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## Why Should We Care

*Legacy, Myth, and Memory*

“All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.”<sup>1</sup>

It is both too soon and too late to write this book. It is too soon because the post-9/11 wars have not ended and appear unlikely to do so by the time the book is published. And it is too late because much of the U.S. military has already decided it has learned its lessons from them—and is moving on to prepare for new and different types of conflict far different and far away from the painful classrooms of Iraq and Afghanistan. But the institutions doing so have fought for the longest stretch of time in their histories. Nearly two decades of conflict have irrevocably shaped the U.S. military, as has incessant fighting in conflicts, many of which could generously be called inconclusive, against non-state actors spanning the globe. The epitaph of the post-9/11 wars, when it is finally written, will likely combine three words: perplexity (over why they lasted

so long); ambiguity (over their focus or lack thereof); and anxiety (over what, on balance, they achieved, prevented, and exacerbated).

What has the U.S. military inherited from nearly two decades at war? This book is about how the U.S. military—its leaders, its troops, its thinkers, its doers, its veterans—is dealing with the legacy of the wars since 9/11. The legacy, or legacies, of these conflicts have serious implications for how the United States will wage war in the future, but there is a stunning lack of introspection about these conflicts. At best, there are ad hoc, episodic, and unstructured debates about Iraq or Afghanistan, or operational-level studies of certain battles. In the military, myths about why, how, and who it has fought have emerged and matured, often consigning those who still worry about the wars' legacies to a strange clergy of historians and axe grinders. The national security apparatus as a whole now seeks to move on to the next perceived threats: China and Russia. The American public, for its part, remains disinterested in the post-9/11 wars—they rarely come closer than casualty lists in the newspaper summarizing horrific events in far-off places, or scattered applause on airplane flights and at baseball games for those who have served. And many Americans are questioning whether it even makes sense to invest in the military given problems at home and doubts about whether U.S. military involvement abroad really can be a force for good. Simply put, there is neither serious nor organized stock-taking by public intellectuals on this inheritance.

But the United States cannot simply hit reset and ignore the legacies from its nearly twenty years at war. Ultimately, its lack of a postmortem dialogue will continue to feed a dynamic in which different constituencies learn different lessons, come to different conclusions, and, therefore, foment a vacuum of introspection and dialogue that neuters the history of what has transpired. When debates do occur, they often are characterized by fierce, visceral disagreements over the facts—potentially leading to hollow analysis. This is “gnawing at our military’s zeitgeist,” as one soldier explained ruefully when I asked him about the legacy of these conflicts.

For that reason, this book focuses primarily on exploring this inheritance and then offers practical antidotes to begin correcting it. It

examines three civil-military crises fomented by the post-9/11 wars. Then, looking through five lenses, it explores how nearly two decades of conflict are influencing how the military goes to war, how the military wages war, who leads the military, who serves in it, how the military thinks about war, and, above all, the enduring impact of these wars on those who waged them.

The post-9/11 era is not necessarily over. Indeed, we may see only its conclusion in retrospect. Those who wrestle with its legacy are frustrated, exhausted, and rarely have a serious opportunity to reflect on it. Yet, if the U.S. military seeks victory in the future, it must acknowledge and reconcile this inheritance. It must recognize the positive and negative baggage it takes on its pivot toward the next wars. This book seeks to help them do so.

### ARGUMENT AND APPROACH

While the term “inflection point” is often both overused and inaccurate, it is entirely appropriate in the case of the September 11, 2001, attack. For the U.S. military, it felt like everything changed overnight. Throughout the 1990s, the military had lurched from one conflict to another, in places as varied as Somalia, Haiti, and the Balkans, on a wide array of missions. But after the September 11 attacks, a perception grew that the military’s purpose was now crystal clear: fighting terrorists and those who sponsor them. Over the next two decades, that crystal clarity shattered under the impact of nearly two decades of unrelenting war, changing the military in the process.

It is easy today to take for granted the many aspects of our system of government that are so long and deeply held as to be unquestioned yet fundamental to the nature of our republic. The role of the military is one of those. It is worth recalling, however, that decisions about the use of military power—including who makes decisions about the use of force, and the military’s relation to society as whole—were a key concern at America’s founding. Questions about the United States’s self-conception of its role in the world and, thus, its military’s activities abroad, often have been a subject of key concern for leaders and the public alike. How-

ever, for much of the post-9/11 wars—indeed, for much of U.S. history—foundational questions like our national security priorities, the proper use of force, and how civilians should control the military have received less introspection than they merit.

