Introduction

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Understanding the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demands that we confront the complexity of their origins, their prosecution, and their legacies—and the ongoing uncertainty about their outcomes. It also depends, to an extent often underappreciated, on recapturing the sense of shock, of fear, and of powerful resolve that gripped the nation in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. That’s not to suggest that histories of these wars should begin with that date; this volume clearly argues otherwise. Nor is it to suggest that the events of 9/11 were the sole cause of these wars, or that the decisions to go to war in Afghanistan and then Iraq were the only, or even the most logical, possible reactions to those attacks. The authors of this volume, in the main, make other claims. Nonetheless, the profound shock of 9/11 shaped America’s course to war; the emotions unleashed by those attacks made possible actions that might otherwise never have been taken—or that would, at least, have provoked longer and more difficult debate. The attack on the U.S. “homeland” changed the political dynamic of America’s foreign relations.

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The first plane slammed into the World Trade Center at 8:46 on a sunny Tuesday morning. It took scarcely more than three minutes before CNN was airing live footage of what anchor Carol Lin called “clearly something relatively devastating happening there this morning on the south end of the island of Manhattan.”

It’s surprising, in retrospect, how willing people were to believe it an accident, how long it took for the word “terrorism” to be used. As reporters scrambled for information, more than one news anchor told listeners that this wasn’t the first time a plane had crashed into a building in Manhattan: an army bomber, flying in dense fog, had collided with the Empire State Building in 1945. On Fox news, shortly before 9:03, when a second plane flew directly into the Trade Center’s south tower, anchor John Scott asked a former investigator with the National Transportation Safety Board if he could “think of any reason
for a pilot to slam into a building of this height on a day like today if it wasn’t intentional.” The investigator offered a long list of possibilities: the pilot might have had “difficulty”; he “might have had engine failure”; he “might have been with his head down in the cockpit instead of looking where he was going”; he might have been flying into the sun; he “could have been confused.” Even after the second plane struck, CNN was airing speculation that something might have gone wrong with the U.S. flight navigation system. On MSNBC, soon after the second collision, anchor Glen Walker noted that the World Trade Center had been “the subject of terrorist attacks in the past.” “I would hate to speculate,” he said, repeatedly, but “that possibility leaps to mind.”

But confusion soon gave way to certainty that the United States was under attack. At 9:29 a.m., in comments lasting less than a minute, President George W. Bush spoke with resolve: “Terrorism against our nation will not stand.” Eight minutes later a third hijacked jetliner hit the Pentagon. By this time, people all over the world were watching the cascading horror. The south tower of the World Trade Center collapsed just before ten; the north fell half an hour later. There were reports of a commercial aircraft driven into the ground in rural Pennsylvania, and speculation about where it had been headed. Images from that day are burned into the memories of those who, at home, at their workplace, wherever they were, watched on television: the planes striking the towers, again and again, in constant replay; firefighters and police confronting a task beyond any capacity; human beings plummeting more than a thousand feet to earth; the towers collapsing in clouds of dust and debris; the faces of those fleeing the encroaching cloud; the survivors, blank-faced and shrouded white in dust.

Only the World Trade Center and the Pentagon bore the physical brunt of attack, but the nation as a whole felt its impact. No one knew, then, that al Qaeda’s plans had run their course before noon fell that Tuesday; Americans remained braced for what might come next. Skyscrapers were evacuated in cities around the nation, as were Disney’s theme parks and Minnesota’s enormous Mall of America. Parents, in scenes of chaos, pulled children from school in Atlanta and in Austin and in Albuquerque; they kept them home in Anchorage, where most people had woken up to a world already changed.

On the day after, in its September 12 edition, the New York Times noted that “the sense of security and self-confidence that Americans take as their birthright suffered a grievous blow, from which recovery will be slow.” There was a powerful sense at the time that September 11 marked a bright line, a division between before and after, a day following which nothing would ever be the same. It is difficult, now, to summon the aching emptiness of America’s airports in the months that followed, to imagine the deserted malls and
sports stadiums and tourist sites, to recapture the anxiety that newly suffused daily life—or, sadly, the spontaneous outpouring of sympathy from people throughout the world.

