America Can Win, Sometimes: U.S. Success and Failure in Small Wars

by
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INTRODUCTION

Americans apparently dislike small wars even more than they do big ones. A majority of the public supports major U.S. commitments to the defense of Western Europe and Japan but opposes the use of American forces in nearly every conceivable small war contingency.[1] Despite an undeserved popular reputation for bellicosity, the American military appears equally, if not more, reluctant to become involved in low-intensity warfare. Reflecting this concern, Secretary of Defense Weinberger in a 1984 speech outlined a series of tests which should be satisfied before the U.S. committed troops to combat; these included a "vital national interest" at stake, the support of the American public, and willingness to commit whatever force was needed to win.[2] Taken together, these conditions would probably rule out most small war commitments, including invasion of Grenada, which Weinberger had endorsed the year before.[3]

Certainly all can endorse Secretary Weinberger's emphasis on the moral imperative of restraint where human lives are at stake. But why more aversion to small wars than to big ones? The answer seems to be in a belief that small wars present unique, perhaps insurmountable, obstacles to success for the United States. Thomas Schelling, in a 1981 Vietnam post mortem, went so far as to assert that "Khruschev was right in 1960. He said that democracies were soft and could not fight against wars of national liberation."[4]

Schelling's conclusion lacks historical perspective and ignores American successes in a number of small wars, including some protracted and difficult engagements. Yet he is correct in asserting that small wars do pose difficult problems for Americans, particularly in the post-World War II era. The present research is aimed toward testing several explanations for success and failure in small wars through a systematic examination of fifteen low-intensity conflicts since 1898.

EXPLAINING SUCCESS AND FAILURE: SOME HYPOTHESES

As Sam Sarkesian points out, few works on the topic of American small wars take a comparative perspective.[5] Most fall into one of two categories: straightforward, non-theoretical studies of pre-Vietnam wars; or the host of works devoted to explaining the Vietnam debacle. Studies of the first type usually attempt no general conclusions while the second variety tend to treat Vietnam as a paradigm for all small wars and draw their lessons accordingly. Two exceptions are Sarkesian's own work, which examines five small wars from the Second Seminole War of 1835-42 to Vietnam, and Larry Cable's study of American post-World War II counterinsurgency doctrine.[6] Both reach interesting conclusions but are difficult to compare since they cover different time periods.

Despite the lack of theoretical focus in this literature, a number of testable hypotheses may be drawn from the past works. One of the most important comes from some adherents of the "realist" school of international politics. Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan, and others have argued that America's Vietnam policy was doomed by its lack of relationship to the U.S. "national interest," which they define in terms of politics.[7] According to these writers, the U.S. had an interest in preventing Chinese domination of Asia but none in the internal politics of Vietnam; hence American intervention there was inappropriate. Moreover the policy was doomed to fail, for policy makers would sooner or later realize that the game was not worth the cost and pull out.[8]

Andrew Mack, in a discussion of why big nations lose small wars, suggests that the realist critique of Vietnam may apply generally to large states in conflict with small ones. Since the large state's power would not be seriously threatened by the victory of the small opponent, the large state has less stake in winning and a correspondingly lowered propensity to make the sacrifices necessary for victory.[9] Weinberger reflected a concern for this problem when he insisted that "the United States not commit forces to combat overseas unless the particular engagement or occasion is deemed vital to our national interest or that of our own allies."[10] Thus, a realist hypothesis on U.S. success in small wars might be stated as follows:

> **Hypothesis 1:** The United States is likely to be successful in a small war when it has a major power interest at stake and unsuccessful when it does not.

Of course, making this hypothesis intelligible requires a definition of U.S. "interests." Generations of realist writers have asserted that the U.S. has an interest in preventing instability in Latin America which might lead to intervention by some extra-hemispheric power, but not in the internal affairs of the Latin American states. Since World War II, realists have also argued that U.S. security interests require preserving a power balance in Europe and Asia, preventing one-nation dominance and more recently, maintaining access to Middle East oil reserves.[11] The present analysis accepts this definition as a heuristic device; interventions which serve realist goals are defined as serving a "major interest" of the United States.

