



BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE: Considering the Inheritance of America’s Post-9/11 Wars

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Table of Contents

1. “Introduction: Long Wars and Lingering Effects” by Joshua Rovner
2. “The Inheritance, Defense Force Planning, and the Three-Body Problem” by Gen. Mike Holmes, Ret.
3. “A Full Diagnosis of Civil-Military Health Should Include the National Guard and Reserves” by Carrie A. Lee
4. “A Story of Post-9/11 Military Legacies” by Ryan Grauer

Summary

Conducting a post-mortem review after a war is an important but fraught exercise. In “The Inheritance: America’s Military After Two Decades of War,” Mara Karlin draws on her experience as a policymaker and academic to assess the legacy of the post-9/11 wars for the military and society and identify lessons for the future. In this roundtable review, our contributors consider Karlin’s analysis and draw on their own expertise to examine the legacy of 20 years of war.

1. Introduction: Long Wars and Lingering Effects

Joshua Rovner

Coming to grips with wartime failure is never easy. Psychological, political, and organizational pressures conspire against honest reflection. War is an intensely emotional business, and it demands enormous personal sacrifice. Collective evaluations are difficult because individual participants have a highly subjective view of events. Political and organizational interests are also at stake, of course — politicians and bureaucrats have parochial reasons to defend their actions. Postwar post-mortems are contentious in the aftermath of defeat.

Strategic failure, however, is not always bad news for a state's long-term health. If the failure is shocking and overwhelming, then the experience can expose prewar beliefs as dangerous delusions. Sometimes leaders put too much stock in technological superiority, for example, assuming that their sophistication will translate into victory. Faith in technology also allows them to indulge the belief that combat will be cheap and bloodless. Sometimes they expect that public support is robust, mistaking a “rally around the flag” effect for something more enduring. Sometimes they overestimate international solidarity and allied cohesion. Sometimes they assume that rival armies will act like cooperative enemies, subscribing to convenient norms that allow the state to fight on its own terms. Sometimes they assume that civilians will welcome them with open arms. These dubious ideas wither in the event of an unexpected wartime disaster. Painful postwar inquiries stand to benefit future strategic decision-makers.

Scrutinizing the roots of strategic failure is also important for a state's grand strategy. Understanding the flaws in its wartime theory of victory may reveal hidden dangers in its

broader theory of security. Done well, a postwar reckoning can force a meaningful debate about national priorities and the real sources of national power. States can use this difficult process to reconsider fundamental issues. What, for example, is the right force structure and force posture, given a state's geography, its natural endowment, and its comparative advantages? What are the necessary foundations of national security, and what can it do without? Answering these questions effectively is possible in the wake of unambiguous defeat. In these cases, history is written by the losers.¹

The situation is different when wartime outcomes are ambiguous. Mixed results make it possible for participants to claim successes and disclaim responsibility for failures. Some things may go well even though the war as a whole proves frustrating, and consensus answers are hard to come by when the fog of war lingers over the peace. Sincere efforts to draw meaningful lessons may be futile because participants have genuinely different perspectives based on their particular experiences. Postwar conclusions are more likely to tend towards the lowest common denominator: bland, broadly acceptable, and ultimately forgettable.

Ambiguous Outcomes and America's Post-9/11 Wars

America's post-9/11 wars fall into this second category. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq both started well — U.S. forces quickly deposed the Taliban and Saddam Hussein's regime. U.S. forces also launched an intensive counter-terrorist campaign against al-Qaeda, capturing and killing most of its leaders and forcing Osama bin Laden's old organization into disarray. But both conflicts descended into terrible violence, as

¹ Joshua Rovner, "History is Written by the Losers: Strategy and Grand Strategy in the Aftermath of War," *Journal of Strategic Studies* (forthcoming).

insurgency and political violence mingled with destitution and organized crime. The United States struggled to stop the killing and build new institutions in the face of stubborn local resistance and declining support, both at home and abroad.

Iraq's civil war was most intense in 2006–2007, before and during the surge of U.S. forces and the introduction of a new counter-insurgency doctrine. Before the surge, the war appeared to be an unambiguous failure. Prominent observers were calling for a fundamental reconsideration of U.S. strategy. Some were calling for a U.S. exit altogether, not least because events in Iraq seemed irrelevant to national security. But the reduction of violence after the surge led to hopes that the United States had discovered a more effective approach to counter-insurgency and that with time it could translate security into stability. Critics of the Obama administration blamed it for withdrawing forces too soon and, from their perspective, the rise of the so-called Islamic State proved the point. Progress in Iraq was real but tenuous, and limits to American support for the fledgling government would open the door to vicious armed groups that might one day threaten the United States directly.

Afghanistan's civil war came in waves, as the descendants of the Taliban regrouped and reorganized their efforts. The United States tried to replicate the Iraq surge in 2009-2010, sending additional forces and introducing the new counter-insurgency toolkit. The results of these efforts were mixed at best. The government in Kabul continued to operate with international support, and U.S. and coalition casualties were few in the last several years of the war. That said, the Taliban continued to operate across large swaths of rural Afghanistan, and it rapidly seized power upon the U.S. exit in summer 2021.

How do we measure these wars? Was Iraq a failure because the United States could not prevent the atrocious violence during the bleakest period of its civil war? Or was it at least

a partial success because the U.S.-led coalition was able to install a representative government that still functions today? Was its strategy a parade of blunders, or did it learn from experience?² And what about Afghanistan? Was this a clear loss for the United States, given the chaotic and tragic withdrawal and the Taliban’s rapid return? Or do successive administrations deserve credit for dismantling al-Qaeda — a uniquely dangerous organization — and potentially stopping another 9/11-scale attack? To borrow Mara Karlin’s phrase, the inheritance from these wars is unclear because the results are contested.

Discussing the Inheritance

This ambiguity notwithstanding, Karlin worries that the post-9/11 experience has produced three crises in American civil-military relations. The first is a crisis of confidence in a military that has become unsure of its own purposes. The second is a crisis of caring as the public has become detached from its own military. The third is a crisis of control, as civilian officials struggle to exercise meaningful authority over the armed forces. Collectively, these problems speak to deep uncertainty about the military instrument.

The participants in this roundtable argue that Karlin’s diagnosis also raises other concerns. Retired Air Force Gen. Mike Holmes argues that the relationship between the government, the military, and the public is always complex and to some extent unpredictable. There is no perfect solution to this “three-body problem,” but it is

² For different answers, see Timothy Andrews Sayle, Jeffrey A. Engel, Hal Brands, and William Inboden, eds., *The Last Card: Inside George W. Bush’s Decision to Surge in Iraq* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

manageable in ordinary times. The post-9/11 wars have witnessed a massive increase in military funding, however, and defense budget negotiations have become extraordinarily complex. Holmes worries that the practical consequences will fall on defense planners, who will struggle mightily to make sense of an increasingly Byzantine process.

Carrie Lee of the Army War College focuses on the relationship between the military and society. The long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have not only taxed active-duty forces, who are the subject of Karlin's attention. They have also asked a lot from the National Guard and Reserves, who have deployed repeatedly over the last two decades. Lee argues that this experience has broken their connection with their communities, eroding the logical foundation of the "Total Force" that evolved after the Vietnam War. The idea, Lee writes, was that "the inclusion of the Guard and Reserve forces — those soldiers with the strongest ties to community and society — would necessarily lead to greater interest and involvement by Americans in the wars that their country fought, thus strengthening the civil-military relationship and tightening political leaders' accountability to the public." Repeated deployments have made the Guard and Reserve forces less visible, however, and survey research suggests that the public no longer distinguishes them from active-duty personnel. Ritual displays of public support for the military may be concealing a growing civil-military divide.

Finally, Ryan Grauer of the University of Pittsburgh explores the implications of Karlin's analysis for military effectiveness. In the ideal, efforts to make sense of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would produce changes that ultimately lead to "improved U.S. military power." Success will come when leaders confront the budget and planning issues that Holmes describes, and when they address Lee's observations about the erosion of the Total Force after two decades of fighting. It is not clear, however, what practical steps will be required to deal with these problems. Karlin emphasizes the importance of candid

conversations. Grauer agrees in principle, as do the other reviewers, but no one has a good idea about converting dialogue into concrete action.

Critics of American grand strategy will conclude that dialogue has its limits. Decisions about war are much more consequential than dialogue with the warriors. Encouraging conversations that bring together defense officials, military leaders, and the public are healthy in a democracy, but they will only work at the margins of the problems that Karlin identifies. An extended period of calm is required to start rebuilding the foundations of civil-military relations, and to restore the military's own sense of purpose. Ambitious grand strategies that call for military activism will not only delay the process but make the problem much more intractable.