In the days and months that followed the attacks, key senior members of the Bush administration struggled with the sense that they'd failed to protect the nation, that they had allowed (in Secretary of Defense Robert Gates’s words) “a devastating attack on America” to “take place on their watch.”5 In fact, the president had received a series of briefings from the U.S. Intelligence Community about the imminence of a terrorist attack, beginning in the spring of 2001 and culminating with the August 6 Presidential Daily Brief bearing the heading “Bin Laden Determined to Strike in the U.S.”6 Shaken by the attacks—and not at all certain they were the last—the administration was willing to take virtually any action to protect the nation from further terrorist strikes. Those responsible for national security made 9/11 their touchstone and their ultimate justification, fully resolved to overcome (again in the words of Secretary Gates) “any obstacle—legal, bureaucratic, financial, or international” to the urgency of their mission.7

The catastrophic attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon called forth compassion and generosity from the American people: long lines formed at local Red Cross blood donation centers throughout the nation, and in the days immediately following the attacks Americans donated $2.2 billion to assist victims and their families.8 But Americans also responded with fear, much of it irrational and incapacitating. People across the nation—including those in outlying suburbs and in the small towns of rural America—worried not only about the security of the nation, but also about their own safety from terrorist attack. In this climate of fear, promises of safety and of security moved the electorate and fostered public support for extraordinary actions.

And, finally, there was a growing resolve to respond, as a nation, to the attacks on U.S. soil. On September 20, President Bush told the nation and the listening world, “Tonight, we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.” Then he issued a list of nonnegotiable demands to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, from where Osama bin Laden had coordinated the attacks. First and foremost was delivery to the United States of “all the leaders of al Qaeda that hide in your land.” Two weeks later, on October 7, the United States (along with its ally, the United Kingdom) began combat operations in Afghanistan.9 Bush’s popularity surged to 92 percent, the highest presidential approval rating ever recorded. America, seared by the events of 9/11, was at war.
The U.S. response to the attacks of September 11, 2001, both immediately and over the subsequent years, revived fundamental questions about America and its global posture that stretch back to its emergence as a great power after World War I and intensified during the Cold War. America’s response likewise generated new questions that already have caused historians and others among the informed public to reconsider and may force many of them to revise the prevailing narrative of the twentieth century. That history centers on rivalries between great powers, two world wars, and, most prominently, a Cold War that lasted almost fifty years. These new questions will almost certainly also frame domestic and international politics for most if not all of the twenty-first century. To no one’s surprise, therefore, debates about the drivers, efficacy, and consequences of the response to 9/11 are heated, and achieving a consensus remains elusive.

These questions could not be more fundamental to understanding and assessing both U.S. international relations and American identity and self-image. They begin by raising conflicting explanations for America’s behavior: Does or should the United States act because of its ideals, values, and perceived mission either to police the globe or to reform and even remake nations large and small to conform to U.S. ideals and values? Or does or should the United States seek to promote and protect its national interests, whether one defines those interests as security, prosperity, or, more generally, the American way of life? These broad questions do not lend themselves readily to either/or answers. Indeed, Woodrow Wilson suggested that the answer is “and” when he spoke about making the world safe for democracy as the justification of America’s entry into World War I. Once the United States did become involved in the war, Wilson went a step further by formulating a program for peace that synthesized American ideals and self-interest. These Fourteen Points highlighted self-determination, the liberal exchange of goods and ideas, and, most important, a league of nations based on shared interests and a universal respect for international law. If the global community followed his prescriptions, Wilson proclaimed, the product would be worldwide peace and prosperity, ensuring that World War I indeed ended all wars.