Some scholars argue that economic interests drive U.S. foreign policy. This would indicate the necessity of inducting economic ties (trade, investment, etc.) as a second measure of interests. However, in many cases the U.S. has intervened in countries where American economic interests were negligible. One might argue, as Magdoff does, that intervention in economically insignificant countries is aimed at preventing leftist revolutions from spreading to more important ones.[12] However, this would mean that all interventions served American, or at least American capitalist, interests, making it impossible to explain the failure to intervene in many other conflicts.

A second group of analysts, also strongly influenced by the Vietnam period, believe that the support of the American public is vital to any

successful small war effort. Sam Sarkesian, in his study of five "forgotten wars," asserts that "military interventions and the conduct of military operations must have some degree of support from and approval of political actors and the public" and that "the withdrawal or withholding of such support can lead to the erosion of the military's sense of mission and decreased combat effectiveness, as was, the case in Vietnam."[13] Sarkesian acknowledges, however, that public support has not been equally vital in all small wars, because some have been remote from the public view. Speaking of the campaigns against the Moros in the southern Philippines from 1903-1913, he notes that "little was heard" of the fighting because "it was low-visibility conflict and involved only the Regular Army."[14] According to this view if a war is both visible to the public *and* unpopular, the chances for success decline. The Sarkesian hypothesis can be stated as:

> **Hypothesis 2:** The U.S. is likely to be successful in a small war when the war is either invisible to the public or popular, and unsuccessful when the war is unpopular.

On the other hand, many observers see public support as more the result than the cause of a successful small war. Mueller, and more recently Cotton, have shown that popular support for wars, and especially small wars, invariably starts at a high level and declines as the cost of the conflict, particular in terms of battle deaths, rises.[15] Mueller argues for a logarithmic relationship in which support falls rapidly in response to the first reports of heavy casualties, then levels off as the public becomes "hardened" to the losses. Supporting this view, Ernest May argues that "protracted and inconclusive ground warfare will not command public support."[16] Thus, the U.S. cannot afford to pursue a stalemate or attrition strategy, as in Vietnam, very long without a severe public reaction. However, rapid military successes will almost guarantee public support.

> **Hypothesis 3:** All small wars are popular when initiated; popular support is lost when U.S. forces incur high costs without achieving their objectives.

According to another theory, American performance in small wars is best explained by the ethos and institutional structure of the American military rather than by the attitudes of the American public. According to many analysts, the U.S. Army, once a "light" fighting force, has developed a strong distaste for counterinsurgency warfare. One study found that most army officers were opposed to preparing for counterinsurgent wars, despite believing that the U.S. was likely to become involved in such wars in the future.[17] In Vietnam, this mentality is said to have led to the army fighting as if it were on the plains of central Europe. Army operations "in South Vietnam were oriented overwhelmingly toward . . . mid-intensity conflict, big unit operations and minimization of U.S. casualties through heavy firepower."[18] Most analysts agree that this approach had a disastrous effect on the "other war" of pacification. Indiscriminate use of firepower led to heavy civilian casualties and severe

refugee problems which blunted efforts to win the support of the South Vietnamese people.[19]

Capabilities for unconventional warfare were upgraded by the Reagan administration but deep-rooted institutional biases are hard to change.[20] If the military is indeed reluctant to adopt viable counterinsurgent tactics, it should have been difficult for the U.S. to succeed in small guerrilla wars, especially in the post-World War II period. In small conflicts where conventional tactics were suitable this disability should vanish. Hence:

> **Hypothesis 4:** The United States will do better in small conventional wars, and worse in small guerrilla wars. The disparity will increase after 1945.