Optimists, on the other hand, might sense an opportunity. The United States is still conducting counter-terrorist operations, and it still maintains a small force in Iraq, but U.S. grand strategy has refocused on Russia, China, and great-power competition. This means that ongoing efforts like the Afghanistan Postwar Commission review can operate without daily public scrutiny. As the politics of the post-9/11 wars become somewhat less intense, the commissioners may have the freedom to explore a great deal of complex recent history without feeling pressure to deliver a quick set of policy recommendations. Instead of offering a checklist of changes or a splashy reorganization plan, they might concentrate on modest but practical steps that address Karlin's fundamental concerns, and the adjacent problems identified in this roundtable. The accumulation of modest gains may not make headlines, but it may go some distance towards mitigating the costs of two prolonged and frustrating conflicts.

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2. *The Inheritance*, Defense Force Planning, and the Three-Body Problem

Gen. Mike Holmes, Ret.

The Inheritance examines the impact of 20 years of war on the civil-military processes that define the way America plans, executes, and learns from military conflict with a particular focus on the ways that legacy, myth, and legend confound our attempts to build effective civil-military relations and processes. In this essay, I'll focus on the ways these factors contribute to and exaggerate a "three-body problem" that makes the American defense force planning process too unstable and unpredictable to reshape U.S. forces to meet developing challenges in useful timeframes and make some recommendations for improving future processes.

The Inheritance

Mara Karlin's book employs hundreds of interviews and her own research and experience in academia and the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy to examine the impacts of conflict on decision-makers, processes, and the people who served, with an emphasis on the interactions between civilian and military leaders in the national defense enterprise that shape America's defense planning and execution.

Central to this discussion is the question of why didn't America win? Or to phrase the question another way, why wasn't the United States able to achieve its policy goals and generate lasting strategic effects?

Through extensive interviews, Karlin discusses voices that cast blame on the *places* where America fought, the *enemies* it fought, the *characters of conflict*, and the lack of a whole-of-government *national commitment*. There is a case to be made that these conditions made the wars unwinnable for U.S. forces — that the U.S. military is unable to adapt to fighting irregular and unconventional war for decades in societies it struggles to understand, and the American people and their leaders don't care enough about the outcomes of these wars to stomach the long-term commitment of national resources and political will required to win. *The Inheritance* takes the view that these wars were winnable, but the functions and dysfunctions of U.S. civil-military relations prevented Americans from seeing the wars clearly, properly adapting their tools and processes to fit them, and developing and executing winning strategies.

Karlin makes her case by examining how the United States plans, how it fights, how it develops and acquires the tools of war, how it builds and prepares soldiers, and how it learns and adapts plans during execution, focusing again on the importance of the interaction between military professionals, civilian managers, and the American people — the Clausewitzian triad³ that drives our responses to threats and decisions.

Her examination of Clausewitz's triad also requires an understanding of the ways that legacy, myth, and memory affect these interactions between the military, civilian defense leaders, and the American people. This additional triad of legacy, myth, and memory is shaped by past efforts, the lessons drawn from them, and the ways they are remembered.

³ Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America's Military After Two Decades of War* (Brookings Institution Press, 2021), xiv-xv.

Legacy, Myth, and Memory in U.S. Military History

Since its beginnings in the American Revolution, there have often been mismatches between the force the U.S. military wanted to be, the force it needed to be, and the force it really was. America's Revolutionary army wanted to become a "respectable army," capable of fighting toe-to-toe with European armies on open battlefields. However, the forces they needed were ground forces capable of extending and wearing down British forces without risking a culminating set-piece battle they might lose, and a navy capable of isolating British troops in America from their base of support in England. For many years, the force that the revolutionaries actually fielded blended irregular troops with limited numbers of regular, "respectable" forces to harry and disrupt British activities until a partnership with the French provided the naval forces needed to turn operational victories into strategic success.⁴

During the American Civil War, leaders on both sides wanted mobile ground forces to carry out sweeping Napoleonic maneuvers to destroy opposing forces and capture territory, and the open battlefields of the war offered such opportunities. However, what the Union actually needed was a combination of diplomatic and naval activities to isolate the Confederates from international support and markets so that the Union could apply its economic and industrial advantages to overwhelm the Confederates. The Union was finally successful when its leaders employed a combination of army and riverine navy forces to control the Mississippi and Atlantic approaches to the Confederate states and applied unrelenting military pressure based on superior numbers and resources. Despite

⁴ James Kirby Martin and Mark Edward Lender, *A Respectable Army: The Military Origins of the Republic, 1763-1789* (Harlan Davidson, inc, 1982).

the appeal of Napoleonic-style fighting, the Union ultimately prevailed by applying economic might to starve and crush the Confederacy.⁵

World War II also provides competing narratives for legacy, myth, and memory. The war in the Pacific was a maritime struggle, focused on controlling and exploiting sea and air lines of communications, employing ground forces to capture the bases required for naval and air forces to isolate, bombard, and blockade Japan. The fight for bases had the happy side effect of destroying the elite Japanese forces that had captured much of the Pacific before the critical battle for the home islands commenced. The United States emerged as a naval and air power without peer in the Pacific. The war in Europe demonstrated the difficulties of launching and conducting a continental campaign focused on seizing and holding territory from bases in the United States and Britain. U.S. forces were unable to get at German ground forces until a series of grinding air battles had defeated the German air force and a relentless naval campaign had depleted German submarines and allowed the delivery of overwhelming forces and materiel to Britain. After the Allied ground force advance was stymied near the beachheads, strategic airpower was employed tactically to open a path and release Allied land forces from the Normandy beachhead. After a brief period of maneuver warfare forced German forces back to their prepared western wall defenses, a combination of Russian ground forces and around-the-clock Allied bombing drove the collapse of German forces. In both theaters, superior naval and air forces isolated, bombarded, and starved Axis land forces so that victory could be achieved without enduring the massive casualties that would have resulted from a climactic land battle. Russia was the only member of the Allies prepared to endure those massive casualties in Europe, and Russian ground forces in Asia certainly contributed to Japan's

⁵ Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Libri GmbH, 1983).

decision to surrender.⁶ After the war, Allied nations and services conducted their own reviews of the war and developed narratives to tell the story of the “good war” in ways that reflected and emphasized their own versions of legacy, myth, and memory, providing a preview of future struggles over the pre-eminence of continental and maritime approaches for U.S. forces.⁷

The Korean and Vietnamese Wars were vastly different in character and conduct, but in both cases American forces were unable to translate tactical and operational successes in combined arms approaches into strategic success. Once China entered the war in Korea, stalemate and a divided Korea was the best available outcome. In Vietnam, the United States was not able to imagine or employ a strategy that would deliver success within the time and casualty constraints it was willing to endure. U.S. attempts to isolate adversary troops from their sources of supply were not successful in continental warfare, due to either the lack of maritime barriers, the limits of airpower in land-based warfare, or the lack of political will — the explanations vary based on interpretations of legacy, myth, and memory. The reality that neither conflict posed an existential threat to the United States contributed to the lack of a thorough self-examination or widely accepted conclusion about how and why America was unsuccessful.⁸

⁶ Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (Random House, 2012).

⁷ See *The United States Bombing Surveys* (Air University Press, 1945 and 1946) and Gian Gentile, *Advocacy or Assessment?: The United States Strategic Bombing Survey of Germany and Japan* (University of California Press, 1997).

⁸ Harry G Summers, Jr, *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Presidio Press, 1995); U.S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (Presidio Press, 1979); and Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (Liveright, 2018).

As with World War II, Operation Desert Shield in 1990 and Operation Desert Storm in 1991 provide examples of the impact of legacy, myth, and memory after successful operations. U.S. forces conducted a wildly successful combined-arms campaign to eject Iraqi forces from Kuwait employing tools and doctrine developed to fight the Soviet Union in Europe. Naval and air mobility provided uninterrupted deployment and supply of a massive force. An air and naval shield provided time and depth to build a coalition and train it for combined operations. A massive air operation conducted from both land and sea bases wounded and, in some cases, destroyed the combat capability of Iraqi forces in Kuwait. Allied ground forces conducted large-scale maneuvers to eject or pursue Iraqi ground forces back across their borders. Overwhelming U.S. force and skillful political coalition-building achieved success in the limited political objective of driving Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. However, the resounding success once again led to multiple after-action studies⁹ and allowed everybody to argue for credit based on their institutional interpretations of legacy, myth, and legend. Which element or elements were decisive? The maritime and air isolation of the battlefield and bombardments? The ground incursion that chased Iraqi forces back to their border? The political maneuvering that secured a coalition?