Two interrelated dynamics require us to think harder about these issues now. The first is a broader societal dynamic: the public is less connected to the military now than at any point in modern history. Few citizens now serve in the military, so those who do not serve neither understand it nor acutely feel its sacrifices. Decisions to pay for ongoing military operations through deficit spending means no Americans feel any immediate financial costs for the military's activities.<sup>2</sup> The result is a military that garners tremendous respect from a public that knows little about it. This societal dynamic exacerbates and is exacerbated by a second trend: the U.S. military has been at war for the longest continuous period in its history, but the outcomes of these post-9/11 wars are inconclusive. The average citizen's attention has largely moved on. In combination, these twin dynamics mean that never have such long wars demanded so much of so few. The military feels the wars' painful effects, but—critically—also seems to feel as if these effects are poorly understood by others. This book seeks to tackle that inheritance.

Three insights about the U.S. military emerge in this book. First, how the U.S. military processes the results of twenty years of inconclusive war can best be understood as encapsulating three interrelated crises. Each crisis aligns with one of the institutions that Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz identifies as comprising the political-structural "social trinity" that influences warfare: the military, the people, and the government.<sup>3</sup> The first, a *crisis of confidence*, focuses on the military's relationship with itself. This crisis includes both strategic- and personal-level understandings of why one fights and what victory looks like. The second, a *crisis of caring*, focuses on the military's relationship with the American public. This crisis is illustrated by the superficial public interest that has overwhelmingly characterized the post-9/11 wars. And the third is a *crisis of meaningful civilian control*, which concerns the military's relationship with civilian national security leaders in the government. This crisis highlights some in the military's tendency to blame

civilians rather than simultaneously engaging in more serious introspection; the resurgence of the Powell Doctrine (and its exceedingly narrow criteria for using military force); the popularity of the phrase “best military advice”; and efforts to minimize civilian oversight in crucial arenas. Taken together, these three crises represent the strategic-level inheritance for the U.S. military from the post-9/11 wars it is carrying toward future conflicts.

Many in the military are bitter and frustrated over the course of the post-9/11 wars, and feel they no longer know what victory looks like. To be sure, many of those grievances are serious and valid, and have driven an outpouring of perturbation from members of the military about their service.<sup>4</sup> Those grievances largely have not, however, generated sufficiently serious and hard thinking about what victory means and how to achieve it. Brief interludes of introspection have been technocratic and tactically focused, or brimming with vacuous platitudes that discount the dynamic and inherently political-military nature of conflict. Blame abounds, particularly for civilian leaders, and the gap between these two communities is growing into a gorge. Many members of the military feel alienated from U.S. civilians, question why more Americans do not appreciate or understand their sacrifices, and are resentful of this public indifference. The implications of these dynamics are profoundly worrisome for the all-volunteer force and those it protects.

Second, despite resulting in the most experienced military in U.S. history, the post-9/11 wars have left the United States woefully unprepared for critical future threats. Military forces can be defined by three attributes—time, space, and the spectrum of conflict—and the longest period of war in modern U.S. history has, understandably, resulted in a force specialized along each of these dimensions. It has focused on winning the wars of today at the expense of fighting the wars of tomorrow. It has focused on wars in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Syria rather than in places like East Asia or Eastern Europe. Finally, it has focused on enemies like terrorists and insurgents rather than adversaries like China or Russia, and has thought comparatively little about conventional or even nuclear conflict.

This all is logical, of course, but still carries costs. The military—

largely following the civilian guidance it received throughout the first decade of the post-9/11 wars—has become so specialized in handling unconventional and irregular warfare that it is not sufficiently ready for a future of interstate competition or conflict. Such future fights could result in tens of thousands of casualties and could involve attacks against the U.S. homeland, for which we are largely unprepared. The post-9/11 wars have been akin to heartburn; a future high-end conventional or nuclear conflict with Russia or China would be much closer to a heart attack.<sup>5</sup>

If the military does not tackle this inheritance, the consequences could be ruinous. After nearly two decades of war in which the U.S. military seemed trapped in a violent cycle of inconclusiveness, first-order questions are reemerging. These include monumental and thorny topics such as: What should the U.S. military fight for? Who should it be willing to kill and be killed for? And, how can it most effectively and efficiently do so?

It is critical to note up front that this book is not intended to be a critique of any single U.S. administration. The post-9/11 wars now span four presidencies across both political parties. Moreover, some of the societal dynamics at play here have long historical roots. Ultimately, however, this is a book about how the last twenty years have affected the military and society, and what we need to do now. As such, it does not explore all aspects of the international repercussions of these wars. Many other books take up, for example, how the international system and the United States's relationships with other nations (including partners and allies) have been impacted, the future threats the United States may face, and the degree to which the military is prepared for them.<sup>6</sup> These are important topics. But the first step to healing is understanding what has happened to us and how we *can* heal. That is the focus of this book.