Americans debated the merits of this Wilsonian ideal for the remainder of the twentieth century. As that century gave way to the next, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provoked an equally fundamental question that likewise had defied resolution since America’s founding—but especially in the years following World War II, as the United States accepted the roles and responsibilities of a world power. Historically the nation identified its vital interests, those
interests for which it was prepared to fight, as located in the Western Hemisphere and in Europe. The Cold War erupted over a divided Europe, and the United States first signaled its rejection of George Washington’s “Great Rule” prohibiting “entangling alliances” by agreeing to collective security agreements with the nations of Latin America (the Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance, or Rio Pact) in 1947 and to the North Atlantic Treaty establishing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. Yet for reasons that ranged from geopolitical (preventing dominoes from falling) to psychological (protecting America’s reputation and credibility) to ideological (combating the spread of communism on the one hand and promoting the spread of republicanism on the other), in the latter half of the twentieth century the United States fought wars not where its historic core interests lie but on the periphery—in Korea, in Vietnam, and, in the century’s last decade, in Iraq (the First Gulf War in 1991). While many Americans supported these wars, others found them incomprehensible and often objectionable. These critics, who spanned the political spectrum, referred to them pejoratively as ill-advised crusades or, worse, imperialist adventures.

Because these debates about America’s proper role in the world carried over to the twenty-first century, their legacies complicate our understandings of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars. The consensus within and beyond the United States was that al Qaeda’s attack on New York and Washington, D.C., egregiously violated international norms as well as international laws. People around the world overwhelmingly sympathized with the United States; 9/11 became synonymous with Pearl Harbor as a day of infamy. Yet the tragedy of 9/11 also raised new questions that collided with the many unanswered ones from the past. After all, unlike the situation in 1941, the enemy, the offending power (loosely defined), was not a state. Al Qaeda had no territory to invade, no military to confront, and no government against which to declare war and ultimately compel to surrender. The rules of engagement by which Americans conduct wars, and for that matter the international laws and treaties that govern how all nations are supposed to conduct wars (and treat prisoners of those wars), did not unambiguously apply.

Yet Americans demanded retaliation against the attack, and President George W. Bush was eager to accommodate them. But how, where, and to what end? President Franklin Roosevelt’s decision after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 was a relatively simple one (as if these kinds of decisions are ever simple). He declared war on the aggressor and launched a military effort to force Tokyo’s surrender. The fact that Japan’s ally, Germany, declared war on the United States allowed Roosevelt to avoid a potential political and strategic nightmare. After September 11, 2001, President Bush faced a more
complicated set of decisions. The aggressor lacked not only a government and a capital city, but also territory and infrastructure. It was more diffuse. Instead of allies it had affiliates.

President Bush finessed this issue by articulating the first Bush Doctrine. “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them,” he proclaimed to the nation the evening of September 11, 2001, in his first public address following the attacks. Al Qaeda was based in Afghanistan, so the United States deployed first paramilitary and then military forces to that country. But he declared war not on Afghanistan but on terror, a global war on terror. “Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there,” the president told a joint session of Congress on September 20. “It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated.”

What it meant to wage war against a tactic and an emotion was obscure to citizens of the United States and of nations around the world. The Bush administration never sought to provide a precise definition, but the manifestations of such thinking rapidly became evident. Even as the ousted Taliban foot soldiers (many of whom, ironically, were former mujahideen, the Islamic warriors or jihadists who had, with clandestine support of the United States, for the decade between 1979 and 1989 fought the Soviets and their Afghan clients) who had initially sheltered al Qaeda faded into the Afghanistan hinterland, and even as Osama bin Laden, Taliban leader Mullah Omar, and their lieutenants escaped the mountains of Tora Bora and crossed the border into Pakistan, the administration made explicit that it considered Iraq the central front in the war against terror. The Bush administration’s claim that there was a link between bin Laden and Iraq dictator Saddam Hussein never gained much traction, even in Washington. More convincing, though, was the charge that Saddam had concealed from the international community a quantity of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), both chemical and biological, and that he was seeking to reconstitute the nuclear program that he had initiated in the run-up to the First Gulf War in 1991. That potential generated terror among Iraq’s neighbors, the United States, and beyond. The existential threat posed by al Qaeda and other terrorist networks was almost incomprehensible to Americans; it obscured the boundary between the “homeland” and the foreign, and could take years if not generations to defeat. The threat the administration claimed that Saddam posed, however, was more familiar, more intelligible, more concrete, and—from the viewpoint of the administration—more manageable.