The Importance of Post-Mortem Reviews

The U.S. military has a deep and thorough debrief culture embedded in tactical operations. Studies are conducted immediately, and again and again over the years to follow, but as Karlin points out, Americans often fail to accomplish a thorough analysis of their ability — or failure — to successfully translate tactical and operational victories into

⁹ Robert Scales, *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War* (Potomac Books, 1998) and Richard Hallion, *Storm Over Iraq: Airpower and the Gulf War* (Penguin, 2015).

strategic successes. Why? Timely and thorough self-analyses dig up painful questions. For example, were the efforts worth the costs in lives and resources? By assigning credit and blame, they also pose risks to policies, the institutional futures of the military services, established industry programs and projects, and reputations of the people who served in and made decisions in the conflicts.

As Karlin notes, the lack of an effective post-mortem after failures allows multiple actors to determine their own lessons — often in ways that privilege their own viewpoints and interests. Without comprehensive analysis and accepted conclusions, where you sit is based on where you stand.¹⁰ Failure to conduct effective post-mortems enables mis-use of the legacies of defeat and victory through myths and memory.

The failure to conduct unbiased post-mortem reviews after a defeat often leads to theories that blame defeat on the lack of political will or decisions outside of the militaries' purview. The German military propagated a view that they were not defeated on the battlefield in World War I but were “sold out” by politicians in the endgame. Many American military leaders blamed failures in Korea and Vietnam on political decisions, believing they were not allowed to use tools or methods that would have achieved victory, or arguing that they could have won a decisive military victory if political leaders had allowed them to attack enemy of centers of gravity in China or North Vietnam.

The failure to conduct useful analysis after a victory allows multiple institutions to examine and interpret results through the lenses of their own legacies, myths, and memories and draw conclusions that emphasize their own contributions. The lack of a

¹⁰ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 2.

consensus view on past lessons leads to a lack of consensus on the force-planning decisions required to acquire the forces needed to fight future wars.

Lessons from the Global War on Terror and Future Conflicts

More recent history, on which Karlin focuses, offers new material for examination. What legacies, myths, and memories will be driven by 20 years in Iraq, Afghanistan, and lesser theaters of the “Global War on Terror”? Will the United States gain a better understanding of how and why it committed military forces to pursue poorly defined and changing strategic objectives? Will it explore the reasons behind its failure to secure strategic victories in irregular and counter-insurgency conflicts with conventional forces? Will it focus on the successful prevention of further large-scale terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland through expansion of paramilitary and Special Operations Forces? Will Americans capture and better understand the impact of focusing defense spending on forces and tools required for irregular war instead of preparing for the unique challenges posed by China?

Underlying all of these questions and debates are more fundamental considerations about future conflict. Should the United States prioritize future spending on preparing land and air forces for continental wars like the current wars between Russia and Ukraine and Israel and Hamas, or preparing sea and air forces for the maritime threats posed by China? How should America structure and execute interactions between civilian and military leaders to prioritize and execute these preparations for the future? How should the United States prioritize forces required for competition, deterrence, or conflict in continental- or maritime-focused conflicts? How should Americans think about

incorporating and prioritizing increasingly important space, cyber, and information capabilities into the force planning processes?

America's geographic position poses unique dilemmas and should drive a distinctive approach to defense. The United States doesn't have exactly the same needs as its continental allies or foes and should expect its process to derive its own requirements. The blessings of friendly neighbors north and south and giant oceans east and west isolate the United States from the Eurasian continent and its continental conflicts. At the same time, dependence on Eurasian markets, trade, and history tie America to the Eurasian continent and make isolation impossible.

Should America prioritize combined armed forces — largely land and air forces, augmented by space and cyber — designed for defending, seizing, or controlling territory in a continental conflict, or the naval, air, and space forces required by a maritime strategy to secure its borders and maintain the freedom of air, sea, space, and cyber required to support its economic needs? Both approaches require allies and partners, and the commitments that make those partnerships real.

The Three-Body Problem in Force Planning

Returning to the Clausewitzian triad, effective interaction between military leaders, civilian security leaders, and the American people will be essential in effectively answering these questions. In practice, interactions between the military professionals who serve on service and joint staffs, executive branch civilians in the White House, Office of the Secretary of Defense, and Office of Management and Budget, and the

American people's representatives in Congress create a unique three-body problem that has made effective prioritization of military requirements difficult, if not impossible.

Cixin Liu's science fiction novel, *The Three-Body Problem*, describes a society whose development is forced into fits and starts because its planet interacts with three suns orbiting each other — a representation of orbital mechanics' three-body problem, where scientists lack the tools to predict interactions in the same way they can predict interactions in our one-sun system.¹¹ In the book, interaction between the planet and its three suns is literally unpredictable, so the society developing there must make unique evolutionary adaptations to allow progress to continue between periods of disastrous interactions with and between the three stars.

Similarly, the unstable and unpredictable interactions between America's three civil-military power centers mean that the force development process also works in fits and starts, limiting its ability to effectively prioritize its actions and respond to new threats in the timeline required to build effective forces. How do America's three bodies interact to choose and acquire the force elements needed to compete, deter, and win against new challenges and build the new force?

Defining the Current State of the Force Planning Processes

The Constitution gives Congress the responsibility and power to “provide for the common Defence,” “raise and support Armies,” “provide and maintain a Navy,” and

¹¹ Cixin Liu, *The Three-Body Problem*, trans. Ken Liu (Tor Books, 2016).

“make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces.”¹² Due to the complexity of today’s defense enterprise and systems and the realities of relevant staff capacities and sizes, the execution of Congress’ authority has evolved into a bureaucratic, multi-polar process that accentuates the unpredictability and instability inherent in the three-body problem.

The president provides fiscal guidance to shape and limit the amount of defense spending. This initial guidance may or may not be established in coordination with Congress. The Office of the Secretary of Defense provides further guidance that splits this fiscal decision-making between the military services and departments — each service is given a top-line number to guide their internal allocation of resources. These top lines generally reflect a percentage of the total defense budget based on previous-year allocations. The service staffs then build their “best versions” of program submissions that prioritize expenses to fit their service’s views of the world and their service contributions — their unique legacy, myth, and memory. The Office of the Secretary of Defense then conducts a program and budget review process to evaluate and shape the service budgets to fit their understanding of legacy, myth, and memory — their beliefs about what has been effective in the past and what will be required in the future. The Office of Management and Budget leads an executive review that further shapes the budget in accordance with White House policy and political views and creates a president’s budget that is delivered to the Congress.

¹² “The Constitution of the United States: A Transcription,” U.S. National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript>.

Congress then reviews and reshapes the budget through a collaborative process with four seats of power — the authorization and appropriations committees in both the House and the Senate. Each committee passes a separate bill that communicates their opinions on prioritization, oversight, and spending, shaped by both the opinions and priorities of the political parties and committee members and staffs. These four bills are adjudicated between the House and Senate in a conference process and eventually, and often late, become a National Defense Authorization Act and a Defense Appropriations Act, delivering a final product that — for better or worse — is a compromise between conflicting legacies, myths, and memories that satisfies multiple viewpoints and is rarely prioritized to focus on approaching threats.

As a result of this process, there are three budgets being planned, shaped, and executed in parallel. For example, Congress recently passed authorization¹³ and appropriations¹⁴ bills for fiscal year 2024, allowing the department to begin executing the 2024 budget. These bills were delivered more than halfway through the current fiscal year, resulting in spending delays and requiring reprogramming of spending plans that were shaped over time from service plans first developed in 2022. The president recently delivered his proposed fiscal year 2025 budget to the Congress,¹⁵ and members and staff are currently

¹³ Bryant Harris, “Congress passed the FY24 defense policy bill: Here’s what’s inside,” *Defense News*, December 14, 2023, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/2023/12/14/congress-passed-the-fy24-defense-policy-bill-heres-whats-inside/>.

¹⁴ Bryant Harris, “Congress passes defense spending bill after months of delays,” *Defense News*, March 23, 2024, <https://www.defensenews.com/congress/budget/2024/03/23/congress-passes-defense-spending-bill-after-months-of-delays/>.

¹⁵ Lloyd J. Austin III, “Department of Defense Releases the President’s Fiscal Year 2025 Defense Budget,” Statement by the secretary of defense, U.S. Department of Defense, March 11, 2024, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3703410/department-of-defense-releases-the->

digesting it and beginning the process of shaping it into bills for 2025. Finally, the services have begun building their inputs into the fiscal year 2026 president's budget, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense will begin the program and budget review process in late spring or early summer — without knowledge of what will be included in the congressional fiscal year 2025 acts.

