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Andrew J. Polsky, *Elusive Victories: The American Presidency at War*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. vii, 445. ISBN 978-0-19-986093-7.

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Political scientist Andrew Polsky (Hunter College and CUNY Graduate Center) was moved to study US presidents at war by the George W. Bush administration's invasion of Iraq. "Bush demonstrated what my research identified as a fundamental characteristic of wartime presidential power: presidents begin conflicts with extraordinary freedom of action, only to see it dissipate quickly" (353). Polsky believes the "two presidency thesis" (that presidents address domestic and foreign policy separately) is false, because presidents do not have more leverage in foreign than in domestic affairs. The book has an avowed "distinctly conservative cast" (353); while liberals say presidents have too much power, Polsky's analysis "suggests ... that presidents have *too little power*, not too much" (352)—not due to lack of resources but lack of time and the need to rely on subordinates.

To defend this "too little power" thesis, Polsky presents secondary-source case studies of men who occupied the White House during wars they started, continued, or tried to end. These studies show that no outcome of a war has fulfilled a wartime president's aspirations. So be it. But do they show that more power might have been the difference in solving or avoiding any president's problems?

Political constraints aside, we must ask whether a president should have waged the war in question at all; whether achieving his goals justified war, given its costs; and whether failure to accomplish goals is regrettable only with respect to his legacy or his party's success at the polls, or *viz-à-viz* inherently worthy and important human values. Such queries remain on the periphery of Polsky's account. Unlike some professional political scientists, he does not limit his evaluation of presidential candidates to, say, electability, but he does generally avoid moral issues. For example, he says next to nothing about how a president's financial backers are "succeeding" during any given war, apart from the more political concerns of the White House occupant (see, however, 15-16, 161-62, 355-56, 392n66).

This shortcoming aside, the book is valuable in other respects. The classification and discussion of the problems each president faced and solved (or not) are pedagogically helpful and make fascinating reading. Before laying out the problems, Polsky first articulates some pertinent "puzzles" in need of solution: why are there no political restraints on presidents' exercise of power at the outset of hostilities? why do they struggle so to achieve the national objectives they have set forth? why do they have difficulty with non-military challenges, especially at war's end? why are their domestic agendas routinely undermined? and why do they lack strategic options once a war is underway (6-11)?

To deal with these puzzles, Polsky identifies six challenges each war president faced: first, to decide whether to go to war or accept it as inevitable; second, to lay the foundations for a successful war; third, to identify the nation's political objectives; fourth, to ensure that the military had a strategy to attain those objectives; fifth, to advance political goals diplomatically; and, sixth, to sustain domestic political support for the war (22-25).

The presidents Polsky assesses are Abraham Lincoln (Civil War), Woodrow Wilson (World War I), Franklin Roosevelt (World War II), Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon (Vietnam), and George W. Bush and Barack Obama (Iraq and Afghanistan). Lincoln scores highest for his performance on the first five challenges. Bush scores lowest on all counts. In between, most of the others get passing marks for challenges 1-5, subject to nuances for Johnson and Nixon and for Obama regarding the first. None dealt particularly well with the sixth. Polsky bases these evaluations on the judgments of historians or (regarding Bush and Obama) journalists and political insiders. With an asterisk after insider information, he seeks to be objective by political science standards. Yet he fails to mention the constraints that derive from obligations to

funding sources. Nor does he specify the sort of mental acumen, fund of knowledge, and moral character a commander in chief should possess. This silence is problematic, for four reasons.

First, none of the evaluated presidents had any military training or experience (unless Bush gets points for his nominal Reserve service); nor did they all have qualified military advisers. Second, Lincoln and his successors had to adapt to the use of new, ever more destructive military technology of which they had no great understanding. (In this regard, Obama is almost a caricature, skeet shooting at Camp David while expanding his remote-controlled drone attacks.) Third, although some presidents had considerable military experience during the period Polsky covers—namely, Ulysses S. Grant, Theodore Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and, to a lesser extent, John Kennedy, the only one with military experience that Polsky considers is Jefferson Davis of the CSA (55–60). Some examination of these crossover individuals might have furnished a kind of control group to ensure some degree of scientific objectivity,<sup>1</sup> since (fourth), the target presidents all had political motives for seeking and holding on to the White House and hoped their war would further those objectives. So, as Polsky indicates, whatever they did or did not do regarding wars waged on their watch, they always took into account what they and their advisers felt to be politically, including electorally, advantageous.