Another set of theories focus not on U.S. behavior but on that of other players in the small war drama. The U.S. is frequently criticized for intervening on behalf of weak, corrupt or ineffective regimes, primarily in the Third World. Richard Barnet has developed this point into a general argument for nonintervention in Third World revolutions, arguing that any regime which needs American assistance against an internal revolt must be so riddled with corruption and social injustice as to be unsalvageable, and indeed not worth saving.[21] Robert Komer, writing from a very different political perspective, acknowledges that "the greatest single constraint on United States ability to achieve its aims in Vietnam was the comparative weakness of the regimes we backed."[22] Similar concerns have been raised about U.S. allies in other parts of the world, notably in Central America. This analysis leads to a fifth hypothesis:

> **Hypothesis 5:** The U.S. will be successful when it goes to the aid of a strong and effective local regime and unsuccessful when it tries to assist a regime which is politically or militarily weak.

A further group of analysts focus on the behavior of nations other than America's local allies or opponents. It is argued that small powers can often frustrate big ones in a small war if they receive adequate assistance from another big power. Richard Pipes, urging the U.S. to aid anti-Soviet guerrillas, contended that "experience indicates that a well-led and motivated, guerrilla force, assisted from outside, is virtually immune to suppression."[23] Some analysts of Vietnam attribute America's defeat there more to Soviet and Chinese aid to the North Vietnamese than to American errors.[24] On the other hand, the U.S. has sought allies to assist it in many of its interventions, and this might be thought to enhance the chances of success. Indeed in Korea and Vietnam both factors were at work contemporaneously, raising the question of which might be more important. Given the emphasis in some of the literature on the importance of aid to the enemy, it is hypothesized that this would generally outweigh any allied contribution in a small war.

> **Hypothesis 6:** The U.S. is less likely to be successful in a small war when its adversary receives outside aid. Assistance to the U.S. from allies will contribute to success but not balance aid to our adversary.

SMALL WARS SINCE 1898: AN EXAMINATION

Testing these hypotheses by examining all of Americans small wars (over 200 since 1789) would be a formidable task indeed. The present analysis is less ambitious, being based on a review of fifteen small wars selected from the period 1898-1984. By excluding wars before 1898, the analysis excludes all the Indian wars which were fought under conditions unlikely to appear in the future. Also excluded are the many shows-of-force and demonstrations which did not end in combat, such as the one in Panama in 1903 and Lebanon in 1958, as well as raids and other "in and out" actions such as that recently occurring in Nicaragua which did not involved U.S. forces in a direct combat role.[25] The study includes all the cases since 1898 where the United States engaged in direct, sustained but small-scale military intervention in support of its foreign policy goals.

The results presented in Table 1 are based upon a search of the extensive literature on the fifteen wars. All fifteen have had books, parts of books, or articles devoted to them though there is a wide disparity in the availability of source material. The literature on Korea and Vietnam is, of course, immense and quite a bit has been written about the Philippine War of 1899-1902 and the two interventions in Nicaragua. By contrast, evidence on conflicts like the Caco War in Haiti in 1918-19 or the 1903-13 Moro campaigns in the southern Philippines is rather sketchy. In all cases, however, the data appear sufficient to make some judgements about what conditions have led to success or failure for the Unites States in small wars.

INTERESTS AND WARS

According to Hypothesis 1, the United States will be successful in small wars when its major interests—excluding other powers from the Western Hemisphere and preventing single nation dominance in Europe and Asia—are at stake. For most of the wars surveyed, there is little evidence that this was the case. A plausible threat to the Monroe Doctrine could have justified the two interventions in Mexico, the Huerta regime ousted in 1914 was backed by the British government and oil interests, and the Germans backed Pancho Villa's adventures in 1916-1917.[26] A case can also be made for the First Nicaraguan Intervention in 1912, prompted by the threat of the Nicaraguan Liberal Party to permit the Japanese to construct a transisthmian canal in Nicaragua, which might well have developed into a threat to the U.S. canal in Panama.[27]