The overlap, delays, inefficiencies, and compromises driven by this process make rational prioritization extremely difficult, stifle innovation by creating unpredictable funding profiles, and allow spending decisions to be shaped, disproportionately, by the legacies, myths, and memories of the individuals and institutions that conduct the process. Like the effects driven by Liu's three suns, the civil-military three-body problem creates so much instability that progress in reshaping military forces to meet future needs is incoherent and driven by fits and starts, making rational, timely adaptation nearly impossible.

What Should Change?

The United States' three-body process should change to enable better decisions, made faster, with reduced turbulence, and ultimately addressing multiple three-body problems.

A revised process should:

- Reduce the impact of the three limiting factors of legacy, myth, and memory by providing a common, accepted set of analytical tools to ensure comparative analysis of force planning options in warfighting scenarios.

[presidents-fiscal-year-2025-defense-budget/#:~:text=On%20March%2011%2C%202024%2C%20the,Act%20\(FRA\)%20of%202023.](#)

- Streamline and coordinate the activities of the three power centers of the services, Office of the Secretary of Defense, and Congress to increase transparency and reduce force planning timelines.
- Alleviate the inefficiencies driven by the three budgets: The president’s budget, the congressional authorization and appropriation budget, and the execution year budget.

The effects of these three-body problems have been widely recognized, and there have been many proposed solutions. Most recently, Congress established the Commission on Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution Reform to examine the Defense Department’s resourcing processes. The commission’s final report, “Defense Resourcing for the Future,” was released in March 2024 and identifies 28 recommendations in five critical areas.¹⁶ The commission’s recommendations include:

1. “Improving the Alignment of Budgets to Strategy;
2. Foster Innovation and Adaptability;
3. Strengthen Relationships Between DoD and Congress;
4. Modernize Business Systems and Data Analytics; and
5. Strengthen the Capability of the Resourcing Workforce.”

History would suggest that America’s ability to successfully execute these recommendations is limited. Members of Congress will likely see much of it as a challenge to their constitutional authorities, the Office of the Secretary of Defense is a notoriously difficult bureaucracy to change, and America’s unwillingness to conduct the analysis

¹⁶ Commission on Planning, Programming, Budgeting, and Execution (PPBE) Reform, “Defense Resourcing for the Future: Final Report,” March 2024, <https://ppbereform.senate.gov/finalreport/>.

required to understand its failures and determine a common view of the future will, if not addressed, get in the way of needed changes.

How can the committee's recommendations be prioritized to address America's over-reliance on legacy, myth, and memory? A good start would be to emphasize efforts that create or enable common approaches across the three bodies.

Efforts to improve the alignment of budgets to strategy should start with coordinating work across all three bodies to build and agree on a common assessment of U.S. interests and future threats to those interests. Building on successful development of a common assessment of threats could allow further collaboration, to include coordinated development of the national security, defense, and military strategy documents now developed within the Department of Defense, enabling better alignment between defense budgets and strategy and strengthening the relationships between the Defense Department and Congress. Better alignment between budgets and strategy might also provide more predictable funding for development of innovative new ideas and systems to foster innovation and adaptability.

Modernizing business systems and analytics should include establishing common IT systems for building and modifying budgets, but these efforts should be expanded to develop a common set of analytic tools capable of judging performance of future weapons systems and concepts in competition, deterrence, and warfighting. A common analytic system would focus decision-making on analytics instead of legacy, myth, and memory by providing quantifiable measurement of the effects of changes made by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and Congress to the services' budget proposals. It should allow a common assessment of whether a proposed change makes the United States more or less likely to succeed.

Efforts to strengthen the capabilities of the resource workforce should include efforts to recruit, educate, and retain the right people to support these critical processes, but should also include exchange tours that shift key civilians among and between developmental tours in the military departments, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Office of Management and Budget, and congressional staff positions, developing and improving understanding and relationships between the Defense Department and Congress.

The defense three-body problem poses a real and lasting threat to America's ability to understand the lessons of its history and develop solutions to new challenges in relevant timeframes. An effort to reshape this universe can reduce the inherent instability that has limited past efforts and would be a fitting inheritance to 20 years of war and a fitting tribute to those who served in all three bodies.

Gen. Mike Holmes retired from the U.S. Air Force in October 2020 after nearly 40 years of service. In addition to serving the Air Force Historical Foundation as chairman of the Board, he is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, the chairman of the Board of Directors at tech start-up Red 6, and advises several defense and tech companies.

He completed his Air Force service leading the transformation of Air Combat Command after serving as deputy chief of staff for Strategic Plans and Programs, deputy commander of Air Education and Training Command, assistant deputy chief of staff for Operations and Requirements, and principal director for Mid-East Policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Before assuming his strategic roles, he commanded Air Force teams at the squadron, group, and wing level, including a year in command of Air Force forces in Afghanistan.

Mike graduated from the U.S. Naval War College National Security Strategy program and completed both the U.S. Air Force's School for Advanced Air and Space Power Studies program and the Fighter Weapons Instructor Course. He was awarded an M.A. in history from the University of Alabama and a B.S. in electrical engineering from the University of Tennessee. He is a fighter pilot with over 4,000 hours in the F-15 and T-38, including over 500 combat hours.



3. A Full Diagnosis of Civil-Military Health Should Include the National Guard and Reserves

Carrie A. Lee

The Inheritance is an unusual book for two reasons. First, it takes a critical and forward-looking eye to the legacy of 20 years of war, which as Mara Karlin rightly points out has been remarkably slow in coming. Second, its author was a senior policymaker. There are few former policymakers who are willing to take such an honest look at their own tenure — Peter Feaver and Kori Schake are two that come to mind, and Karlin is another. She commendably approaches her task — one undertaken in between two tours in the Office of the Secretary of Defense — with both intellectual honesty and humility.

The Inheritance is a sweeping look at the legacies of the post-9/11 wars. Karlin begins with a discussion of why it is important to pay attention to the myths and narratives that emerge after war — a topic on which there is a rich literature — and the three civil-military crises that trace their roots directly to the influence of the post-9/11 wars. The crises follow a standard format for how we think about civil-military relations: the military's relationship with itself, or what we might call the profession; its relationship with society; and its relationship with the political elite. She then tours through the different policy implications of these crises: funding, tactics, personnel, promotion, and readiness.

Karlin says in the preface that she hopes the book will “inspire a dialogue that has been long in the making, is frankly much overdue, and, bluntly, must take place if we are to

learn from the past to do better going forward.”¹⁷ Given this aim, and the remarkable ambition and scope of the subject matter, Karlin must sacrifice depth for breadth in her analysis. The result is a book that raises more questions than it answers, but nevertheless provides a valuable framework to understand — and highlight — the profound, lasting, and widespread civil-military consequences of two decades of conflict. It should be required reading for civilian and military leaders alike.

There is irony, then, in the fact that my principal critique of such a comprehensive book rests on what is missing from the analysis. Its focus, almost certainly in part because of the position and perspective of its author as a civilian policymaker in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, largely equates the military with the active-duty force. However, it misses the critical role that the other components of the Total Force — a term used to refer to the active-duty, reserve, and National Guard forces — have played in enabling the post-9/11 wars, and the very different legacies that they carry as a result of their participation in these campaigns. Indeed, the inheritance of the National Guard especially looks very different from that of the active-duty forces, yet the term “national guard” does not even make an appearance in the index. Without sufficient attention to the crises and challenges facing the National Guard today — most which can also trace their origins to the post-9/11 wars — we are unable to understand contemporary challenges and crises.

The Forgotten Warriors?

The omission of the National Guard from Karlin’s analysis is unsurprising in many ways. In our search to understand and evaluate the broader policies, strategy, and decision-

¹⁷ Mara Karlin, *The Inheritance: America’s Military After Two Decades of War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021), *xvi*.

making that created ambiguous-at-best results from America's longest wars, it is both tempting and reasonable to think of the use of the National Guard as simply augmenting and enabling the all-volunteer force. Indeed, Karlin's chapter on "Who Serves" begins with the assertion that, "the post-9/11 wars have ... demonstrated the [all-volunteer force's] feasibility as a wartime construct."¹⁸ Even as she (rightfully) goes on to discuss the costs of staying with a volunteer Army throughout two decades of active conflict, however, the transformation of the National Guard from a strategic reserve to an operational reserve force stands out as the key enabler of military readiness from 2001 to 2021 — even more so than the temporary stop-loss policies or acceleration of familial legacies of service that Karlin highlights. National Guard units were critical to sustaining the war in Afghanistan while the Bush administration turned its attention to Iraq — by the end of 2007, National Guard forces comprised over 20 percent of total U.S. forces in Afghanistan.¹⁹ Just last year, the National Guard had 22,000 service members deployed overseas despite America's withdrawal from both wars.²⁰

Yet, despite this understandable temptation to blur the lines, *The Inheritance* is, fundamentally, a book about American civil-military relations. And despite their centrality to the post-9/11 wars, the Guard's relationship with the profession of arms, society, and political elite are very different than those of the active-duty forces. Indeed, the Guard's own historical legacy as the citizen-soldier militiamen from the Revolutionary War suggests that their link with society should be especially strong. While the active-duty

¹⁸ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 141.

