

Rachel Maddow Abbreviates History

An MSNBC host's book on foreign policy leaves out too much of the story of how this mess began.

[*Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power*](#), by Rachel Maddow, Crown Publishing Group, 275 pages, \$25.

Justin Logan | August 19, 2012

The hardest part of a policy book has to be the last chapter. Having diagnosed an important problem and traced its evolution, the author is expected to sketch out a solution at the end. Books about important, tough problems frequently end with weak closing chapters. MSNBC host Rachel Maddow's *Drift* is no exception.

Maddow promises a lot but unfortunately can't deliver. In the introduction, she puts her thesis starkly: American military policy "isn't much related to its stated justifications anymore....We're not directing that policy anymore; it just follows its own course." Fortunately, though, it "is fixable."

Don't get your hopes up on that last part.

Maddow opens by sneering—rightly—at the absurd militarization of her western Massachusetts town in the Homeland Security era. (In her tiny town, only seven houses were on public water, but just to be safe, after 9/11 the government paid to wrap the pump house in chain-link fence and barbed wire. But they neglected to cut the grass there, turning it into an overgrown—but Homeland Secure!—eyesore.) From there on, the chapters are stapled-together polemics about the foibles and screwups in American defense policy. They are decent polemics, readably written. They are not, unfortunately, a coherent explanation for why America has drifted away from small-R republicanism and toward empire, much less an explanation for how to turn the tide.

The opening chapter zips too rapidly from Jeffersonian ideology to the Vietnam War, missing a great deal of the drift. Many crucial way stations on the path to our present condition predated Vietnam: Washington developed an ideology to justify occupying the Philippines, embraced a standing army and a department of "defense," and accepted an income tax and other extractive instruments of war. Don't those developments warrant mention in a book describing the unmooring of American military policy? Instead, by the second chapter, we're reading about

Ronald Reagan, apparently the true father of America's zany national security politics.

The first half of the book (no kidding: pages 29 to 156) center on some of the low points of Reagan and Bush the Elder's foreign policies: [Team B](#), [Iran-Contra](#), Reagan's executive power claims—the usual. But Maddow does nothing to explain how Reagan's shortcomings constitute the wellspring of America's messianic and destructive defense policies. She definitely does not justify the decision to devote an entire chapter in a book of 252 pages to the invasion of Grenada.

Unfortunately, the genuine insights sprinkled throughout the book are not nearly as well developed as the case for Reagan's daffiness and Cheney's sociopathy. It is an interesting observation, for example, that the "Think Tanks and Very Important Committees of the permanent national security peanut gallery are now so mature and entrenched that almost no one thinks they're creepy anymore, and national security liberals have simply decided it's best to add their own voices to them rather than criticize them." But that's one of several well-crafted sentences that tantalize the reader only to be cast aside.

And should we really lay so much of the blame for American militarism on the grave of the Gipper? Part of it, yes. Reagan enabled the transformation of the Republican foreign policy establishment from the patrician WASPs who ran things through the 1980s to the more diverse but substantively worse cadre running things today. But Reagan's foreign policy itself was far more restrained than Maddow would have us believe. Was the (admittedly crazy) Grenada campaign really more of a watershed than, say, Teddy Roosevelt's bigoted Progressive imperialism? Or than Woodrow Wilson throwing Eugene Debs in the hoosegow for opposing the Great War? Was it worse than FDR's internment of over 100,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans on the basis of their ethnicity?

This reviewer would have been open to the argument, had it been made. But it was not. The Roosevelt, Wilson, Roosevelt, and Truman presidencies make only fleeting appearances in the book. Rather than straightforwardly asking why America is so militaristic and what we can do to change that, Maddow presents a gallery of ready-made villains for liberal readers to heckle. This is not scholarship.

Clinton and Gore's constitutional and strategic indiscretions are mostly glossed over. When they are cited, the principals appear as victims of Republican perfidy who find themselves chain-ganged into betraying their own better angels. Clinton's flamboyantly unconstitutional war in Kosovo goes unmentioned, and the circumstances of his war over Bosnia are sourced entirely to Clinton's biography and the accounts of three Democratic government officials. Not exactly fair and balanced.

After Clinton, Maddow moves on to chapters on Bush the Younger and nuclear weapons before wending to a shaky and abrupt close. Her solutions are delivered in Pentagon-friendly bullet-point format: institute a war tax; get the CIA out of the military business; get the executive branch out of the war-starting business; get military officers out of politics and politics back into the use of the military; stop treating the National Guard and Reserves as if they're active duty; stop using contractors; concede to the establishment that "the world is a threatening place" but don't support their wars; and shrink our nuclear arsenal.

Most of these suggestions are sound, but achieving them would require identifying the pressures and political phenomena that created these pathologies, and using that understanding to determine just how to undo them. For example, wars for Americans are cheap and low-risk. Our wars rarely are fueled by serious threats, but by a particular sort of ideology that tells us we need to use our military to change the world. So if you want to make American defense policy better, you should probably try to figure out how to raise the costs of dumb wars to Americans, or else how to popularize a new ideology that says good Americans resent and oppose the national security bureaucracy. But Maddow doesn't do that. Instead we get a lively but limited guide to American militarism without a program for fixing the problem.