## LEGACIES MATTER

For any military, the legacies of its previous conflicts inform the institution, the individuals, and the broader society. How a war is fought—and how its society views the conflict—are inextricably linked. Defeat can turn into victory in the public square, as Egypt’s government managed when it built a monument in Cairo insinuating success in its 1973 war with Israel despite the reality of catastrophic loss.<sup>7</sup> Blame for losses can be shifted away from the political leadership and the military and toward certain portions of society, as the Nazi leadership did with German Jews in the run-up to World War II. And lost causes can be embraced long after the guns have fallen silent. Some inheritances are “passive” and represent emergent patterns that become acquired norms. Others are “active,” such as policy constraints or decisions on how to wage war that are deliberately imposed by leadership. In the case of the U.S. military, some of the most influential conflicts include the Civil War, the World Wars, the Vietnam War, and the Persian Gulf War.

The Civil War illustrates the ultimate futility of burying legacies. More than 150 years after it ended, the impact of this war still is being debated across the country. No work encapsulates its immediate legacy better than Winslow Homer’s painting “The Veteran in a New Field,” finished in 1865, not long after Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Court House, depicting a former Union soldier who has returned to reap his overgrown and flourishing fields, and he does so with a scythe—the symbol of death.<sup>8</sup> The country had undergone a painful few years, having suffered an estimated 1.5 million casualties, and wrestled over how to reconstruct a “house divided against itself,” as Abraham Lincoln had warned.<sup>9</sup> It sought to put the past behind it.

That this resulted in an uneven and unfair approach to issues like equality is clearly evident in the fact of U.S. military segregation through at least 1948.<sup>10</sup> Over the next century, and particularly in the early 1900s, Lee and his lieutenants were deified across the southern United States. Their statues became popular spots in cities like New Orleans, Louisiana, and Richmond, Virginia, as the movement to immortalize those men with monuments was an effort to use the war’s legacy to deny Af-

rican Americans their constitutional rights. More subtle consequences for the military include both its continued overreliance on servicemembers from the South, largely due to base locations, and—given that ten of the military’s bases are named after military officers from the Confederacy, as well as a barracks at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point—a potentially worrisome deifying dynamic, as well.<sup>11</sup> In recent years, the Civil War has again come alive, resulting in the removal of some Confederate statues, but the ultimate legacies of a war that tore the country apart have yet to be fully reconciled. These issues took on new energy throughout 2020 as the Marine Corps banned Confederate flags and the Army reconsidered the names of its bases, perturbing a president who vowed to reject any changes.

The aftermath of World War I illustrates the significance of geography, and especially physical distance, in shaping the United States’s use of force. In the wake of the Versailles Treaty, empires collapsed and some states were born. But America was shielded from much of that revolutionary upheaval by the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>12</sup> The overwhelming majority of American troops killed in combat were brought back home for burial.<sup>13</sup> Although the American Legion wanted all Americans to observe two minutes of silence on the armistice’s anniversary, the idea never really took hold.<sup>14</sup> When the war to end all wars ended, Americans moved on remarkably fast, content to hope that such carnage would not, or could not, be repeated in their lifetimes. The size and quality of the interwar U.S. military reflected this belief.

The legacies of World War II illustrate how memory of a spectacular victory can change a military. As with all these conflicts, “much depends on which aspects of the war—and which period of time—one examines, and which reminiscences one trusts.”<sup>15</sup> To be sure, there should be no doubt that without the U.S. military’s involvement in World War II the world would have looked dramatically different over the last seven decades. It is no exaggeration to say, as President Bill Clinton declared on the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day, “These men [who fought] saved the world.”<sup>16</sup> More broadly, the war’s legacies have been multifaceted and include a transformed Japan and Germany, the rebirth of a rules-based liberal international order, and the firm elevation of the United States as



a global superpower. For the military, World War II became the epitome of success, establishing the total defeat of the enemy as the sine qua non of true victory in the minds of its leaders. It is not a coincidence that the Army's newest uniform is strikingly similar to its World War II uniform. As the most senior enlisted soldier in the U.S. Army explained, in designing the new uniform he and others asked, "When is the most prominent time when the Army's service to our nation was universally recognized?"<sup>17</sup> Although World War II is an obvious answer, it is telling that the Army had to reach back more than seventy years to find it.

The Korean War illustrates the opposite: amnesia about a conflict that never ended. Formally speaking, Korea was neither a war nor is it over: it was a "police action" that ceased through a negotiated truce. Due to concerns about whether a future Korean leader would allow Americans to visit the graves of their loved ones, no cemeteries of deceased Americans remain on the peninsula.<sup>18</sup> Often described in the United States as "the Forgotten War" given its virtual absence from the American mindset, the evidence of that conflict can, nevertheless, be found in the flourishing South Korean political and economic space, the broken North Korean state, and the 28,500 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea to this day.