Beyond these cases, there is little evidence that major American interests were involved in most of the interventions. The invasion of the Philippines (1899-1902) and the subsequent conquest of the Moros (1903-13) were imperialist ventures prompted by a perceived "civilizing mission" unrelated to American security.[28] The expeditions to China and the Second Nicaraguan Intervention of 1927-33 were aimed primarily at protecting American lives and property in those countries. President Wilson more or less blundered into intervention in Russia; American

TABLE 1
U.S. SMALL WARS 1898-1983

War	U.S. Goal	Outcome	U.S. Power Interest	Adversary Receives Aid	Friendly Local Regime	Involved With Allies	Guerrilla or Conventional War	War Visible	War Popular
1. Philippine War, 1899-1902	Colonize Philippines	Success	Peripheral	No	None	No	Guerrilla	Yes	No
2. Boxer Rebellion, 1900	Rescue citizens in Beijing, pacify China	Success	Peripheral	No	None	No	Conventional	Yes	Yes
3. Moro War 1903-1913	Pacify Moros in Southern Philippines	Success	Peripheral	No	None	No	Conventional*	No	—
4. First Nicaragua Intervention 1912	Ensure friendly govt., prevent rival canal in Nicaragua	Success	Major	No	Weak	No	Conventional	No	—
5. Veracruz Expedition 1914	Topple Huerta govt.	Success	Major	No	None	No	Conventional	Yes	Yes

TABLE 1 continued

War	U.S. Goal	Outcome	U.S. Power Interest	Adversary Receives Aid	Friendly Local Regime	Involved With Allies	Guerrilla or Conventional War	War Visible	War Popular
6. Villa punitive expedition 1916	Destroy Villa, end threat to U.S. border	Partial Success	Major	Yes	None	No	Guerrilla	Yes	Yes
7. Dominican Republic Intervention 1916-1922	Pacify country prevent European Intervention	Success	Peripheral	No	Weak	No	Guerrilla	No	—
8. Caco War in Haiti 1918-19	Pacify country prevent European Intervention	Success	Peripheral	No	Weak	No	Guerrilla	No	—
9. Russian Intervention 1918-19	Topple Boshevik govt., guard supplies	Failure	Peripheral	No	Weak	Yes	Conventional	No	—
10. Second Nicaragua Intervention 1927-33	Ensure friendly govt., protect U.S. Business, destroy Sandino	Partial Success	Peripheral	No	Weak	No	Guerrilla	Yes	No

TABLE 1 continued

War	U.S. Goal	Outcome	U.S. Power Interest	Adversary Receives Aid	Friendly Local Regime	Involved With Allies	Guerrilla or Conventional War	War Visible	War Popular
10. Korean War 1950-53	Preserve S. Korea, later to eliminate N. Korea	Partial Success	Peripheral	Yes	Weak	Yes	Conventional	Yes	No
12. Vietnam 1961-72	Preserve non-communist govt. in S. Vietnam	Failure	Peripheral	Yes	Weak	Yes	Guerrilla	Yes	No
13. Second Dominican Intervention 1965-66	Prevent Communist takeover	Success	Peripheral	No	Weak	Yes**	Conventional	Yes	Yes
14. "Peace keeping" in Lebanon, 1982-84	Create strong pro-Lebanese govt.	Failure	Peripheral	Yes	Weak	Yes	Guerrilla	Yes	No
15. Grenada Invasion 1983	Topple Communist govt.	Success	Peripheral	Yes (minimal)	None	Yes	Conventional	Yes	Yes

*Moros sometimes used guerrilla tactics
**OAS units after several months

troops were sent into action against the Bolsheviks by a British general without his approval.[29] Years of European involvement in Haiti and the Dominican Republic led to Wilson's interventions there, but in these cases the threat was "greatly exaggerated." Yet all these interventions, except the one in Russia, were at least partially successful.