The United States launched Operation Iraqi Freedom, the invasion of Iraq, on March 19, 2003. In this fashion the global war on terror (GWOT) bred two
distinct wars—one in Afghanistan and the other in Iraq. Once again, questions and challenges emerged that had bedeviled American policy makers and strategists long before 9/11. Defeating Saddam Hussein and his Republican Guard proved remarkably but not unexpectedly easy. But that ease caused as many problems as (some might argue more problems than) it solved. The destruction of Saddam's forces left no obstacle to uncovering Iraq's cache of WMDs or its nuclear facilities. None were found. The United States had long prided itself on relying on force only as a last resort and waging war only with the greatest reluctance. In Iraq, however, both the precipitant for taking military action and the nation's relationship to the war on terror evaporated. Furthermore, the president had justified the invasion on the grounds that any nation had the right to take preemptive measures when its security—and that of its allies—was in imminent danger. The results of Operation Iraqi Freedom exposed Iraq as far from an imminent danger. This outcome did more than make a mockery of American boasts about U.S. intelligence capabilities and cast doubt on U.S. military strategy and doctrine. It also discredited longstanding claims about U.S. exceptionalism and its status as the indispensable nation.

The conflict in Iraq, much like the past war in Vietnam, engaged the United States in the kind of war for which it was the least equipped to fight. Few of Saddam's forces surrendered; most melted away to their villages. Of these, many were Sunni Muslims, Saddam loyalists, or former Ba'athists (Saddam Hussein had been the leader of Iraq's Ba'ath Party). They became the pillars of resistance movements that assembled to fight the American forces they saw as occupiers and the government in Baghdad that the United States had established. Also fighting the Americans, while at the same time fighting the Sunnis, were Shi'ite Muslims, who constituted the primary support for the post-Saddam Baghdad government and received assistance from Iraq's regional rival and America's worst regional adversary, Iran. The consequence was escalating sectarian violence as government forces, competing private armies, and disorganized insurgents struggled for control. U.S. forces were not well trained or well supplied for such unconventional warfare.

The United States had confronted parallel conditions in Vietnam, with similarly poor results. In the wake of that war, American political and military leaders had first vowed and then planned never to repeat the experience. In future wars, they emphasized, America would deploy overwhelming force, fight on its terms, formulate and articulate unambiguous objectives, and develop a clear exit strategy. Furthermore, as President Bush had repeatedly emphasized in the 2000 election campaign, the “humble” global posture that the United States would pursue under his leadership precluded its under-
taking nation building.\textsuperscript{12} Yet the Bush administration violated virtually all these post-Vietnam principles. In an attempt to counter public opposition to the war (which had grown as it became clear that the administration had misled the nation about the reasons for going to war) and in order to have any chance of success in the difficult early years of struggle, the Bush administration turned to nation building. Accompanying the surge of some thirty thousand additional troops in 2007 was a new counterinsurgency doctrine that fundamentally committed the United States to placing American soldiers in harm's way for the purpose of building a new nation in Iraq.

Whether nation building will succeed in Iraq remains to be seen. But after some initial causes for optimism, the prospect of a unified nation in Iraq, one with a capacity for effective governance, seems distant—if at all achievable. The same holds true for Afghanistan, which had provided safe haven for al Qaeda and was thus the initial front in the GWOT. By opening a second front in Iraq the Bush administration had provided time and space for the Taliban to revive in Afghanistan and reignite violence. Afghanistan, moreover, proved even less hospitable to nation building than Iraq. American military efforts did succeed in rooting out—or more accurately decapitating—al Qaeda (Osama bin Laden was killed in neighboring Pakistan in 2011), but the Taliban soon reemerged with a vengeance. Afghanistan’s capacity for governance was less than that of Iraq, its corruption was more pervasive and ran deeper, and whereas Saddam was surrounded by regional enemies, powerful elements in Pakistan nurtured the Taliban. For all these reasons the counterinsurgency doctrine developed for Iraq was inadequate if not inapplicable for Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan has now eclipsed that in Vietnam as the longest in America’s history.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan gave form to the GWOT, and thus that broader war can be traced to the forces unleashed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the Islamic Revolution in Iran that same year. For that reason, 1979 may someday overshadow 1989 (when the collapse of the Berlin Wall served as a catalyst for the end of the Cold War) as a watershed in the evolution of global politics. Understanding the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, accordingly, requires understanding both the historic processes and the contemporary dynamics that precipitated and sustained them. This collection of essays provides a basis for developing these understandings even as it provokes further questioning and inquiry.