The Vietnam War is especially relevant for this study on legacies of the post-9/11 wars because it illustrates the challenge posed when different constituencies learn different lessons and adopt them following a conflict. Various groups of Americans have had different arguments as to why the United States lost in Vietnam. These include a lack of understanding of the war's character among senior civilian decisionmakers; poor decisionmaking by military leaders; crass motives; the media; public protestors; the draft; unwillingness to see a tough fight through; and, of course, the adversary's particular qualities.<sup>19</sup> One good example of the panoply of reasons for Vietnam's failure is exemplified by retired General Barry McCaffrey, a highly decorated infantry veteran of the war. He alternately blames defeat on "arrogant, blowtorch personalities like McNamara and his 'whiz kids' . . . micromanagement of the war by bureaucrats . . . (lack of) unwavering resolve to support South Vietnam . . . (and lack of) the support of the American public."<sup>20</sup>

Defeat in Vietnam crushed the American soul. As one scholar argues, it “brought a loss of American innocence” that profoundly shaped the future military.<sup>21</sup> The war “polarized the American people and poisoned the political atmosphere as had no issue since slavery.”<sup>22</sup> Many in the U.S. military were riddled with resentment for their sacrifices, which the public seemed unwilling to recognize, let alone honor. As an example of myth-making about war, the titular action-hero lead of the *Rambo* movie franchise is a useful proxy for the U.S. Army: he mourns, “I want my country to love me as much as I love it.”<sup>23</sup> Some troops, of course, were angrier; as one veteran bitterly explained, “I won *my* war. It’s *you* who fucking lost.”<sup>24</sup> As the Vietnam War was ending, American society—racked by guilt, disillusionment, and frustration—decided it would largely contract warfighting to a small subset of the population. The all-volunteer force was born.<sup>25</sup>

Frustration over perceptions of civilian micromanagement and meddling in so-called military affairs further colored the Vietnam War’s legacy. One sees this dynamic in pockets across the military. The National Museum of the Marine Corps, for example, extols the Marine role in WWII but sees Vietnam as a “‘political war’ rather than a military ‘war.’”<sup>26</sup> Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster is another case in point. His book *Dereliction of Duty*, written when he was an Army major, criticized civilian leaders for setting what he deemed impossible-to-achieve goals and military leaders for quietly enabling them to do so. His book has been exceedingly popular across the military.<sup>27</sup> Ironically, the Army passed then Colonel H. R. McMaster over for promotion twice, and he only finally became a general after senior civilian officials intervened.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, there is reason to question just how much the legacies of the Vietnam War reflect rigorous military introspection. While the military’s composition and capabilities shifted in its aftermath, as one scholar argued: “The military has been less successful in adjusting intellectually and emotionally to the trauma of Vietnam. There has been a marked reluctance on its part to accept a share of responsibility for the nation’s failure. The tendency, rather, has been to blame a weak-kneed civilian leadership or a lack of public will.”<sup>29</sup> Such arguments were, frankly, more popular in the Army than those made by scholar and then active-duty

Army officer Andrew Krepinevich's in *The Army and Vietnam*, his doctoral dissertation and subsequent book, which squarely placed blame on the Army.<sup>30</sup>

Given its complicated legacy, perhaps there should be little surprise that the specter of the Vietnam War lingers. From President Reagan arguing that for “too long, we have lived with the Vietnam Syndrome,” to President George H. W. Bush declaring after the 1991 Persian Gulf War that “we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all,” neither America’s political elite nor its military leadership could escape Vietnam’s discomfiting presence.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, nearly two decades after the drawdown of U.S. ground forces in Vietnam, journalist James Mann found in his research that there was heavy pressure “to overcome the legacy of Vietnam with a clean victory” before, during, and in the immediate aftermath of the Persian Gulf War.<sup>32</sup> More recently, Vietnam has been used as a powerful historical analogy for today’s conflicts, compared to the U.S. wars in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Senator John McCain, a Navy pilot and prisoner of war during the Vietnam War, said the Obama administration’s approach in Iraq and Syria reminded him of “another war we lost . . . and that was the war in Vietnam.”<sup>33</sup> Senator John Kerry, another Vietnam veteran, warned that the United States had “misunderstood, misread, misplanned and mismanaged our honorable intentions in Iraq with an arrogant self-delusion reminiscent of Vietnam.”<sup>34</sup> And, some critics argue that President Obama’s team was obsessed with avoiding another Vietnam, perhaps to the detriment of their policy choices.<sup>35</sup>

The Persian Gulf War, in contrast, illustrates the dangers posed by romanticized conflicts for the military and society. The U.S. military was built to fight the Soviet Union in a massive conventional war. It prevailed in a brief war with extremely limited objectives—pushing the Iraqi military out of Kuwait—by employing overwhelming force against an opponent best described, with the advantage of retrospect, as a third-rate power. This victory came after an overwhelming air campaign and a brief ground conflict colored by spectacular technological prowess and the deployment of more than half of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Army’s available assets against a surprisingly inept opponent.