Post-World War II small wars show a similar pattern.[30] The threat of a "second Cuba" in the Dominican Republic provided a plausible security justification for sending troops there in 1965, but the degree of Communist influence in the Dominican revolution appears to have been overstated.[31] Korea was seen by U.S. policy makers as having low strategic value before the North Korean attack.[32] Vietnam was described by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1954 as "devoid of decisive military objectives."[33] The domino theory justifying intervention there to protect other Asian nations does not seem to have been valid. The Reagan administration involvement in Lebanon seems to have arisen from an identification with the Israeli goal of a pro-Israel, Christian government in that country.[34] Certainly America's position in the Middle East was diminished rather than enhanced by the failed intervention. Grenada, though located in an area important to the U.S., did not represent a serious security threat, even if its much discussed airport had been converted to military uses.[35]

If Hypothesis 1 is correct, most of the fifteen interventions should have ended in failure, since they were not grounded in a major interest. However, the realist view is not confirmed by the facts. The U.S. was clearly sucessful in achieving its objectives in nine of the fifteen cases and partially successful in three others. Nine of these were instances where American interests were, by realist standards, peripheral. Only three times (Vietnam, Lebanon and Russia) did America withdraw without achieving any of its major goals. (One could argue that the Nixon administration achieved its goal of a peace treaty in Vietnam but in view of later events this argument appears specious.) Contrary to Hypothesis 1, success or failure in small wars does not seem to hinge primarily upon whether a major interest is at stake.

POWER TO THE PEOPLE?

Five of the ten pre-1945 wars had such low visibility to the public that popular support or opposition had little meaning for policy makers. The First Dominican, First Nicaraguan, Haitian, Russian and Moro conflicts fall into this category.[36] However, not all small wars during this period were invisible to the public; the Philippine War of 1899-1902 was highly visible, as were the Mexican involvements and the Second Nicaraguan intervention.[37] After 1945, the development of mass media made all small wars visible.

The record of ten visible small wars appears to support strongly Hypothesis 3 rather than Hypothesis 2. In four cases—Veracruz in 1914, the Boxer Rebellion in 1902, the Dominican Republic in 1965 and Grenada in 1983—the U.S. was quickly successful with light casualties. All four of these wars were popular. In both the Dominican Republic

and Grenada cases, the interventions were criticized by segments of the foreign policy elite and the mass media, but the people backed the president's policies.[38]

Three of the five unpopular wars—the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam and Lebanon—also fit Hypothesis 3; they started out popular, then lost support as costs and casualties rose. The relationship between casualty rates and opposition is clearly documented for Korea and Vietnam.[39] The Philippines was also a costly war, claiming the lives of over 4,500 Americans. Despite ultimate victory, it was probably even more unpopular than Vietnam.[40]

Three cases clearly do not fit Hypothesis 3. The Punitive Expedition against Villa in 1916-17 was popular despite an inconclusive outcome. However, in this case U.S. territory had actually been invaded and American civilians killed by Villa's forces. Moreover, casualties were not high.[41] The Second Nicaragua intervention of 1927-33 aroused consideration opposition, though only 47 Marines died in six years.[42] Apparently this was because the operation was seen by many as aimed at advancing selfish interests of some American business firms in Nicaragua.[43] The Lebanon "peace-keeping operation" was unpopular even before the bombing of the Marine barracks in October 1983, perhaps because of the vague explanations given for the mission and fear of another Vietnam.[44] Obviously many factors can make a war popular or unpopular and no one explanation fits all cases. Nonetheless, Hypothesis 3, that costly and inconclusive wars will be unpopular, appears well supported.

Hypothesis 2, that unpopularity causes failure and popularity brings success, is less strongly supported. Despite its unpopularity, the Philippines War ended in victory. Korea and the Second Nicaragua intervention were partially successful. No popular war ended in defeat, however. This suggests that popular support is an important asset to American leaders pursuing a small war, but not as essential to victory as Sarkesian and others suggest.