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This volume contains thirteen essays, organized into four sections. The first section offers overviews of the wars and arguments about their origins; the
second evaluates the possibilities and limits of American military and diplomatic strategy; the third examines those who fought and places the wars in broader political and cultural context; and, finally, the fourth speculates on the lessons and legacies of wars whose outcomes may not be clear for decades. The essays, read together, offer a multifaceted look at these wars. At the same time, each chapter can stand alone, serving as a freestanding essay on one or another aspect of these wars. In order to make that possible, some of the same key events appear in multiple chapters.

We begin with two overviews of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In “The Wars’ Entangled Roots: Regional Realities and Washington’s Vision,” Michael Reynolds starts with a straightforward explanation for America’s invasion of Afghanistan: it was in response to attacks on American soil waged by a terrorist organization based in that nation. However, he notes, the “reasons why a non-state organization led by two Arab citizens of nominally pro-American states assaulted the United States and why that organization was based in Afghanistan are anything but straightforward.” And the origins of the war in Iraq, he notes, are even less so. In this essay, Reynolds (an Associate Professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton) situates these wars in the local dynamics of the Middle East. In 1979, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran “overturned the geopolitical order” of the region. Indigenous struggles over social and economic change, inflamed by religious claims, had sparked deep and divisive conflict. Because the countries of the Middle East possess vast quantities of the world’s oil, it was virtually guaranteed that powers outside the region would take interest and intervene. In the 1990s, Washington began to see the maintenance of global security as a moral duty and a prerequisite for America’s own security. It identified the Middle East as a region of importance not only for its energy resources but also as a test case and proving ground for America’s global mission. One cannot understand why the United States went to war in Afghanistan and Iraq, Reynolds argues, without comprehending how regional struggles intersected with Washington’s pursuit of its vision of world order.

Terry Anderson, Professor of History at Texas A&M and author of Bush’s War (2011), turns from the wars’ origins in the Middle East to their origins in the United States. Anderson traces U.S. engagement from September 11, 2001, through the failing Iraqi state of 2015, situating “Bush’s wars” in Iraq and Afghanistan in relation to the broader war on terror, the Patriot Act, the incarcerations at Guantanamo Bay, the “rendition” of suspected terrorists to “black sites” beyond U.S. legal jurisdiction and consequent legitimization of torture, and the doctrine of preemptive war. Anderson portrays Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan as necessary. This operation, which initially relied
on CIA teams with extensive knowledge of Afghanistan’s culture and politics and which ultimately drew the participation of twenty-five nations, proved a limited success. In contrast, he argues, Bush and his administration launched Operation Iraqi Freedom with no fundamental knowledge or understanding of Iraq, its people, or its history, “dragg[ing] the United States into the greatest foreign policy blunder in American history.”

Following these overviews, scholars who have in significant ways contributed to policy making related to the wars assess the possibilities and limits of American military and diplomatic strategy. Richard Immerman, who served as assistant deputy director of national intelligence (2007–9) and directs Temple University’s Center for the Study of Force and Diplomacy, analyzes the role intelligence played in the origins and conduct of these wars. The purpose of intelligence, he argues, is to reduce policy makers’ uncertainty and to provide them with a “decision advantage.” There is little evidence that in either the Iraq or Afghanistan Wars the U.S. Intelligence Community (IC) achieved these goals. There is likewise little evidence, however, that this failure affected the policy decisions of the George W. Bush or Barack Obama administrations. Both presidents placed a higher priority on the IC’s paramilitary capabilities in their effort to terminate America’s engagement in the wars than they did on its collection and analytic capabilities when deciding initially to engage in the wars.