Military leaders were informed by the legacies of Vietnam in how

they planned and fought the Persian Gulf War, particularly in their focus on combining limited objectives with overwhelming force.<sup>36</sup> More broadly, for the U.S. military, the inherited legacy is that the Persian Gulf War was won because it was conducted without the apparent defects of the Vietnam War: there was no civilian micromanagement; there were clear, limited, and fixed objectives; and the U.S. military devoted all its resources to a single fight. Overwhelming victory against Iraq represented a vindication for the military of everything it had done to rebuild after the Vietnam War. It “learned” that it had done everything right and expunged the ghosts of Vietnam. This, as we later see, set it up for spectacular missteps in the post-9/11 wars.

One could argue, of course, that the military should have considered the many other reasons the United States prevailed in the Persian Gulf War, including the political and military decrepitude of its Iraqi adversary following Baghdad’s grueling eight-year war with Iran, as well as the heavy U.S. investment in training and equipping its military over the previous two decades. President Reagan’s massive defense build-up, which emphasized new bombers, missiles, advances in stealth, and sophisticated command and control systems, was particularly important in providing the coalition with overwhelming conventional superiority. And, of course, the war ended with Iraqi president Saddam Hussein still in power, U.S. air patrols policing much of Iraqi skies through Operations Northern and Southern Watch, and U.S. troops based in Saudi Arabia. In other words, even after victory, the U.S. military never fully withdrew the military presence it had built up for the Persian Gulf War—a cause célèbre for al Qaeda. These concluding legacies serve as reminders that wars are not bookended but, rather, bleed into one another.

Nevertheless, the muddling of the legacies of the Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars spurred the rise of what has become known at various times as the Weinberger Doctrine, the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine, and the Powell Doctrine. It first emerged in late 1984, with the painful memory of Vietnam still fresh, after the Marine barracks bombing killed 241 military personnel in Beirut and the United States invaded Grenada. As Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger explained his theory of the use of force, the United States should send its military to fight abroad

only when vital national security interests are at stake and the intention is victory; when it has well-defined and executable objectives; when it devotes sufficient resources and the military has the ability to employ them as desired; when public support is assured, and “as a last resort and to be used only when other means have failed.”<sup>37</sup> In drafting this historic speech, Weinberger was supported by his senior military aide at the time, Major General Colin Powell.<sup>38</sup> Powell would go on to serve as chairman of the joint chiefs of staff during the Persian Gulf War and, in the wake of that conflict, he refined Weinberger’s criteria. However, he attributed the eponymous doctrine’s conception to national security discussions held before the Persian Gulf War began, rooted in a particular set of lessons from the Vietnam War. As Powell explained:

The lessons I absorbed from Panama confirmed all my convictions over the preceding twenty years, since the days of doubt over Vietnam. Have a clear political objective and stick to it. Use all the force necessary, and do not apologize for going in big if that is what it takes. Decisive force ends wars quickly and in the long run saves lives. Whatever threats we faced in the future, I intended to make these rules the bedrock of my military counsel.<sup>39</sup>

Once President Bush listened to his recommendation and “doubled the force facing the Iraqis,” the concept became part of the national security lexicon.<sup>40</sup>

The Powell Doctrine encapsulates military frustration over two perceived problems: civilian micromanagement and meddling in so-called military affairs, and vague political objectives. While it is inherently flawed given its political naivete (particularly in a system where national security power is distributed so the system will rarely give firm and clear political objectives); its minimal consideration of the adversary’s perspective; and its grounding in the linear nature of conflicts and national security interests, the Powell Doctrine, nevertheless, profoundly shaped the young military leaders of 1991—who became the generals of 2001 through 2003.<sup>41</sup>

Scholars Nora Bensahel and David Barno recall the ominous warn-

ing by retired General Barry McCaffrey, who said, “I fear the majors of Desert Storm,” because he understood that “now a whole new generation of soldiers believed that the overwhelming success of the Gulf War proved once and for all that the Army had learned the right lessons from Vietnam.”<sup>42</sup> The doctrine resonated, in other words, and continues to resonate, among a certain subset of the U.S. military and its leadership, not least due to its seemingly straightforward checklist to solving the complex nonlinear issues of war.

