

# Shaping National Security Decisions: An Insider's View of *The Insiders' Game*

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## Elizabeth Saunders's *The Insiders' Game* offers a rich perspective regarding how legislators, military leaders, and high-ranking civilian officials shape national security decision-making.

Elizabeth Saunders's recent book, *The Insiders' Game*, offers a positive contribution to the literature on war-making. By exploring the role of democratic elites in shaping major decisions regarding war and peace—including the approach, the parameters, and the length of a conflict—Saunders underscores that more people are at the decision-making table than readers may have previously considered. She focuses on three groups—legislators, military leaders, and high-ranking civilian officials—and the book is particularly useful in outlining how and in what ways these cohorts shape decision-making by imposing resource or informational costs on leaders. Although Saunders's book provides a broad and rich view of multiple cases, her book is particularly illuminating in how it treats these dynamics during the formation of US policy toward Lebanon in the 1980s, and in comparing different administrations' approaches to strategy during America's post-9/11 wars.<sup>1</sup>

### How Insiders Shaped a Fuzzy Mission in Lebanon

The calamitous national security decision-making that characterized President Ronald Reagan's approach to Lebanon in 1982–84 has been well recounted. Saunders's book provides clarity about the impact of this dysfunctional process; as she compellingly argues, the elite debates in Reagan's administration ultimately constrained the US mission in Lebanon.

Lebanon's political and security scene during this period was convoluted, given the myriad actors involved in the internecine civil war that had been raging for seven years by the time Reagan sent US troops. The complex dynamics of the conflict were further exacerbated by repeated Israeli invasions and the interventions of other regional actors, including Syria and Iran. "Some days, we had no idea who was fighting who," one former senior Lebanese government official explained to me during field research I conducted in Lebanon.<sup>2</sup> Reagan's Middle East envoy, Philip Habib, felt similarly. He cabled

back to Washington his attempt to summarize the fighting as follows: "It may be typical of the complex Lebanese problem that as many as five factions may be involved in this gunfire: the Lebanese army, the Syrian army, the Murabitun, the Palestinian Liberation army, along with a Shi'a faction and an Iraqi-supported group."<sup>3</sup>

Saunders's exploration would therefore have benefited from a bit more background on the war, as the confusing environment inside Lebanon added to the Reagan administration's confused approach. American officials assumed that the US contingent of the Multinational Force would be deployed for a few weeks—far less than the nearly two years that became their reality. And the Marines' mission, which began as fuzzy, only became more distorted as it continued.

As Saunders also shows, however, confusion about the US Marines' role in Lebanon stemmed from Reagan himself. Reagan told Congress that "the intervention would be brief and succeed in its limited aims."<sup>4</sup> Reagan's decision-making process, however, compounded the administration's turmoil—the president was unwilling to clearly adjudicate differences of opinion among his senior leadership team. Some advisors from the State Department, the CIA, and the White House wanted the US military directly involved in supporting one side in Lebanon's war, whereas the Department of Defense opposed direct involvement and preferred an indirect role that prioritized American efforts to train, equip, and advise the Lebanese Armed Forces. These dynamics were worsened by perturbation within and between US government departments and agencies, information hoarding across the interagency, power imbalances due to special envoys, routine efforts to bypass chains of command, and a limited and ad hoc interagency decision-making process.<sup>5</sup>

As the administration debated what the Marines would actually *do* in Lebanon, Reagan failed to clarify the parameters of the US military's role. The president may have thought he knew why US Marines were in Lebanon—to strengthen the Lebanese government's sovereignty and enable foreign militaries to withdraw—but he couldn't articulate

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

2 Mara E. Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States: Challenges for the United States* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 110.

3 Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 110.

4 Elizabeth N. Saunders, *The Insiders' Game: How Elites Make War and Peace* (Princeton University Press, 2024), 191.

5 Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, chapter 2.

it clearly and persuasively.<sup>6</sup> “The people just don’t know why we’re there,” he wrote in his diary.<sup>7</sup> Reagan was accurately reading public opinion; Saunders cites a September 1983 survey that reveals similar sentiments among the American public about the US approach.<sup>8</sup>

As a fuzzy mission grew fuzzier and US rules of engagement shifted, different actors on the ground began to see the United States, understandably, as choosing sides. In fall 1983, the US military began using naval power in support of the Lebanese government, including by firing on positions held by the Syrian military and Druze militia. Reagan, however, did not see this change in the US military’s posture to be meaningful; after the first time that the United States used naval gunfire in support of the Lebanese Armed Forces, he wrote in his diary, “This still comes under the head of defense.”<sup>9</sup> That was not, of course, the perception on the ground—Reagan failed to recognize that allegedly neutral American peacekeepers were now using force on behalf of an antagonist, and had chosen a side. Within weeks, Hezbollah bombed the Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 241 US military personnel.

