



## *The Pentagon's Wars: The Military's Undeclared War against America's Presidents* by Mark Perry.

New York: Basic Books, 2017. Pp. xviii, 341. ISBN 978-0-465-07971-1.

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Military and foreign affairs analyst Mark Perry begins his new book with an epigraph quoting the words of Pericles on the eve of the Peloponnesian War: "What I fear is not the enemy's strategy, but our own mistakes."<sup>1</sup> He argues that changes in US military technology and structure have led to conflicts detrimental to both elected officials and the Pentagon. His purview extends from the end of the Cold War to the present.<sup>2</sup> Using dozens of interviews with senior military officials, reporting by others, and relevant academic studies, Perry dissects disagreements between four American presidents and the military leaders who (ostensibly) served them, in a "narrative account of the politics of war..." (xviii).

The book's prologue traces major problems confronted by the American military in Perry's target period. The first was a technical revolution beginning in the early 1970s. The idea was to deploy not necessarily more but *better* weapons systems than the Soviet Union. These were unveiled during the 1991 Gulf War (Desert Shield) against Saddam Hussein's Iraq; they included drones, stealth fighter-bombers, air-launched cruise missiles, radar-jamming aircraft, and tanks fitted with laser guidance systems. Perry notes that the resultant easy American victory in Kuwait and Iraq launched a period of military adventurism, overreliance on sophisticated armaments, and ill-preparedness for asymmetric warfare.

The second problematic revolution stemmed from the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act, which removed the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) from the military command chain and made its Chair the principal military advisor to the president. Perry contends that the elevation of top military officers to influential policy positions stifled dissent and strained relations between military service leaders and various presidential administrations.

Chapter 1 covers administration-military relations during the George H.W. Bush presidency. Despite the success of the Gulf War, military leaders criticized the Bush team for its confusing instructions at the cease-fire conference and for failing to defeat the Iraqis completely after their retreat from Kuwait.

Chapters 2-4 concern relations between the military and President Bill Clinton. Over his two terms, Clinton appointed three JCS Chairmen; Perry devotes a chapter to each. The first, retired General Colin Powell, was a holdover from the Bush administration. In less than a year in the position, Powell clashed with Clinton over gays in the military, the appointment of Les Aspin as Secretary of Defense, and the US intervention in Bosnia. There was "a growing sense among retired

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1. Thucydides 1.144.1.

2. His previous book, *Four Stars* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), assessed the same topic from the conclusion of World War II to the early 1990s.

military officers that Powell's disagreements with Clinton were undermining the Clinton presidency and the Office of the President" (48).

Clinton's second JCS Chair, Army General John Shalikashvili, took over after the Somalia debacle (Oct. 1993) and served through the remainder of the president's first term. His tenure coincided with NATO's military intervention in the Bosnian crisis, the indecisive use of military force in Haiti, and the lack of action during the Rwanda genocide. Clinton got along better with Lt. Gen. Wesley Clark—an assistant to the JCS Chair—than with Shalikashvili himself.

At the outset of his second term, Clinton named Hugh Shelton as JCS Chair. Over the next four years, the administration authorized military operations in Kosovo and sought to track down Osama Bin Laden after a series of attacks against American interests in Africa. But Clinton's sex scandal with Monica Lewinsky compromised his policy against sexual assault in the military.

Chapters 5–8 focus on relations between military leaders and the George W. Bush White House. President Bush inherited General Shelton as JCS Chairman, though he relied heavily on CENTCOM commander Tommy Franks. General Richard Myers replaced Shelton after the 9/11 attacks. But as the White House and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld took control of the fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq, military leaders chafed at directives stressing nation building over counterinsurgency. By 2006, the worsening situation in Iraq precipitated Rumsfeld's replacement by Robert Gates. Bush also named General Peter Pace as JCS Chairman and tapped General David Petraeus to lead a surge in Iraq. A year later, Admiral Mike Mullen took over for Pace. Though the surge stabilized conditions in Iraq, Gates spent much of his time in disputes with Army and Air Force personnel over weapons and resources.

Chapters 9–10 examine the military's interactions with the administration of President Barack Obama. Mullen stayed on as JCS Chair for the first two years of Obama's presidency, when the immediate priority was the situation in Afghanistan. This entailed, after extensive deliberation, a temporary increase in troop strength there. General Stanley McChrystal led the military effort in Afghanistan in 2009, but resigned under pressure a year later after negative remarks he made about Obama administration personnel were published. When General Martin Dempsey replaced Mullen as JCS Chairman (Oct. 2011), key changes had already been made to the Obama defense department team: Leon Panetta became Secretary of Defense, General Petraeus was appointed head of the CIA, and Thomas Donilon took over as head of the National Security Council. At the same time, military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan began to be scaled down. This coincided with the debate over intervening in Libya and Syria. Military leaders disagreed with President Obama's inconsistent approach to Syria, where US action against the Bashar al-Assad regime was threatened but then withheld in favor of asking Congress to authorize a response. During his second term, Obama replaced both Petraeus at CIA following a sex scandal and the retiring General Dempsey with Marine General Joseph Dunford as JCS Chairman.

In the book's final chapter, "Original Sin," Perry explains how the United States "squandered its promise to provide a more stable international order" (292) at the end of the Cold War. He exposes America's inconsistent use of military resources, which alternated between overreach and nation building on the one hand and reluctance to intervene on the other. He faults military leaders for not insisting that civilian officials "question their assumptions or rethink their options" (297).

Several other fine books have recently addressed these same subjects from various viewpoints and reached different conclusions. William Howell and his coauthors<sup>3</sup> have discussed how a per-

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3. In *The Wartime President: Executive Influence and the Nationalizing Politics of Threat* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 2013).

petual wartime model enables a president to project power globally, but with diverse results for domestic policy. James Burton,<sup>4</sup> by contrast, has blamed the military's policy-making process for tensions between White House and Pentagon. Rosa Brooks<sup>5</sup> has evaluated the ability of the military to take on added duties while maintaining a permanent war footing. And Jeremi Suri<sup>6</sup> has written a perceptive study of the rise and fall of presidential power generally, with an astute discussion of Abraham Lincoln's legacy for wartime chief executives.

Mark Perry shows us that, if politics itself is dirty game, the politics of war can be downright ugly. Military-civilian policy disputes can cripple an entire administration and make it hard for a new president to reverse the military priorities (or blunders) of his predecessor. But he is shortsighted in criticizing chiefly military personnel rather than ill-prepared civilian leaders with little or no military expertise or experience. That said, he does argue persuasively that responsibility for American military policy and actions must be shared. Just as being in uniform "is not a disqualification for freedom of speech" (297), so too being chief executive does not justify discounting or countermanding military advice.

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4. In *The Pentagon Wars: Reformers Challenge the Old Guard* (1993; rpt. Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2014).

5. In *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2016).

6. In *The Impossible Presidency: The Rise and Fall of America's Highest Office* (NY: Basic Books, 2017).