¹⁹ Michael Waterhouse and JoAnne O'Bryant, "National Guard Personnel and Deployments: Fact Sheet," *CRS Report for Congress*, January 17, 2008.

²⁰ Jim Garamone, "Leaders Detail Future of National Guard," *DOD News* (Jan 24, 2023), <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3276423/leaders-detail-future-of-national-guard/#:~:text=While%20the%20wars%20in%20Afghanistan,commands%2C%22%20the%20general%20said.>

component relies upon a model that rotates soldiers across geography, time, and space, guardsmen and reservists are supposed to be deeply embedded members of the community, present in locations where the active-duty are not and holders of civilian jobs that make them more neighbor than soldier. Indeed, when recommending that President Richard Nixon establish the all-volunteer force, the Gates Commission explicitly referenced the Guard and Reserve as key to avoiding a civil-military divide because of their embeddedness in their communities.²¹

What's more, because of its history and institutional construct, the Guard especially holds different responsibilities and relationships with its political elites — adjutant generals are political appointees of the governor of their state, with a different chain of command. Guardsmen and reservists have different rules and regulations around political speech and activity, and different incentive structures because of varying chains of command. Put simply, civil-military relations for the National Guard and Reserve components look very different than those for their active-duty counterparts and are thus worth investigating independently.

The Guard's Inheritance

By far the most impactful consequence of the post-9/11 wars has been the National Guard's transition from a strategic to an operational reserve force. Far from being the reserve of last resort, today the National Guard is essentially operationally indistinct from the active-duty and deploys nearly as often. There is irony that this change is the

²¹ Thomas Gates, ed. *The Report of The President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Armed Force*, February 1970, <https://www.nixonfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/The-Report-Of-The-Presidents-Commission-On-An-All-Volunteer-Armed-Force.pdf>.

inheritance of another war that Karlin analyzes in her introduction: Vietnam. While the exact motivations behind what is now known as the Abrams Doctrine — a concept that integrated key parts of conflict sustainment and capabilities into the Reserves and National Guard — remain contested, the end of the Vietnam War led not just to the establishment of the all-volunteer force, but to the construct known as the Total Force. Indeed, the integration of key sustainment capabilities inside the National Guard and Reserve components effectively ensured that in any large-scale conflict both the Guard and Reserves would have to be mobilized, in contrast to the decisions made by the Johnson administration in the early days of the Vietnam War to rely upon the draft rather than reserve forces.²² This organizational shift led many to assume that the inclusion of the Guard and Reserve forces — those soldiers with the strongest ties to community and society — would necessarily lead to greater interest and involvement by Americans in the wars that their country fought, thus strengthening the civil-military relationship and tightening political leaders' accountability to the public.²³

In reality, the widespread use of the National Guard to fight the post-9/11 wars has only resulted in their estrangement from civil society in ways that the architects of the all-volunteer and Total Force never imagined. Regular deployments, training for those deployments, and re-deployment transitions have made it extraordinarily difficult for

²² Conrad Crane and Gian Gentile, "Understanding the Abrams Doctrine: Myth vs. Reality," *War on the Rocks* (Dec 9, 2015), <https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/understanding-the-abrams-doctrine-myth-versus-reality/>.

²³ Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of His Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 363-364; Christopher Parker, "Lack of Will: How the All-Volunteer Force Conditioned the American Public," *Military Review* (Sept/Oct 2023), pp 44-56; Major General Arnold Punaro, USMCR (Ret), "Written Testimony to the National Commission on the Future of the Army," July 16, 2015, <http://punarogroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Testimony-to-Army-Commission-07-16-15.pdf>.

guardsmen and reservists to hold the kind of community-centric positions envisioned by the Total Force in favor of careers and opportunities more amenable to the enormous time demands of today's reserve components — if they are employed at all outside of the Guard.²⁴ Even legislation designed to protect the jobs and eligibility of those serving in the Guard and Reserve has largely failed to stem the tide of soldiers moving into government jobs as civilians or contractors, as well as other public-service careers that are friendlier to long absences. Anecdotal and statistical evidence suggests that guardsmen and reservists are less likely to be business owners, work for small businesses, or work in sectors that require employees to have flexible schedules to fill shifts, though more research is needed.²⁵ This movement — most easily explained as a labor market adjustment to changing economic conditions — has resulted in the disproportionate concentration of Guard and Reserve soldiers with jobs in large corporations or the federal government. As a result, the model of the citizen-soldier, where members of the reserve components are community members first and represented across all of civil society, has been fundamentally broken over the last two decades due to the high operational tempo imposed by the post-9/11 wars and corresponding economic adjustments made by its members.

²⁴ Mana Rabiee, "Guard and Reserve Members Fare Worst Among US Jobless Veterans," Voice of America News (March 25, 2012), <https://www.voanews.com/a/returning-us-veterans-face-a-battle-to-find-jobs-144267585/181105.html>.

²⁵ Institute of Medicine, "Chapter 7: Community Impacts of Deployment," in *Returning Home from Iraq and Afghanistan: Assessment of Readjustment Needs of Veterans, Service Members, and Their Families* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2013); Alison St. John, "National Guard Members Struggle to Keep Civilian Careers," National Public Radio Morning Edition (April 22, 2015). Available online at <https://www.npr.org/2015/04/22/401025857/national-guard-members-struggle-to-keep-civilian-careers>;

The public has picked up on this estrangement. Many architects of the Total Force model believed that the activation of the National Guard and Reserve forces would serve as an important signaling mechanism to the public regarding the severity of a conflict — an assumption that echoed those of the Johnson administration in the 1960s. Today, however, survey research reveals that the public makes little distinction between the Army’s active-duty and reserve components. Indeed, far from being a signal about conflict severity, public attitudes do not register any hesitance at all to use National Guard and Reserve forces for overseas missions.²⁶ Further, when questioned about civil-military norms and uses of force, public opinion data collected by Kori Schake and James Mattis find that the public does not distinguish between soldiers who serve in either the active-duty, guard, or reserves — when presented with information on the three components, the average American today neither understands the differences between the institutions nor makes any attempt to disaggregate between soldiers serving in different components.²⁷ And there is little reason to believe these findings have changed — in the decade since Mattis and Schake ran their survey, the National Guard and Reserves have only become more like the active-duty force as the Department of Defense continues to use them in an operational reserve capacity.²⁸ As a result, the evidence suggests that the very institutions meant to serve as a primary connective tissue between the military and

²⁶ Jessica Blankshain, “Who Has ‘Skin in the Game?’ the Implications of an Operational Reserve for Civil-Military Relations,” in Lionel Beehner, Risa Brooks, and Daniel Maurer, ed, *Reconsidering American Civil-Military Relations: The Military, Society, Politics, and Modern War* (New York Oxford University Press, 2020).

²⁷ Kori Schake and James Mattis, ed, *Warriors and Citizens: American Views of our Military* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institute Press, 2016)

²⁸ Jessica Blankshain, Lindsay Cohn, and Douglas Kriner, “Citizens to Soldiers: Mobilization, Cost Perceptions, and Support for Military Action,” *Journal of Global Security Studies* 7:4 (2022)

American society have suffered as this critical relationship significantly degraded, and in many cases severed entirely, due to 20 years of operational activity.

Karlin's framework is useful here, as the post-9/11 wars have also created a separate identity crisis within the Guard itself. The Guard's historic mission has been to serve as a reserve force for the state governor — available to conduct disaster relief missions, serve as an emergency public safety force during disturbances like riots, and step in during other state-wide or national domestic emergencies. These missions require very different types of training, funding, and preparation than the kind of overseas combat operations that the National Guard has been focused on over the last two decades. This is not to say that the Guard is immune from the crisis of confidence that Karlin identifies — indeed, their participation in the post-9/11 campaigns has resulted in many of the same frustrations that their active-duty counterparts express — but that there is an additional burden, one that comes from a torn sense of mission and purpose. The result is a National Guard that requires yet more time from its soldiers, only to leave them increasingly unprepared to do the kind of state and local emergency relief that has traditionally been their bread and butter. The identity crisis is real: Are soldiers serving in the Guard supposed to be warriors who fight terrorists and insurgents abroad, or are they community members who are called to serve their state and local governments during times of crisis? Where one falls on this central question of identity can and should have lasting implications for how the Guard is resourced, trained, and educated.