Eventually, Saunders finds that “elite pressure forced Reagan to choose some kind of definitive outcome, rather than settling for kicking the can further down the road.”<sup>10</sup> Choosing among thorny options for US policy in Lebanon was difficult for Reagan, but fundamental disagreements between his top advisors on using force to support the Lebanese government ultimately required him to calibrate US support. In particular, disputes between the White House and the State Department (which both hoped for deeper US involvement in Lebanon) and the Department of Defense (where civilian and military leaders remained skeptical) shaped the US approach. “Reagan was not able to push the mission as far as he, Shultz, and the NSC [National Security Council] preferred, in part because of the need to accommodate the preferences of Weinberger and the JCS [Joint Chiefs of Staff], as well as to avoid congressional scrutiny,” explains Saunders.<sup>11</sup> She highlights a striking vignette: Following the Marine

barracks bombing, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger apparently failed to carry out Reagan’s orders on expanding the rules of engagement for using force in response to the attack, a worrisome dynamic between civilian leaders.<sup>12</sup> Weinberger’s efforts to collaborate with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff John Vessey do not improve this picture, since neither supported following the president’s guidance.<sup>13</sup> Their unwillingness to support Reagan’s approach further illustrated the gap between Reagan’s senior advisors—a gap between elites that grew so large that Reagan could no longer avoid making a decision on the fundamental issue of US military presence in Lebanon. Saunders’s finding that elites were heavily influential in constraining “the conduct, scope, and duration of war” in the Reagan administration’s decision-making on Lebanon is far from a bad outcome.<sup>14</sup> Substantial elite involvement in shaping leadership decisions on the most critical issues of national security can be beneficial, as this case study shows, owing to the profound disagreement among Reagan’s senior advisors, which made it increasingly difficult for him to promulgate a confused policy. The Department of Defense leadership recognized that the US deployment was having a limited impact and saw the danger of a chaotic and unclear mission in a failing state. When Reagan pulled the Marines out of Lebanon in early 1984, Lebanon’s military melted away, and the state essentially disappeared. Muddling through and continuing along the slippery slope in Lebanon with more losses and few accomplishments would have been a poor decision indeed. In this case, the cautionary role played by Reagan’s military advisors helped American foreign policy cut its losses.

## Elite Influence Across America’s Post-9/11 Wars

Saunders’s book also considers how elites shaped decision-making at key junctures in the conduct of America’s post-9/11 wars. In one particularly compelling example, she outlines how President Barack

6 President Reagan approved a new policy toward Lebanon in October 1982. See Ronald Reagan, “Next Steps in Lebanon: National Security Decision Directive 64,” October 28, 1982, Federation of American Scientists, *Reagan Administration National Security Decision Directives*, <http://www.fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdd/>; Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 113.

7 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 203.

8 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 208.

9 Karlin, *Building Militaries in Fragile States*, 136.

10 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 201.

11 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 212.

12 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 211.

13 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 211.

14 Saunders, *The Insiders’ Game*, 184.

Obama reshaped the findings of an Afghanistan review in 2009 to ensure that the strategy had military support.<sup>15</sup> The president agreed to surge US troops to Afghanistan—for the second time in his presidency and with enthusiastic support from the Department of Defense—but simultaneously announced when those forces would withdraw. He did not pursue his own desired approach, and chose instead a middle ground between the counterinsurgency strategy preferred by the military and the counterterrorism approach preferred by Vice President Joe Biden, to ensure that the United States' strategy received the widespread backing of the American national security establishment that the president believed was necessary.