And, of course, none of these dynamics are idiosyncratic to the U.S. military. Neuralgia-inspired denial is reminiscent of the French war in Algeria. Despite deploying 500,000 troops, 35,000 of whom died in Algeria, the war has “disappeared from collective memory” in France.<sup>43</sup> Conversely, the French have glorified their population’s “resistance” against the Nazi occupation in World War II despite overwhelming evidence that it was far from unanimous and unified.<sup>44</sup> More recently, and closer to the U.S. experience, the Soviet leadership hid the coffins of its troops killed in Afghanistan and often failed to specify where a soldier had perished. However, by 2004, Russian president Vladimir Putin said they had “won their battle.”<sup>45</sup>

Legacies of war shape individuals, militaries, and countries. They simply cannot be ignored. Failing to deliberately reconcile the impact of these legacies will merely allow them to shapeshift—positively or deleteriously.

### MYTHS AND MEMORY

Exploring the military’s inheritance since 9/11 requires difficult discussions regarding myths and memories, the stories institutions or individuals tell themselves and others, since they shape our understanding of legacies. Vigilance is necessary in these discussions, because “much depends on which aspects of the war—and which period of time—one examines, and which reminiscences one trusts.”<sup>46</sup> Narratives come and go like waves on a beach, and as the literature on memory studies highlights, memory is complicated, fragmented, and disorienting.<sup>47</sup> Simply put, one cannot ignore the profound impact of myths. As scholar Eliot

Cohen affirms, “Political and military institutions can no more escape the molding hand of history than an individual can escape the influences of memory.”<sup>48</sup>

Myths invariably develop around the legacies of conflict. Given how wrenching it is to conduct serious introspection of painful events, myths may, themselves, end up forming the dominant legacies of a war, especially for those intimately involved in waging war or making decisions. Such individuals have developed stories about what happened and why, which may or may not be defensible or even factually correct. And those tales will invariably inform their future actions. President Truman approached the conflict in Korea based on his understanding of the causes and course of World War II; General Maxwell Taylor, General William Westmoreland, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Under Secretary of State George Ball did the same for the Vietnam War.<sup>49</sup> “Where they sat depended on where they had *stood* before,” scholars Ernest May and Richard Neustadt remind readers.<sup>50</sup> As one author on military affairs reflected, “Mom had grown up an admiral’s daughter and said that senior officers functioned so that no truth could betray the myths, of either the past or the mind.”<sup>51</sup>

Studies of bias by scholar Daniel Kahneman are particularly noteworthy in this regard, since he smartly highlights the dangers inherent in errors of confabulation and attribution; fallacies of sunk cost; and biases of optimism, availability, confirmation, saliency, and anchoring in making judgments.<sup>52</sup> Now, two decades of cycling in and out of theaters like Iraq and Afghanistan has resulted in many troops going back to the same country—and sometimes the same province—repeatedly. That dynamic colors many military perspectives, invariably informing the lessons they have learned and, just as importantly, the myths they have formed.

Buying into myths does not necessarily have to be disingenuous or nefarious. It often is neither. But it can be dangerous, nevertheless. As President John Kennedy explained, “The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived, and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.”<sup>53</sup>

The post-9/11 wars shaped the military leaders who led them from

the Pentagon, the combatant commands, or in the field. They have shaped those who will lead the American military in its future wars, as well. This is important because military myths vary by rank, by specialty or community, and by service. The Air Force and Navy have told themselves very different stories than the Army and the Marines have over the years. Within specialties, the lessons learned by those who flew unmanned vehicles differs from those who flew fighter aircraft in combat. When Winston Churchill reminds us that “at times of crisis, myths have their historical importance,” he did not also acknowledge their often diffuse nature.<sup>54</sup> There is no one story or myth about the U.S. military that encapsulates the single story of this inheritance. Readers seeking that unified summary will find themselves terribly unsatisfied. Moreover, in the vein of George Packer’s warning, “Journalists and historians have to distort war: in order to find the plot—causation, sequence, meaning—they make war more intelligible than it really is.”<sup>55</sup> *Caveat lector.*

#### REVIEWS TO DATE

The U.S. military has not conducted its own serious, rigorous, and holistic assessment of its inheritance from the past nearly two decades of war. The Army authorized a two-volume study focused solely on Iraq from the years 2003 to 2011, which was reluctantly published after a public outcry. However, it contains little strategic analysis and has had virtually no effect on the overall narrative inside the institution.<sup>56</sup> Then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Martin Dempsey did commission a thoughtful study on the costs, benefits, and lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan, which was conducted entirely by National Defense University rather than members of the military—although many of its authors are veterans.<sup>57</sup> And in 2011, Dempsey tasked the Joint and Coalition Operational Analysis division with gathering lessons learned. The final product focused on the first decade of the post-9/11 wars and has received little attention to date, perhaps due to the anodyne nature of its findings, such as the difficulty of accurately assessing the security environment, shifting from waging conventional conflict to counterinsurgency, and collaborating with partners in and outside of the U.S. government.<sup>58</sup>