The discrepancy that emerged between the operational capability and professional education expected of Guard and Reserve soldiers after two decades of war highlights this identity crisis. While the National Guard was trained and resourced to operationally perform on par with active-duty units overseas, the Department of Defense never modified subsequent requirements for military education and professionalization.

BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE: Considering the Inheritance of America's Post-9/11 Wars
<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/book-review-roundtable-considering-the-inheritance-of-americas-post-9-11-wars/>

Through largely institutional inertia, the Guard today operates with the same requirements and regulations around professional conduct and behavior that their predecessors in the 1990s did, despite vastly different public perceptions of their roles and who they represent. Guard and Reserve soldiers today have far fewer incentives than their active-duty counterparts to complete professional military education programs and largely complete those programs in online settings as opposed to in residence, where they experience lower graduation rates and significantly less in-person interaction with their peers.²⁹ Yet, research on how norms are developed and enforced suggests that they are only truly internalized with sustained and repeated exposure such that they adopt a “taken for granted” nature — something that the National Guard and Reserves lack due to the very nature of their jobs.³⁰ Recent research on civil-military norms of non-partisanship similarly warns that, “absent deep internalization, constant teaching, clarity, and well-specified standards that are agreed upon and enforced, civil-military norms can and will deteriorate.”³¹

It follows then that the legacy of the post-9/11 wars is that America has created an operationally capable fighting force that is also lagging in the professional safeguards that were created to control such a lethal force in the first place. This lack of regular, in-

²⁹ Kathleen Mahoney-Norris and John Ackerman, “PME and Online Education in the Air Force: Raising the Game,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 67:4 (2012), pp 20-25; James Campbell Jr., “The Challenges of Distance Learning,” *NCO Journal* (February 2021), pp 1-4, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/nco-journal/images/2021/February/Distance-Learning/Distance-Learning.pdf>.

³⁰ Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, “International Norms Dynamics and Political Change,” *International Organization* 52:4 (1998), pp 887-917.

³¹ Risa Brooks, Michael Robinson, and Heidi Urben, “Speaking Out Why Retired Flag Officers Participate in Political Discourse,” *Texas National Security Review* 7:1 (Winter 2023/2024), pp 49-72. <https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/50675>

person socialization with their military peers as they rise in the ranks was always a risk built into the differing structure and professional expectations associated with service in the National Guard. However, the internalization of the warrior ethos within the Guard force, reinforced by their admirable and effective participation in the post-9/11 campaigns and accelerated by an ignorant public, has led to a profound imbalance between the Guard's tactical/operational capacity and their relative preparedness to act as stewards of the profession of arms.

Caught on the Front Lines

The consequences of the Guard's inheritance from the post-9/11 wars are profound for American civil-military relations, and different from those of their active-duty counterparts. While the general trends and crises that Karlin identifies are pervasive, they manifest in different and more extreme ways for those serving in the National Guard because of their specific inheritance from the post-9/11 wars. Indeed, the National Guard is on the front lines of some of the most bitter and consequential civil-military disputes in the United States today — many of which have implications for the all-volunteer force, American democracy, and the future of civilian control.

Karlin may be correct that the all-volunteer force has been shown to be a feasible wartime construct, but it has only been viable with the widespread use of the National Guard to fill combat and support missions. Yet, the severance of the Guard as a connective tissue to the rest of the public is at least partly responsible for the recruiting crisis that the Army faces today as the civil-military gap expands — jeopardizing the country's ability to prepare for the next conflict. Also, its heavy use as an operational force already means that America's strategic depth is significantly more limited than the numbers on paper

would suggest — undercutting the feasibility of using an all-volunteer force to fight a near-peer competitor. Plans to continue to use the Guard as a supplement to the active-duty forces in order to mask the effects of shortfalls are the consequence of an Army that is actively “robbing Peter to pay Paul.” All in all, the operational demands on the Guard and its increasing separation from society may have enabled the post-9/11 wars but also undermined the long-term viability of the all-volunteer force in a significant way.

Perhaps most important, however, are the ways in which the legacy of the post-9/11 wars have put the National Guard on the front lines of one of the most troubling civil-military developments in the last decade: the active politicization of the military. Over the last several years, governors across the United States have discovered that their authorities over the National Guard provide useful contexts in which to challenge the authority and policies of the federal government, taking advantage of the differing chains of command to effectively make the National Guard insubordinate to federal policy.³² This problem is not unlike the challenges that the United States saw in the 1950s and 1960s during the civil rights movement, when southern governors attempted to use the National Guard to block school integration and other federal policies that protected black Americans’ rights. However, whereas the public likely had a better sense of the ways in which the National Guard differed from the active-duty military during the draft era, today the public only

³² Andrew Jeong and Alex Horton, “Federal court denies Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt’s attempt to stop military vaccine mandate,” *The Washington Post* (Dec 29, 2021),

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2021/12/29/national-guard-federal-vaccine-mandate-oklahoma/>;

Acacia Coronado, “What to know as Republican governors consider sending more National Guard to the Texas border,” *AP News* (Feb 1, 2024), <https://apnews.com/article/texas-border-deployment-national-guard-31466d4882415e8d525d675df0567526>;

Steve Beynon, “The National Guard is Stuck in the Middle of Political Infighting, and It’s Getting Worse,” *Military.com* (Dec 7, 2021), <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2021/12/07/national-guard-stuck-middle-of-political-infighting-and-its-getting-worse.html>.

sees uniformed military officers disobeying orders from the president — exacerbating public perceptions of a political military.³³ What’s more, the prestige and popularity of the military — particularly when compared to other government institutions — make the National Guard units an especially tempting (and rewarding) group for political partisans to pit in contrast to an executive they are trying to challenge.³⁴ Complicating matters is that senior National Guard officers are oftentimes unprepared to handle these politicization challenges, and for good reason: As appointees of the state governor, they are more likely to see political conflict, at lower ranks, and with less professional socialization than their active-duty counterparts.

That lack of public distinction between the Guard and active-duty forces means that the consequences of politicization threaten the legitimacy not just of the state organization but the entire force. When the public is unable to distinguish between conflict between forces under a governor’s authority and those under the president’s, it increases concerns about politicization and extremism across the force. To use a recent example, Texas Adjutant General Thomas Suelzer has been caught in the crossfire between Texas Governor Greg Abbott and President Joe Biden over immigration policy. In the process, he appeared, in uniform, on stage during a campaign rally for presidential candidate Donald Trump — a clear violation of civil-military norms, and an act that would subject

³³ Schake and Mattis, *Warriors and Citizens*; Jim Golby and Peter Feaver, “Military Prestige During a Political Crisis: Use it and You’ll Lose It,” *War on the Rocks* (June 5, 2020). Available online at <https://warontherocks.com/2020/06/military-prestige-during-a-political-crisis-use-it-and-youll-lose-it/>.

³⁴ Polina Beliakova, “Erosion by Deference: Civilian Control and the Military in Policymaking,” *Texas National Security Review* 4:3 (2021), pp 55-75.

an active-duty soldier to disciplinary action.³⁵ While Suelzer's status as the Texas adjutant general complicates the legal picture, there is little doubt that his presence at the political rally conveyed the message that the military is supportive of Trump's presidential campaign — an act that could deeply damage the essential non-partisan identity of the force. Indeed, Suelzer's appearance with Trump highlighted the difference between Guard and active-duty socialization — while Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Mark Milley publicly apologized for appearing to support a partisan agenda after he accompanied then-President Trump in 2020 during a highly politicalized photo opportunity, Suelzer was, at a minimum, complicit in political leaders' cooptation of the uniform for partisan purposes.³⁶ During a time when Americans regularly express significant concern about the politicization of the military, these acts undermine the legitimacy of the force in ways that will reverberate for years to come.