WHAT KIND OF WAR?

Eight of the fifteen small wars involved basically conventional military operations. Of these, the U.S. was successful in six and partially successful in one. Only one conventional operation, Russia in 1917-18, appears a clear failure.

In the other seven cases, the U.S. faced a guerrilla warfare situation. Here, there were only three successes, all before World War II. The opponent's weaknesses clearly played a role here; the Dominican and Haitian insurgents were poorly equipped and ill-organized.[45] Two other pre-1945 guerrilla wars (the Punitive Expedition and Second Nicaragua) were partially successful. Vietnam and Lebanon were very different situations, one a large rural guerrilla war and the other an encounter with urban terrorism. Both were unconventional conflicts and both were American failures.

Given recurrent U.S. security needs, it is understandable that guerrilla warfare should have a lower priority. As one scholar points out, "Tactics, technologies and operational concepts that work well in wars in the Third World may bear no relation at all to wars elsewhere."[46] Since the greatest threats to the security of the United States and its allies are nuclear or conventional wars, large and small, a wholesale reorientation of U.S. force structure, tactics and doctrine toward counterinsurgent warfare is impossible. However, the record clearly shows the need to upgrade and develop counterinsurgent capabilities and expertise, unless intervention in such conflicts is to be foresworn altogether.

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE, DO WE NEED ENEMIES?

Hypothesis 5 suggests that the U.S. gets into trouble in small wars when it supports a weak local regime. The historical record shows that U.S. supported regimes in small wars were weak. In fact, all of the regimes America has supported have been weak, except when there was no friendly local government at all, as in the Philippines, China in the Boxer Rebellion, or Grenada.

The infirmities of the South Vietnamese government have already been discussed, but the Saigon regime could be compared favorably with some other American clients. Marines training the National Guard in Nicaragua in the 1920s complained that their recruits seemed primarily interested in "locking up everybody they had a grudge against or who would not turn over to them a little graft."[47] The Guard was plagued by mutiny and a high desertion rate with only a few units become effective against the Sandino forces. The Haitian regime installed by Wilson in 1915 and the Domincan government created a year later brought order and improved social services to their countries but, because of their foreign backing, failed to win significant popular support. Both were replaced by repressive military regimes after the U.S. withdrew.[48] White Russian troops fighting beside Americans in 1918-19 were unreliable and frequently deserted to the Bolsheviks.[49] Perhaps the best of America's local allies were the South Koreans in 1950-53, yet even they were frequently unable to hold against Chinese and North Korean assaults.[50]

In some cases the U.S. may have been better off without local allies. In the Philippines War, for example, the military won over many Filipinos from the nationalist forces by instituting social reforms and extending health and education services to the people.[51] These policies might have been more difficult to carry out if the Americans had been defending an entrenched local elite like the one in South Vietnam. The intervention in Grenada won the support of the Grenadian people because it ousted a repressive government rather than sustained one.[52]

Altogether, in those cases where the U.S. intervened without any local allies it was successful four times and partially successful twice. With allies, there were still four successes and one partial success, but also three failures—Russia, Vietnam and Lebanon. In all three cases, the weakness of the local regime clearly contributed heavily to the failure.

Do these results indicate that America generally does a poor job of picking its friends? Perhaps, but not necessarily. This study is concerned only with regimes that needed direct American military assistance against an internal or external threat. The stronger an ally is, the more able it is to handle a security threat on its own or with U.S. arms and economic assistance. For example, the U.S. aid helped several governments in Latin America in the 1960s to repel leftist challenges.[53] Thus, one cannot demonstrate that U.S. aid is typically futile or counterproductive. However, the record suggests that if a regime cannot stand without a direct U.S. military involvement, serious thought should be given to liquidating the commitment, as was done with Chiang-Kai-Shek in China in the late 1940s, Batista in Cuba in 1958 and Somoza in Nicaragua in 1979. In all these cases the outcome was unfavorable, but direct U.S. involvement might well have produced a similar result at far greater cost.