Political scientists Stephen Biddle (who before accepting an appointment as Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University served on General David Petraeus’s Joint Strategic Assessment Team in Baghdad in 2007 and as a Senior Advisor to Petraeus’s Central Command Assessment Team in 2008–9) and Duke University Professor of Political Science and Public Affairs Peter Feaver (who from 2005 to 2007 served as Special Advisor for Strategic Planning and Institutional Reform on the George W. Bush National Security Council) then evaluate the strategic choices made by the Bush administration. They argue that the GWOT consisted of a series of strategic decisions, each with its own consequences, intended and unintended. The conventional wisdom treats U.S. strategic choices as a series of “ninety–ten” decisions: some obviously right, others just as obviously wrong. But in fact the war was a series of “fifty-five–forty-five” decisions, close calls where the arguments for and against were in most cases fairly evenly balanced—even if outcomes make the choices appear obvious in retrospect. Using counterfactual scenarios to make their points, Biddle and Feaver argue that different choices at key junctures in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would not have produced dramatically different outcomes. Thus there may well be a greater degree of “equifinality” (different paths can lead to the same outcome) in the GWOT than is commonly assumed.
Next, Conrad Crane, lead author of the U.S. Army-Marine Corps counterinsurgency manual (2006) and Director of the Army Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, discusses “Military Strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq: Learning and Adapting Under Fire at Home and in the Field.” Crane argues that the U.S. military efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq contrasted starkly. In Afghanistan, the military relied on an innovative combination of indigenous forces, Special Operations Forces, and airpower in its initial strategic movement to contact. Neither the U.S. military nor political leadership expected the “catastrophic success” that came as the Taliban fell, leaving “ownership” of the country to the invading forces. Before a coherent strategy to stabilize Afghanistan could be designed and implemented, the United States shifted critical assets to Iraq. Not until 2009 did the military apply counterinsurgency doctrine to Afghanistan, and by then any chance to create a legitimate Karzai government had passed. In Iraq, conversely, disjointed planning for stability operations followed a well-orchestrated initial assault. General George Casey launched a counterinsurgency program intended to build up Iraqi security forces, but sectarian violence intensified until General Petraeus implemented a redesigned counterinsurgency doctrine and successfully lobbied for the “surge.” Petraeus benefited from good timing and good fortune, but what success he had was tenuous at best.

Finally, Jonathan Horowitz, a Legal Officer at the Open Society Justice Initiative, discusses the ethical and legal parameters of these wars. In “Human Rights as a Weapon of War,” Horowitz argues that the United States “weaponized” human rights in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Leaders in the U.S. government used the human rights abuses of the Taliban, al Qaeda, and Saddam Hussein to create public support for going to war in Afghanistan and in Iraq. Once deployed, the military exploited aid and humanitarian assistance, along with emphasis on securing the rule of law, to help expand its reach and to “win the hearts and minds” of local populations. While many communities in Iraq and Afghanistan initially received the U.S. military with good faith and with confidence that its presence would improve their livelihoods and security, U.S. human rights abuses significantly undermined that positive initial reception. Nonetheless, Horowitz argues, the problems created by the weaponization of human rights would likely exist even without the abuses that undermined U.S. moral authority.

We then turn away from high-level policy and strategic decision making to the experiences of war, both foreign and domestic. In the section titled “Waging and the Wages of War,” four scholars analyze the experience of combat and of antiwar protest, of war’s portrayal in news media and in popular culture. Lisa Mundey, formerly a historian at the U.S. Army Center of Military
History and currently an Associate Professor of History at the University of St. Thomas, discusses combatants’ experiences. Focusing on members of the U.S. military, she reminds us of the human scale and consequences of war. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were the first extended wars fought by the all-volunteer force, and Mundey shows us who served and compares those troops to those who fought the wars of America’s recent past. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, she emphasizes, much of the experience depended on when and on where—when in the course of the war, and where one was located, not only geographically, but also from the austerity of the field to the striking comfort of well-defended bases.