Why It Matters

Karlin's focus on the military as a relatively monolithic actor is understandable for her purposes. She is seeking to draw out the big challenges and implications that the post-9/11 wars present for American civil-military relations today. Yet, by failing to disaggregate, we also miss important indicators of civil-military health or, in this case, sickness. It is not an accident that many of the most challenging civil-military crises today involve the National Guard and Reserve forces — they are less studied and less bound by traditional rules and

³⁵ Leo Shane III, "Guard officials probing Texas general's appearance at Trump rally," *Military Times* (March 1, 2024), available online at <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/pentagon-congress/2024/03/01/guard-officials-probing-texas-generals-appearance-at-trump-rally/>

³⁶ Helene Cooper, "Milley Apologizes for Role in Trump Photo Op: 'I Should Not Have Been There,'" *The New York Times* (June 11, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/11/us/politics/trump-milley-military-protests-lafayette-square.html>.

norms, yet more subject to political influence than their active-duty counterparts. While the active-duty forces have challenges, the stark discrepancy in attention paid to the active versus reserve components in the civil-military dialogue have led to a new set of problems that will be difficult to correct.

The Inheritance raises important questions and gives both scholars and practitioners a useful framework for thinking about the legacy and future of the armed forces today. It is already required reading across much of professional military education, and shaping the way in which we approach civil-military challenges. But it is the starting point, not the final word. There is still much to uncover about the legacies of 20 years of war on the military, its masters, and the society they serve.

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4. A Story of Post-9/11 Military Legacies

Ryan Grauer

In *The Inheritance: America's Military After Two Decades of War*, Mara Karlin explicitly notes that she is offering “not a theory of things but, rather, a story of things.”³⁷ The tale she tells in the book is powerful and sobering, tracing the path the U.S. military has trodden since the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001 to the current day, when there is great uncertainty both within the armed forces and about the nature of the relationship among and between America's warriors, leaders, and people. The broad strokes of the narrative presented are familiar to scholars of civil-military relations, military and civilian personnel working as part of the national security enterprise, and sharp-eyed citizens who pay close attention to dispatches from the Pentagon, the White House, and war zones around the world. As a person who embodies all three identities, Karlin is exceptionally well-positioned to flesh out, bolster, and provide shape to the narrative with insight, evidence, and analysis that enriches conventional understandings. In doing so, Karlin's *The Inheritance* is an important contribution to our collective understanding of the state of the American civil-military relationship and may help provide a stable intellectual foundation for efforts to rebuild the strength of the armed forces. Crucially, though, *may* does not mean *will*. As I discuss further below, it is not entirely obvious how scholars, practitioners, and others should contextualize and employ the enhanced understanding presented in the book.

³⁷ Mara E. Karlin, *The Inheritance: America's Military After Two Decades of War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2022), 21.

Karlin is perhaps the person best positioned to write a book about legacies of the post-9/11 wars.³⁸ She is a trained scholar who has thought deeply about the history and practice of building and training militaries, run academic programs, and taught classes on strategy and policy as well as civil-military relations to vast numbers of students, many of whom have gone on to public service.³⁹ She has also held a variety of posts in the Department of Defense, most recently serving as the assistant secretary of defense for strategy, plans, and capabilities from August 2021 to December 2024 and performing the duties of the deputy under secretary of defense for policy in the midst of the 2023 hold on confirmation of civilian appointees put in place by Republican Sen. Tommy Tuberville.⁴⁰ The combination of an academic's eye for the interplay between structure and agency and first-hand knowledge gained by working to develop and implement defense policy — including, notably, the 2022 *National Defense Strategy* — allows Karlin to perceive trends and dynamics in the American military and its relationship with political elites and the broader public that are likely to escape the notice of others. Additionally, her unique background helps her frame questions in a way that contextualizes the day-to-day

³⁸ Karlin is correct in noting that “the post-9/11 wars” is a rather clunky phrase, and that the alternatives bandied about — the Global War on Terror, the Long War, the Forever War, and World War IV, among others — are equally, if not more problematic. I follow her usage here, and note that the dialogue Karlin hopes to inspire might help Americans better define how to talk about the conflicts and experience since Sept. 11, 2001. Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 21.

³⁹ Mara E. Karlin, “Training and Equipping Is Not Transforming: An Assessment of U.S. Programs to Build Partner Militaries” (Ph.D., The Johns Hopkins University, 2012); Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, “Johns Hopkins SAIS Names National Security Expert Mara Karlin Director of the Strategic Studies Program,” March 28, 2019, <https://sais.jhu.edu/news-press/johns-hopkins-sais-names-national-security-expert-mara-karlin-director-strategic-studies>.

⁴⁰ Lara Seligman and Paul McLeary, “Top Pentagon Official Steps down, Creating Policy Gap amid Tuberville Hold,” *Politico*, December 11, 2023, <https://www.politico.com/news/2023/12/11/mara-karlin-defense-department-departure-00131081>.

dynamics of the Department of Defense and gives her access to top civilian officials and military officers, to whom she can pose them.

On the back of her perceptiveness and rich, detailed interviews with nearly 100 civilian and military elites, Karlin argues that, after two decades of war, the United States military is marked by three crises: a crisis of self-confidence, in which the military itself is confused about what it is meant to be, how it is meant to perform its functions, and why;⁴¹ a crisis of caring, in which the American public has lost both connection to and authentic interest in the armed forces;⁴² and a crisis of meaningful civilian control, in which civilian political elites have varied in their interest in and ability to exert influence over the military while the armed forces have simultaneously worked to loosen reins imposed on it.⁴³ These three crises, Karlin argues, both emerged from and shaped the experience of the planning and conduct of operations during the post-9/11 wars; the resourcing of the Department of Defense and what it in turn prioritized in budgets; and the number and diversity of people who joined, remained in, led, and left the military. They also define America's questionable current preparedness for the wars that it thinks it might fight in the future, as well as those that may arise unexpectedly. The story told throughout the book is rich in detail — with keen insights often extracted from the interviews and supplemented with incisive commentary from irreverent sources like *Duffel Blog*⁴⁴ and *Doctrine Man*⁴⁵ — and largely depressing. The inheritance Karlin describes is not an attractive one.

⁴¹ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 23–27.

⁴² Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 38–48.

⁴³ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 49–80.

⁴⁴ Duffel Blog, <https://www.duffelblog.com/>.

⁴⁵ Doctrine Man, @Doctrine_Man, https://x.com/Doctrine_Man.

The question that naturally arises from the discussion throughout the book is: What is to be done? Perhaps unsurprisingly, given Karlin's insistence that she is offering a story rather than a theory, her solution — or maybe the first step on the road to recovery — is dialogue: dialogue within the military, dialogue between the armed forces and the civilians empowered to direct them, and dialogue between the warriors and the society that they are tasked with defending. Improved communication, including official correspondence and increased sharing of stories between a variety of actors involved or invested in the national security project, can help the military better understand its purpose and role, help the American public relate to and meaningfully engage with the armed forces, and help firm up mechanisms ensuring civilian control over the military.

The Value of Storytelling

For me, the story motif running throughout the book is compelling. Stories are powerful pedagogical tools that help us understand the nature of problems we confront and imagine pathways toward solutions.⁴⁶ At the same time, by taking seriously the notions of the book as a story and stories as an essential part of repairing the damage done to the military during the post-9/11 wars, questions arose in my mind as I read. Specifically, three interrelated issues seem pertinent: the degree to which this book is “just” a story, the audience for whom this story is being told, and the end to which this story is intended. The points are difficult to tease apart, but it is worth attempting to do so in the remainder of this essay.

⁴⁶ Indeed, I frequently use fiction for these purposes in classes with my graduate-level students, many of whom are veterans and most of whom aspire to some form of public service after they complete their program of study in the policy school in which I teach.

Turning first to the nature of the book, a story is almost never simply a story. Some tales are indeed meant merely to entertain, but, as no less an authority than J. R. R. Tolkien noted, even fairy tales — perhaps the style of story that one would least associate with broader purpose — inherently force readers and listeners to compare their own world with the often more rationalized, rule-bound fantasy realm; provide a means of escape; and very frequently invoke what Tolkien called “eucatastrophe” to provide moral consolation and instruction.⁴⁷ The rationalized world of stories and their message depend on an underlying theory of appropriateness, and this kind of implicit model of the world is present in Karlin’s book. Specifically, her depiction of the deterioration of the American military as an effective warfighting institution and in its relationship with civilians of all sorts underscores the persistent failure of communication. The myriad issues highlighted throughout the book all turn on the failure of one or more parties to communicate honestly, clearly, and effectively. These include the inability of the military and political elites to collectively agree on a theory of victory, resulting in the military defining for itself an alternative standard focused on operational or tactical success, protection of personnel, and bureaucratically defined metrics of progress;⁴⁸ the varied meanings — sometimes bordering on meaninglessness — of “Thank You for Your Service”;⁴⁹ the perniciousness of “best military advice”;⁵⁰ the resistance to conducting and making available studies on lessons learned during the wars;⁵¹ and the tensions surrounding and flaws of President Barack Obama’s 2009 review of American strategy in and around Afghanistan.⁵² There may be intervening variables in the causal chain between failed

⁴⁷ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 33–99.