Polsky has clarified this prioritizing of the political over the military in comments since the publication of his book: “As a political leader ... a president needs to balance the wishes of his military subordinates against his larger political objectives. He has to weigh future casualties against the prospect that the losses would produce a better political outcome.... Barack Obama ... has demonstrated ... his grasp of one vital principle. Military strategy and operations must serve a political goal.”<sup>2</sup> There is, in other words, “a recurring logic to presidential leadership ... grounded in the vitality of a dominant partisan political order and a president’s relation to that order.”<sup>3</sup> Political scientist Stephen Skowronek has analyzed this process in *The Politics Presidents Make*,<sup>4</sup> a book Polsky cites (370n20, 372n46) and says “has long shaped mine.”<sup>5</sup>

Besides Skowronek, however, Polsky relies mostly on historians and journalists.<sup>6</sup> Though he rarely addresses the question of source credibility, he does, however, note that scholars disagree about Johnson’s comfort level in the area of foreign policy (402n18), and writes of the Iraq War that “Because few documents ... have been declassified to date, analysts have relied heavily on several fine works by journalists as well as a number of memoirs by former members of the Bush administration. Both should be regarded with caution. Many insiders who speak to reporters seek favorable treatment in their books, while memoirs often have a self-exculpatory purpose, especially when the authors have become the target of criticism” (413n1).

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1. He toys with the idea of such a comparison in “A Conversation with Andrew Polsky, Author of *Elusive Victories*, Part II,” *Lawyers, Guns, and Money* (18 Sep 2012) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1311.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1311.htm).

2. “Obama v. Romney on Afghanistan Strategy,” *OUPblog* (23 May 2012) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1312.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1312.htm).

3. “A Conversation ...” (note 1 above), Part I (10 Aug 2012) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1313.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1313.htm).

4. Subtitle: *Leadership from John Adams to Bill Clinton* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1997).

5. Note 3 above.

6. These include, for Lincoln: James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1988); also, for Jefferson Davis: William J. Cooper Jr., *Jefferson Davis, American* (NY: Knopf, 2000).

For Wilson: Kendrick A. Clements, *The Presidency of Woodrow Wilson* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 1992), John Patrick Finnegan, *Against the Specter of a Dragon* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1974), David F. Trask, “The American Presidency, National Security, and Intervention from McKinley to Wilson, 1789–1889,” in Richard H. Kohn, ed., *The United States Military under the Constitution of the United States, 1789–1989* (NY: NYU Pr, 1991) 290–316, and Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919* (NY: Random House, 2002).

For Roosevelt: Donald Cameron Watt, *How War Came* (NY: Pantheon, 1989), Jonathan C. Utley, *Going to War with Japan, 1937–1941* (1985; rpt. NY: Fordham U Pr, 2005), Warren F. Kimball, *Forged in War* (NY: Morrow, 1997), Eric Larrabee, *Commander in Chief* (1987; rpt. Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2004), David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1999), and Andrew Roberts, *Masters and Commanders* (NY: Harper, 2009).

For Johnson and Nixon: Gary R. Hess, *Presidential Decisions for War*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 2009), Larry Ber- man, *Lyndon Johnson’s War* (NY: Norton, 1989) and *No Peace, No Honor* (NY: Free Press, 2001), and James S. Robbins, *This Time We Win* (NY: Encounter Books, 2010).

For Bush: Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II* (NY: Pantheon, 2006), Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco* (NY: Penguin, 2006) and *The Gamble* (NY: Penguin, 2009), Gideon Rose, *How Wars End* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010), Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2002), *State of Denial* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2006), and *The War Within* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2008).

For Obama: Bob Woodward, *Obama’s Wars* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

This cautionary note fades to naught when Polsky can bolster his points with documentary evidence. But information, especially when political in nature, obtained from a source with vested interests, however highly placed, does not necessarily merit unquestioning belief. This is less true, however, when the pertinent documents were not meant for public consumption (thank you, Freedom of Information Act), as shown by Polsky's account of how Roosevelt maneuvered the United States into World War II. He writes that FDR wanted to enter the war against Germany rather than Japan and, though Pearl Harbor required a focus on the latter, Hitler quickly resolved his need to prioritize the Pacific by declaring war against the United States (133-49). This may not be a fairy tale, but it is startlingly oblivious of documents showing that Roosevelt knew well in advance precisely what the Japanese were planning and in effect facilitated their "ignominy."<sup>7</sup>