David Farber, Roy A. Roberts Distinguished Professor in the University of Kansas Department of History, has written extensively on the antiwar movements of the 1960s, as well as on more recent conflicts in Taken Hostage: America’s First Encounter with Radical Islam. He analyzes a different sort of combat in “Fighting (Against) the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.” While the Afghan War produced relatively few opponents, the Iraq War from beginning to end was opposed by many well-informed and influential elite figures, as well as by masses of people inside and outside the United States. Nonetheless, the Bush administration was able to prosecute the war as it saw fit and without the kind of disruptive and radical protests that challenged the Vietnam War–era presidencies of Johnson and Nixon. The explanation, Farber argues, is that the political framing of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars as key to a global war on terror, the changing nature of the mass media, the polarized nature of political debate in the United States during the Bush years, and Americans’ views of the all-volunteer military played major roles both in disarming the antiwar movement and in allowing the Bush administration unusual latitude to fight the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Sam Lebovic, an Assistant Professor of History at George Mason University who studies freedom of the press, analyzes “Limited War in the Age of Total Media.” Despite the proliferation of media channels and the ease of access to the media, he argues, the American public never acquired adequate knowledge of these wars. Journalists themselves failed to portray the nature and complexity of the wars, relying heavily on official sources and official framing. Moreover, the state manipulated the media, censoring, for example, the portrayal of war casualties. More significantly, the American public showed little hunger for more accurate reporting. In an age of proliferating cable news channels and Internet media outlets, viewers were easily distracted and less interested in hard news. And in the years since the Vietnam War, as images of warfare and violence have become more common, the public has become increasingly desensitized to the horrors of war. As a result of the twin
problems of inadequate media coverage of the wars and a public that was too often uninterested in and unaffected by them, the American people were ill equipped to offer consent to or critique of U.S. policy.

Andrew McKevitt, Assistant Professor of History at Louisiana Tech University, examines the popular culture of the wars. Wide-ranging misinformation from the Bush administration about the origins and process of these wars, he argues, filtered into popular culture, which tended to conflate all opponents and to implicitly connect all military action to the attacks of 9/11. The “metaphorical construct” of the GWOT underlay a wide array of television programs, films, literature, music, and video games that “both reflected and shaped the ways Americans made sense” of the wars and their origins. Situating the wars as part of a global (epic) war on terror (an existential battle) made it easy to transpose them to the realm of epic fantasy. Works that attempted to portray the wars realistically rarely gained traction; those that portrayed an epic struggle between good and evil, in contrast, captured the American imagination and helped shape perceptions of the all-too-real struggles on the other side of the world.

The book concludes with a section on the lessons and legacies of the wars. David Kieran, an Assistant Professor at Washington and Jefferson College who writes about war and society, investigates the wars’ legacies for their veterans. While most service members returned to civilian life with relative ease, aided by programs such as the G.I. Bill, others struggled with profound physical or psychological wounds, the trauma of sexual assault, the difficulty of securing employment in the midst of economic recession, and—significantly—problems in securing care from the Veterans Administration. The shortcomings in assistance offered to veterans are most fundamental, Kieran argues, because those responsible did not anticipate the length and brutality of the wars, leaving the VA always responding to problems rather than anticipating needs.

Robert Brigham, Professor of History at Vassar College and author of works including *Is Iraq Another Vietnam?* (2006), draws cautionary lessons from the U.S. war in Iraq. The Bush administration went to war in Iraq, he argues, with the expectation that a distinctly American story would emerge. This did not happen. The greatest lessons of the Iraq War are, first, that there is often no political corollary to America’s overwhelming military power and, second, that the United States does not possess transformative power—at least not at acceptable risk and costs. Despite enormous expenses in blood and treasure, the United States failed to alter the Iraqi political outlook and policies because it lacked leverage with a government in Baghdad that was uncommitted to promoting national reconciliation and concord by creating
a more just and equitable society. Its inability to deliver on the revolutionary change it promised has cost America credibility and influence in the region.

The final essay, on the lessons and legacies of the war in Afghanistan, is by Aaron O’Connell, an Associate Professor of History at the U.S. Naval Academy and a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve; O’Connell served as a Special Advisor to General David Petraeus in Afghanistan and also as Special Assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey. O’Connell evaluates the goals, costs, and outcomes of what is now America’s longest war, concluding that, in sum, “American efforts were at best a wildly inefficient partial success and at worst a failure.” From this experience, he argues, American policy makers should identify lessons about how states cooperate and compete with each other, what constitutes an appropriate mission for the U.S. military, America’s limited capacity for exporting its values and culture, and, perhaps the most important lesson of all, the vital importance of looking to the past as a guide for future action.