There have been various narrower efforts to analyze the U.S. approach to the post-9/11 wars, including on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>59</sup> In this category belong a number of assessments on specific periods in specific wars, most notably the 2006–2007 Bush administration national security discussions that culminated in the decision to surge troops in Iraq and the Obama administration’s 2009 decision to review options in Afghanistan that culminated in a surge of troops.<sup>60</sup> As retired General Stanley McChrystal, who commanded the war in Afghanistan, said of them: “I saw good people all trying to reach a positive outcome, but approaching the problem from different cultures and perspectives, often speaking with different vocabularies.”<sup>61</sup>

A second category includes the broad defense strategy reviews conducted every four years or so, including internal Defense Department-led Quadrennial Defense Reviews as well as the products of independent panels or commissions appointed by Congress. However, only the most recent of these examined the legacy of the last two decades of conflict, and then only briefly.<sup>62</sup> In doing so, the report states that the “security and well-being of the United States are at greater risk than at any time in decades . . . America’s military superiority . . . has eroded to a dangerous degree.”<sup>63</sup> A final category of narrower projects includes the tremendous literature on the post-9/11 wars written by those who experienced them from various vantage points, including those who served in the military.<sup>64</sup>

Two key U.S. allies that engaged in the post-9/11 wars, the United Kingdom and Australia, have conducted their own reviews, albeit with varying results. Most famously, the British government empowered an independent panel to study the UK’s involvement in the Iraq War and to identify lessons learned. Led by Sir John Chilcot and subsequently nicknamed the Chilcot Report, the scathing report was published after seven years of inquiry—far from those wars’ conclusions.<sup>65</sup> Australia’s review was more informal. Conducted over three years by a Defence Department analyst, it was released only after a freedom of information act request, as the Defence Department leaders had quashed its publication. The report brims with frustration with and resentment for politicians and military leaders unwilling to provide “strategic direction,” and

military personnel adrift, perhaps best summed up by one Australian military commander who rued: “We did some shit for a while and things didn’t get any worse.”<sup>66</sup>

### METHODOLOGY

This book asks the question: What has the U.S. military inherited from nearly two decades at war? Chapters 2 to 4 outline three crises that are shaping the military’s sense of itself, its relationship to society, and its relationship with its civilian overseers—a crisis of confidence, a crisis of caring, and a crisis of meaningful civilian oversight, respectively—which provide a useful framework for the subsequent chapters. Chapter 5 explores how the military goes to war, including planning for war, paying for war, and perceiving war. Chapter 6 examines how the military wages war, particularly exploring how it makes choices regarding time, space, and the spectrum of conflict; the different impacts of being at war on each of the military services; and the changing role of combatant commands. Chapter 7 looks at those who have served throughout the post-9/11 wars, while chapter 8 focuses on those who have led the military during this period. Chapter 9 outlines some of the approaches to fighting and winning that have characterized these wars and been developed to understand them (as well as the future). Finally, chapter 10 offers insights for the reader on how to productively deal with these legacies.

This book’s overwhelming focus is on the armed forces, the civilian managers of violence, and the relationship between them. While it predominantly focuses on what the post-9/11 wars have meant for the military, it is impossible to ignore the role of civilians because of the nature of U.S. democracy. To be clear, many of those civilians have made many mistakes, which a substantial literature has addressed.<sup>67</sup> However, one should be cautious of sleepwalking into narratives that simply blame civilians for the strategic sins of the past two decades. Instead, this book seeks to explore the shared responsibility of those in uniform and those in Western business attire while accounting for the lessons implicitly learned by both.

Exploring issues that are “not dead yet” is a thorny endeavor.<sup>68</sup> Study-

ing contemporary affairs poses its own difficulties and rarely lends itself to formal theory development or highly stylized argument. Some research methods, like process tracing, were useful in examining the range of primary sources that complemented this book's leveraging of the rich secondary literature on particular issues.

Much of the analysis in this book, however, is based on the findings from nearly 100 interviews that I personally conducted from 2018 to 2020. I conducted most of the interviews with current or recently retired generals or flag officers, the highest-ranking members of the U.S. military, and a few current or former senior civilian executives who served in the U.S. Defense Department. All interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, used the same list of questions, and benefited from the snowball sampling method. Interviewees were generally asked a broad question about the legacies of the post-9/11 wars for the U.S. military, a more specific question about how the inconclusiveness of these wars may have shaped these legacies, a few questions about the impact of the wars on the joint force and on internal Department of Defense dynamics, a question about their perception of shifts in civil-military relations, and a pair of questions about how they thought about conflict earlier in their career and how they think about the trajectory of conflict in the future.