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The rigor of President Obama's national security decision-making approach on Afghanistan compares favorably to President Reagan's approach in Lebanon in terms of the conscious effort made to ensure broad support among key administration stakeholders. President Obama required his entire senior national security team to endorse the new strategy toward Afghanistan. "The president had all the key players read and agree to it in the final round of meetings, where he emphasized that everyone had to voice disagreement at that moment, after which their 'wholehearted support' would be expected," explains Saunders.<sup>16</sup> Given that the policy review process engendered substantial disagreements among Obama's senior advisors about which approach his administration should take, he clearly wanted to ensure that his senior advisors would focus on implementing his decision—regardless of whether they supported it. The relevant departments and agencies largely fell in line. Strategically, Obama

could then assess the impact of his policy decision rather than fight his team on the actual decision.

There is no evidence of a similar set of discussions on President George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq. Despite conventional wisdom that Secretary of State Colin Powell did not support the Iraq War, Saunders recounts a somewhat different interpretation of this history. When President Bush asked Powell for his endorsement of the decision to invade in January 2003, Powell responded affirmatively. Powell's voice was particularly crucial to Bush on this issue, by virtue of both his position and the public respect he held in the United States and globally. With Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld enthusiastically supporting a potential war against Iraq, and National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice playing a relatively restrained role, it fell to Powell to offer a cautionary perspective on the prospects of an invasion. Powell, however, had been rebuffed when he had attempted to raise these concerns six months earlier, and ultimately endorsed Bush's decision to invade.

This episode in Saunders's book offers a valuable corrective to the conventional wisdom, but also raises questions: How do elites assess their ability to inform key decisions under consideration by the president? And how does that assessment shift throughout their tenure, as different decisions either follow their advice or don't? For example, these questions might affect how we could use Saunders's framework to understand the role of outsider elites in shaping the Iraq surge decision in late 2006. How did elites at the American Enterprise Institute, for example, decide it would be useful to have Gen. (ret.) Jack Keane brief a report recommending this course of action?<sup>17</sup> Given the significance of that decision, and the broader pattern of think tank elites attempting to influence administration decisions, this example would be a compelling additional test of Saunders's framework.

Another strength of Saunders's book is that its assessment of the importance of elites in shaping America's post-9/11 wars is grounded in a sobering but well-supported claim that the American public plays much less of a role than observers might think. Saunders notes that elite opinion matters in a context in which the US public generally expresses broad but shallow support for the US military, in part due to a lack of knowledge about the military and its activities. Here, Saunders's evidence is telling—only 8 percent of those surveyed could correctly identify

15 Saunders, *The Insiders' Game*, 234.

16 Saunders, *The Insiders' Game*, 234–35.

17 Peter Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision," *International Security* 35, no. 34 (Spring 2011): 110–11.

how many combat troops the United States had in Iraq in 2012, a percentage that didn't rise much over a decade.<sup>18</sup> This gap between those who serve and the society they serve is a stark reminder of a dynamic that has characterized the United States throughout its post-9/11 wars.<sup>19</sup>

## Concluding Thoughts

*The Insiders' Game* convincingly analyzes the role that American elites play in shaping decision-making on national security affairs, arguing that elites play a much more significant role than is often appreciated. The book stands as a historical tour de force, grounded in serious and rigorous research, and contains insights that speak to patterns in American uses of force throughout history as well as the nature of democratic politics in foreign policy decision-making and implementation.

Future research might expand on where these crucially important elites get their information. Is it through personal experience? Visits to war zones? Reading think tank reports? Convening briefing roundtables with outside experts? How do these sources of information vary in the three constituencies that Saunders studies—presidential advisors, military officials, and legislators? And how does the

process of acquiring information change over time, particularly over the course of the time an official is in office? The intense, exhausting, and often overwhelming pace of elite decision-making in American national security policy can make it difficult to thoughtfully and deliberately take in information from a wide range of diverse sources—and yet at the very time when it is the very hardest to continue learning, leaders must try to find a way to do so, or risk serious strategic consequences.

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**Image:** Complete renovations of the White House Situation Room on August 16, 2023. Carlos Fyfe / The White House via AP.<sup>20</sup>

18 Saunders, *The Insiders' Game*, 80.

19 Karlin, *The Inheritance*, particularly "Chapter 3, The Military's Relationship to Society: The Crisis of Caring."

20 For image, see <https://dms.apnews.com/dims4/default/bc29b85/2147483647/strip/true/crop/3000x2000+0+0/resize/599x399/quality/90/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fassets.apnews.com%2Ffc%2F44%2F3dba0751c1872739d73e6854a938%2F232e7c19fa3c492f933d0a8377e0a355>.