⁴⁸ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 30–36.

⁴⁹ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 43–44.

⁵⁰ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 70–73.

⁵¹ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 16–18, 117.

⁵² Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 204–5.

communication and the current state of the U.S. military and civil-military relationship — including lack of trust, political and bureaucratic inertia, apathy, and many other problems — but, in Karlin’s telling, there is a line to be drawn connecting the two.

If we accept that *The Inheritance* is more than just a story and has an implicit theory of American military and civil-military malaise, then the question becomes: How useful is the theoretical tale being told? Using Tolkien’s first point about stories, it is somewhat difficult to identify the ideal, rationalized world of communication within the U.S. military and among the armed forces, politicians, and society more generally that should be used as a point of comparison for the current, real-world state of affairs. There are some hints. Karlin, for example, notes three goals for any dialogue that might help correct the flaws bound up in the inheritance: 1) help participants in the post-9/11 wars process what happened and their role in events; 2) assist in establishing baselines against which progress (or regress) in ongoing wars may be measured; and 3) facilitate an understanding of how the post-9/11 wars have shaped and perhaps warped American conceptions of warfare, with respect to both ongoing conflicts and expectations regarding future wars.⁵³ These are certainly laudable goals, but it is not obvious that any of them are in fact attainable. Beginning with the rage of Achilles and continuing to the present day, there is good evidence that processing the trauma of war — no matter one’s role in a conflict or whether it is a “good war” — is exceptionally difficult and not possible for everyone.⁵⁴ Wide arrays of metrics with varying degrees of plausibility have been devised to baseline martial performance.⁵⁵ Interrogating the origins of assumptions and their

⁵³ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 217–18.

⁵⁴ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare* (New York: Basic Books, 2000); Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁵⁵ Scott Sigmund Gartner, *Strategic Assessment in War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).

suitability as a basis for guiding future action is inherently a gamble. It is thus perhaps unfair to use this likely unachievable standard as a basis for comparison for the current American military and civil-military relationship.

It is not obvious, though, what a more appropriate standard might be. Even looking to American history, there seems to be no golden age to hold up as an archetype. Karlin herself notes that the United States has historically struggled to cope with the kinds of problems she details in the book, from the Civil War to the current day.⁵⁶ Even if we consider the 1990s, in the wake of both the collapse of the Soviet Union and the shockingly successful campaign to eject Iraq's forces from Kuwait, civil-military relations scholars fretted over a growing "civil-military gap" and even imagined a world in which continued discontent and disillusion in the military, paired with its increasing separation from American society, could make a military coup possible.⁵⁷ To assess the utility of theory underlying the story — indeed, to fully appreciate the severity of the problems Karlin details in the book — some standard by which it would be possible to say that sufficient progress has been made is necessary.

Who Is the Audience?

The second question motivated by Karlin's story framing is who, precisely, constitutes the audience. Karlin suggests that civilian elites — in the executive and legislative

⁵⁶ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 7–13.

⁵⁷ Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001); Charles Dunlap, "The Origins of the American Military Coup of 2012," *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters* 22, no. 1 (July 1992), <https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723-1623>.

branches — are the primary audience, as it is they who must drive the dialogue she sees as the path toward improvement.⁵⁸ Civilians throughout American society are also a primary audience: Karlin’s thoughts on and recommendation of connective programs like Theater of War, which uses ancient Greek tragedies to ground and inspire conversations between civilians and military personnel, are creative and intriguing.⁵⁹ And, of course, the military itself is an audience: Introspection is necessary for processing the experience of the post-9/11 wars and understanding how the past two decades of operations have shaped expectations for the future of war.

Curiously absent, though, are foreign audiences.⁶⁰ Even if the military and the United States more generally can adopt the recommended correctives, any resolution of the problems Karlin identified will take considerable time. Yet, war does not happen on America’s timeline, and many of the most likely conflicts in the near to medium term will necessitate that U.S. forces fight alongside military units fielded by other states. Cooperation under fire requires all partners to understand the strengths, weaknesses, and foibles of those alongside whom they are fighting. To that end, as distressing as the disfunction reported in the book may be to American audiences, it is likely to be equally, if not more, so for foreign militaries that anticipate working with the United States in the coming years. Is there reason to think that the three crises Karlin compellingly argues are plaguing the U.S. military and its relationship with civilian political elites and the broader society will have systematic effects on, and perhaps preclude, effective battlefield

⁵⁸ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 218.

⁵⁹ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 220–21.

⁶⁰ Karlin, seeking analytical tractability, sensibly excludes from her analysis “the international repercussions of [the post-9/11] wars.” The point here is not to challenge that decision, but rather to highlight that the implications of the domestic repercussions of the post-9/11 wars reverberate beyond the borders of the United States. Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 6.

cooperation with partners? What lessons can America's allies and partners learn from this story that, if there is not meaningful change in the direction Karlin hopes for the foreseeable future, they might apply in their own efforts to ensure combined efforts do not fail? Is there a role for allies and partners to play in helping spark and encourage the dialogue that may assist the United States in regaining its footing? Perhaps more troubling, are there lessons that America's adversaries can learn from this story that might help them gain an advantage in a future conflict if the United States does not resolve the three crises Karlin details? If so, the urgency of pivoting away from the inheritance of the post-9/11 wars is even greater than she suggests.

The Story's Purpose

This final point feeds into my third question arising from the emphasis on the story nature of the book. What is the end sought by the telling of this story? Aesop's fables were intended to impart moral and ethics lessons, and William Shakespeare used his plays to interrogate some of the most complex human relationships and emotions. What is the equivalent here? Karlin expresses an interest in understanding the sources of, and ideally bolstering, American military power, arguing that "if the U.S. military seeks victory in the future, it must acknowledge and reconcile [the inheritance of the post-9/11 wars]. It must recognize the positive and negative baggage it takes on its pivot toward the next wars."⁶¹ If we take increased U.S. military power, understood as future victory and facilitated by reconciliation, as the story's purpose, there remains some ambiguity about how to get there. The depths of the crises laid out in the book suggest that reconciliation will require much more than mere recognition of the positive and negative baggage accumulated during the post-9/11 wars. Improved understanding will not, at least in the

⁶¹ Karlin, *The Inheritance*, 3.

short term, fix dysfunctional political, bureaucratic, and social dynamics that plague budgeting, recruiting, planning, acquisition, and other processes required to make the national security enterprise work. Dialogue is undoubtedly a step toward the broader reconciliation required for future victory, but it is only that — a step.

At this point in her argument, Karlin’s lack of clarity regarding both the theory underlying the story and her intended audience returns to complicate matters. What indicators might determine whether the U.S. military has made sufficient progress in reconciling the inheritance of the post-9/11 wars? If dialogue alone cannot get the U.S. military to that point — and it is almost certain that it cannot, given the institutional changes required — how can we assess the gap that remains between where the military is and where it needs to go? What additional steps do military and civilian leaders need to take? As queried above, can foreign partners or adversaries play a role in the process of reconciliation, either through the offer of friendly assistance or by posing a sufficient threat that spurs efforts to resolve the problems fostered and exposed by the past two decades of war? Karlin’s articulated end — improved U.S. military power — is sensible, but the pathway suggested by the story — improved dialogue — seems insufficient.

Concluding Thoughts

Some readers might see my consideration of Karlin’s *The Inheritance* as a story as a denigration of the work: Social scientists and others often devalue work that they see as “merely” descriptive.⁶² Nothing could be further from the truth. Developing theory and, more relevant here, effective policy requires a firm understanding of facts as they are: It

⁶² Carolyn E. Holmes et al., “A Case for Description,” *PS: Political Science & Politics* 57, no. 1 (January 2024): 51-56, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000720>.

requires truly excellent descriptive work. *The Inheritance* is exceptionally useful in that regard. The story told is compelling and disconcerting. While it is not entirely clear just how disconcerted scholars, policymakers, military officers, and the general public should be, as it is impossible to tell just how far from ideal the current situation is, Karlin provides more than enough reason to believe that something is wrong. Similarly, her solution — improved dialogue — makes sense, though the path from that change to the larger reconciliation of the legacies of the post-9/11 wars remains somewhat murky. As first steps go, however, facilitating more and better conversation within the military and between the armed forces, political elites, and the American public writ large is a sound one.

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