Without implying that everything else in the book is beyond controversy, I will now summarize some of Polsky's assessments of presidential abilities in time of war. Lincoln and Roosevelt came closest to meeting all the specified challenges (200). The others all fell short because of "the impossibility of the challenges" (340). Lincoln tolerated horrendous casualties, initiated expanded emergency powers and executive privilege, and planned inadequately for the postwar, post-emancipation nation. Wilson sought the unattainable, a world made "safe for democracy," while undermining civil liberties in its pursuit; he was thwarted by unpersuaded allies abroad and hostile politicians at home. But, on the credit side of the ledger, he did manage to stagger US participation in World War I to allow time to train the troops properly. Johnson, Nixon, and, to some extent, Obama made poor decisions regarding wars not primarily of their making. "Bush mismanaged nearly all of the tasks a wartime president faces" (323), for example, by delegating authority in occupied Iraq to the utterly unqualified Paul "Jerry" Bremer (298-303) and his incompetent "Coalitional Provisional Authority" staff.

Lincoln and Roosevelt were the best at changing military leadership as circumstances dictated. For example, except for Robert E. Lee, few of Jefferson Davis's generals were reliable. Once he had chosen Gen. John J. Pershing, Wilson relied on him without hesitation, as did Nixon and Henry Kissinger (less reasonably) on Alexander Haig, and Bush (still less reasonably) on Donald Rumsfeld. (The book was published before scandals involving top military personnel in the Obama administration became public.) Roosevelt, convinced of the importance of warplanes and ships, including aircraft carriers, for military success, ramped up US production accordingly. Johnson stuck with Gen. William Westmoreland long after his insistence on "search-and-destroy" missions (as opposed to winning hearts and minds) had proved misguided.

In military strategy, each president was an activist at least on occasion, some (Lincoln and now Obama with his drones) more than others. Davis failed to adopt and capitalize on the tactics of asymmetric warfare. Roosevelt was consistently involved in strategic planning (195) and adroitly reconciled the quest for unconditional German surrender with Stalin's desire for a second front in Europe and Churchill's fixation on regaining or preserving British colonial interests in the Mediterranean and elsewhere (172-76, 194). He also acquiesced in the rapacious land-grabbing by the Soviets and others, but laid the groundwork for permanent peace via the United Nations and new financial institutions (181-88).

None of the target presidents consistently maintained popular support for war. Lincoln, Wilson, Roosevelt, and (reluctantly) Johnson implemented conscription; Bush and Obama did not. Bush accepted Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's vacuous claim that large numbers of troops were unneeded for America's hypermodern, efficient war machine, then resorted to multiple redeployments to sustain personnel levels.

All of Polsky's chosen presidents controlled the media to some degree, suppressing negative assessments of their war-making. Bush used "cooked" intelligence and the nation's desire to avenge 9/11 to make his case, while curtailing civil liberties through the USA Patriot Act and the newly established Department of Homeland Security. Intense political pressure undermined Roosevelt's New Deal during the war (160-68). Johnson scaled back many of his policies in order to salvage his Great Society, but could not overcome antiwar protests and looming electoral challenges (235-47). Nixon tried expanded excursions and bombing

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7. See Robert Stinnett, *Day of Deceit: The Truth about FDR and Pearl Harbor* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000); also Justin Raimondo, "Pearl Harbor: Roosevelt Knew," *Antiwar.com* (7 Dec 2012) - [www.miwsr.com/rd/1314.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1314.htm).

missions to demonstrate US prowess to the North Vietnamese, who knew time was on their side and negotiated accordingly.

Polsky has written an engaging and perceptive book. But is it good political science? This is a hard question to answer, given the extreme specialization of work in this academic discipline. A broader issue is the indifference of the social sciences as a whole to the study of war.<sup>8</sup> Since wars often reflect (explicit or implicit) political objectives, Polsky correctly warns us that future presidents pursuing non-military solutions to international problems will face a structural problem: “Wars are instruments of national policy with political objectives, and some of those goals can be achieved by other means ranging from diplomacy to economic sanctions.... [T]he cost—human, economic, and political—will likely be far less than war.... [But absent] more effective non-military tools to influence foreign policy outcomes ..., the disproportionate allocation of resources toward the military encourages presidents to opt for military solutions” (355–56). In other words, the critical policy priorities that American presidents should espouse are often frustrated by the institutional imperatives of their office.

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8. For a seminal discussion of this subject, see Hans Jonas and Wolfgang Knöbl, *War in Social Thought: Hobbes to the Present*, trans. Alex Skinner (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2013 [German ed. 2008]). For a good economic, rather than political, approach to the study of war, see, e.g., Hugh Rockoff, *America’s Economic Way of War: War and the US Economy from the Spanish-American War to the Persian Gulf War* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2012).