The interviewees represent a wide diversity of experience, including serving across the joint force, the combatant commands, the military services, the joint staff, and the office of the secretary of defense. They include many of the military leaders who found themselves in positions of influence as they served at the highest levels of a military waging its longest conflict. Some still serve, while others retired or resigned their positions over the last decade or so. Each held multiple positions throughout the post-9/11 period. The senior civilian executives represented both career officials and political appointees across both political parties.

On the whole, however, interviewees were overwhelmingly senior military leaders, like current and recently retired general and flag officers. That makes sense for two reasons. First, senior military leaders shape the military's internal narrative of and approach to the legacies of

the post-9/11 wars. Whether through promotions, professional military education, strategy, budget, or doctrine, they transmit their views into the organization. Second, they shape the external narrative of the legacies of the post-9/11 wars by informing the national security debate and by engaging the American public on how it absorbs the wars. To be sure, more junior members of the military have an important perspective to offer. Notably, many of the most compelling quotes come from mid-level and junior officers across the military. However, when examining influence on the broader military organization, the current and former senior leaders have a more substantial impact.

To benefit from the interviewees' frank and honest insights while also respecting their desires for discretion, I have anonymized their words and refer to them generically throughout this book. Quotations in the book without footnotes are interview quotes. I took this approach to preserve confidentiality and trust, which was of the utmost importance to interviewees who shared their frank and provocative insights. I took the triangulation process seriously, weighing the internal consistency of interviews and including as much context as possible to inform readers' abilities to critically interpret the findings. Although much of the research in this field is based on anonymized surveys, expert interviews are the best way to answer this book's question.

As a national security professional and scholar who worked in the Pentagon for five secretaries of defense over two administrations, and who made policy on a wide range of issues, I was granted tremendous access by my former colleagues in and out of uniform. They were generous with their time, their insights, and their connections, such that there remain very few notable senior military officials from the last two decades whose experiences have not been considered in this book—either through interviews or through their public comments.

The observations they share are compelling. Patterns emerged in these interviews to a degree I had not expected, including key terms and ideas that were either repeatedly invoked or repeatedly ignored.<sup>69</sup> Other sources, like the satirical website *Duffel Blog* started by Marine veteran Paul Szoldra, helped unearth the hidden discourse of those servicemembers who were not otherwise represented. *Duffel Blog* is a modern version

of *The Wipers Times*, the witty paper that troops on the Western Front in World War I produced to offer a sardonic reflection on the conflict.

All these sources represent different lenses based on their background, role, and temporal involvement in the post-9/11 wars, and were important to access. Nevertheless, the complicated nature of the issues under discussion precludes a neat and tidy narrative. As the reader will find, this book is, therefore, not a theory of things but, rather, a story of things. That recognition forced great humility on me as I tried to tell this story. I profoundly recognize that, like Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. has said, this book has been written from a “zone of imperfect visibility.”<sup>70</sup> Contemporaneously defining the post-9/11 wars and explaining the legacies that come out of them through firsthand accounts comes with risks, but given how consequential the misuse of military history can be, it is a risk worth taking.

One such risk worth addressing now is the book’s use of the term “post-9/11 wars.” It is clunky and awkward. This is, perhaps, appropriately so, given that the fighting itself has clunkily and awkwardly spanned the globe. There are other names for it, of course, like the Global War on Terror, the Long War, the Forever War, or World War IV. However, these are unsatisfying and each is riddled with its own problems. “This war has no easily visualized ending or telos that lends itself to articulation in a phrase or name,” John McLaughlin and I previously wrote.<sup>71</sup>

Moreover, the length of this time period invariably means that different moments in these wars have different characters and rhetorical resonances. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are a major part of the post-9/11 wars, but, according to one study, the post-9/11 wars have involved the U.S. military fighting in nearly 40 percent of countries.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the inability to pinpoint exactly where the U.S. has been waging war over the past two decades represents one of the many ways in which these conflicts have been fuzzy. Using the term “post-9/11 wars,” thus, purposively trades rhetorical punch for definitional clarity.

My personal involvement in many of the issues covered in this book while I served as a senior Defense Department policymaker presents its own challenges, as well. Although my background and profile facilitated extraordinary access, that came with costs. I recognize my own position-

ality in this research and have attempted to control for it to the extent possible while also acknowledging where and how it introduces bias.<sup>73</sup> I hope the approach I offer in this book benefits a field in need of more diverse research methodologies, especially those that can help bridge the scholar-practitioner and civil-military divides.