THE NATIONAL INTEREST

There Is Not Enough Scrutiny of America's Wars

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At last year's annual meeting of the American Political Science Association my Cato colleague Ben Friedman organized a panel to consider the question "Why is there not more scholarly evaluation of war?" The good people at H-Diplo/ISSF Forum invited us to reprise our discussion for a wider audience, and Friedman, Alan Kuperman and Jon R. Lindsay accepted the invitation, offering three distinct answers to the question.

In my brief introductory essay, as in my remarks at APSA last year, I focused on one explanation. There is some focus on major wars, especially controversial ones such as Iraq and Afghanistan, but far less on smaller conflicts, such as the interventions in the Balkans in the 1990s or the Libyan caper of 2011. Meanwhile, scholarly analysis tends to study the conduct of U.S. wars, rather than the rationales for why the United States went to war in the first place.

Why might this be true?

For one thing, articles focused on operational matters are often written by serving military officers. The military's professional schools publish a number of journals, and the writers are often drawn from there.

These men and women are comfortable criticizing the *conduct* of the nation's wars, but are reluctant to scrutinize the premises underlying U.S. foreign policy. They are taught from the very beginning not to question the orders that they are given by the civilian authorities, and especially not to do so publicly.

Meanwhile, foreign policy experts—scholars in the academy or at think tanks who have chosen to study war and peace—may not have prior military service. But, in my experience, television and radio producers, as well as op-ed editors at major newspapers, are less likely to seek out the opinions of those who have not served, especially when the thrust of the commentary is skeptical of the case for war.

I find this frustrating, even if I have benefited from it. I attended college on an NROTC scholarship, and was commissioned in the U.S. Navy upon graduation. I served four years on active duty, slightly more than three of those years on a ship, including two six-plus month deployments. So, on account of these criteria alone, it seems, I'm sought after for my opinions on military-related matters. But just because I served in the military doesn't mean that I *necessarily* have any particularly unique insights. I'd like to believe that it is my research and

scholarship since I left the Navy that qualifies me to comment, with my prior service being an occasionally relevant factor.

The tendency of elite opinion leaders to gravitate to former military personnel must be discouraging for would-be foreign policy scholars trying to break into the field. But deference to experts, particularly those with a personal connection to the military, and anecdotes to share, runs strong.

Scholars must work extremely hard to convince the general public of their particular expertise on a subject in order to even get a hearing. It is especially hard to break past this general skepticism if the expert is cutting against the conventional wisdom, for example by appearing to criticize the conduct of U.S. foreign policy, or, more precisely, the conduct of the nation's wars. Quite a number of non-veterans get a pass when making the case *for* going to war. It is the rare veteran, indeed, who deigns to question the wisdom of such wars, which, at some level, amounts to either criticizing his or her former colleagues, or the civilian leaders to whom they have been taught to defer. (A few exceptions include Andrew Bacevich, Gian Gentile, and Daniel L. Davis, who also writes forThe Skeptics)

I encourage Skeptics readers to read the essays in the H-Diplo/ISSF symposium. I tend to agree with the question as framed—there is not enough serious evaluation of the nation's wars—but I may be wrong that the relative dearth of study of the nation's wars reflects the lack of respect among the public at large for the opinions of those who have not served, and the general reluctance of those who have served to question the wars that they fight.

To the extent that scholars and pundits are comfortable commenting on the manner in which our wars are fought, but not on why we are fighting them in the first place, we need more of the latter.

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