wartime presidents, it promises a great deal, and occasionally it shows signs of real brilliance. Deep truths are uncovered about the profound challenges that presidents confront when waging war. But neither the historical renderings it develops nor the analytical framework it adopts can support the grander claims this book seeks to advance. Instead, Polsky offers another useful reminder of the limits of presidential power and the perils of war, the value of which will depend a great deal upon the reader's prior expectations of each.

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Barack Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Engagement by Robert Singh. New York, Bloomsbury Academic, 2012. 272 pp. Paper, $32.95.

Robert Singh's book offers a trenchant critique of Barack Obama's foreign policy, more out of sadness than opposition. Like most Europeans, Singh applauds the stylistic changes Obama has made in U.S. policy. But, unlike many Europeans and others who strain to magnify Obama's accomplishments, Singh concludes that "the substantive results of Obama's approach have been relatively modest" (p. 194).

Neither transformative nor realist, Obama's approach, according to Singh, is "unrelentingly pragmatic, prudent and at times accommodationist" (p. 6). The goal appears to be "calibrated strategic retrenchment; scaling back commitments, reducing costs, minimizing unilateralism, encouraging multilateralism, and espousing less rather than more US assertiveness abroad" (p. 59). According to Singh, the policy fails on four counts.

First, it suffers from strategic naïveté. It assumes that countries share interests and mutual gains when, for most states, interests remain sovereign