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Reading these essays, it is clear that the authors are not speaking with one voice. Obviously, they are writing about different topics. But they also make arguments that conflict with one another—sometimes slightly, sometimes profoundly. They emphasize different points, stress different factors, place weight differently when explaining origins or evaluating outcomes. That’s no accident. This volume wasn’t meant to offer an encyclopedic account of the wars, nor one in which the questions about the wars’ origins, prosecution, and legacies are transformed into a seamless narrative. Instead, the essays provide entry into a broad conversation about the meaning and significance of the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in hopes that the understandings offered will allow readers to make informed arguments of their own.

These understandings will also allow readers to formulate new questions. When this project began, at the head of the U.S. government was a president who took great pride in his having fulfilled his promise to bring the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars to an end. The withdrawal of U.S. forces began six months into President Obama’s first administration and was completed in December 2011. The same year that the last U.S. soldier left Iraq, President Obama announced the start of the drawdown in Afghanistan. “We’re starting this drawdown from a position of strength,” he remarked. U.S. “troops will continue coming home at a steady pace as Afghan security forces move into the lead. . . . By 2014, this process of transition will be complete.”

The global environment has evolved dramatically since Obama uttered those remarks, and not for the better. Despite the turmoil over Ashraf Ghani’s
2014 election as president of Afghanistan after Hamid Karzai’s decade-long tenure, the withdrawal of American forces is on track, albeit it is almost certain to proceed more slowly than Obama projected. In 2014 a new government came to power in Iraq, too, when Haider al-Abadi succeeded Nouri al-Maliki as prime minister. Yet President Obama is speaking no longer of America’s position of strength but of “pervasive unease” and a “cycle of conflict.”

The political complexion in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan all but ensures continued instability and violence in the region. In Iraq, the situation is worse. Not only have sectarian bombings, assassinations, and related mayhem reminiscent of the Bush years exploded again, but large swaths of territory have fallen to the Islamic State (also called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS, or the Islamic State in the Levant, ISIL). This offshoot of al Qaeda seeks to establish a caliphate (theocratic Muslim empire) that envelopes Iraq, Syria, and beyond. Indeed, the Islamic State exploited the insurgency against the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria to acquire territory in that state as well, and has designs on Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, and Turkey.

The emergence of the Islamic State as an even more ruthless and ambitious network of terrorists than al Qaeda reveals the complex consequences of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the uncertain future. The Islamic State is not the direct product of those wars. It is the product of the collision of forces—political forces, religious forces, military forces, international forces—unleashed by those wars. Assessing the Islamic State as a threat to both America’s core values and vital interests, an extremely reluctant and deeply conflicted President Obama recommitted U.S. forces to Iraq and extended their use to Syria. Referring to the U.S. military action not as a war but a “counterterrorist campaign,” he has vowed that with the support of regional allies the United States can “degrade and ultimately destroy” ISIS without deploying American boots on the ground. Whether that’s possible remains an open question. Capturing the difficulties the administration faces, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman writes that “our enemy is barbarous, our regional allies are duplicitous, our European allies are feckless, and the Iraqis and Syrians we’re trying to help are fractious.”

As the essays in this volume chronicle, the Obama administration has sought a substitute for the Bush administration’s brand of war. It has banked on a complex combination of actions: drone strikes and the training and supply (often covertly) of forces it assesses as sympathetic to American goals and interests, on the one hand, and the mitigation—if not elimination—of government corruption and the building of the capacity to govern as an antidote to radical Islamist terrorism, on the other. Critics on the right have lambasted the president for not doing enough, critics on the left for doing too
much. In all likelihood his successor, whether Democrat or Republican, will confront the same and perhaps even more intractable forces and challenges as did Bush and has Obama. In 1945 and 1946 few Americans could imagine that the country would be locked in a Cold War with the Soviet Union for almost the next half century. Will historians fifty years from now have coined a name for the period, beginning in 2001 (or perhaps in 1979), when America became enmeshed in an unending succession of “low intensity” conflicts with a shifting set of elusive enemies whom it could not defeat but from whom it could not escape? This volume cannot provide the answer. But it can help to understand the problems and pose the proper questions.

NOTES
7 Gates, Duty, 93.
11 “President Bush Address to a Joint Session of Congress” (September 20, 2001).