THE IMPACT OF ENEMIES

Only one of the ten small wars before 1945 saw any significant aid to America's adversaries. This occurred during the Punitive Expedition against Villa in 1916-17, when the Germans provided arms to Villa and urged the Mexican government to go to war with the U.S. In the five wars since 1945, the adversary received aid in four, though in the case of Grenada the aid could not be called significant. Clearly there is an increasing tendency for U.S. adversaries to receive assistance from outside powers.

This trend may be explained by the emergence of a bipolar international political system after World War II. As Kenneth Waltz has pointed out, in a bipolar world any initiative by either superpower tends to attract the attention and opposition of the other and/or its allies.[54] This is particularly true when a superpower commits its forces to a small war, allowing the other to score points against it at minimal cost by aiding the other side. U.S., as well as Soviet behavior, confirm Waltz's theory: aid to the Afghan guerrillas is but the latest in a series of American efforts to aid anti-communist guerrillas, some in the Soviet Union itself.[55]

Hypothesis 6 suggests that external aid for an adversary will reduce the chances for American success in a small war. The data confirm the hypothesis. In eight of ten cases where the adversary received no aid from another power the U.S. succeeded. One, Second Nicaragua, was a partial success, and one, Russia, a failure. Of the five cases where the adversary did receive outside help, only one, Grenada in 1983, was a clear-cut U.S. success. Outside aid was most important in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts but also played a role in Lebanon where the Syrians and Iranians supported attacks on the Marines.[56] Pancho Villa probably would have been destroyed without German aid and might have been destroyed anyway except for U.S. entry into World War I.[57]

It should be noted that aid to the adversary does not always lead to a negative result. In the Korean war the U.S. accomplished its original objective—preserving South Korea—but failed when it attempted to

eliminate the North Korean regime, provoking Chinese intervention. On the other hand, the Grenada intervention did not provoke a major response from adversaries because the U.S. had an overwhelming military advantage and because its actions did not threaten important Soviet interests. Whether American entry into a small war will produce effective counteraction by the Soviets or some other power may depend on the place and purpose of the intervention.

As predicted by Hypothesis 6, help from allies did not make up for outside aid to the adversary. In fact, the U.S. has actually done worse when it intervened with allies than without them. Allied help was available in seven of the fifteen cases; three of these were successes, three failures, and one a partial success. Without allies, the U.S. had six successes, two partial success and no failures. Moreover, the allied contribution was decisive in only one successful case, the Boxer Rebellion of 1900. Americans made up only 10% of the 25,000-man force which relieved the legations in Beijing and crushed the Boxers.[58]

It seems paradoxical that allied support would contribute little to a successful outcome. Yet, upon reflection, it is consistent with what is known about the nature of alliance relationships. Nations typically align with one another to balance the threatening power of another state.[59] In a small war situation, no such impulse to cooperate exists because the military power of the U.S. is vastly superior to that of the adversary. Defeat will not be the result of inadequate resources but of other factors. Hence, allies can contribute only modestly to the military effort, though their very presence may have political and propaganda effects. At the same time, they introduce the inevitable quarrels, constraints and complications present in alliance relationships.

The Multinational Force (MNF) in Lebanon in 1982-84 illustrates some of the problems which can arise. Americans, French and Italian troops made up the force. The Americans, who wanted to establish a pro-Israeli, Christian-dominated government in Lebanon, pushed for a coordinated response to attacks by the Muslim and Druse militia but were rebuffed by their allies. The Italians, who became involved out of humanitarian concern for the Palestinian refugees in Beirut, were not attacked by the irregulars and showed no desire to confront them. The French, as the former colonial power, wanted to restore order but did not share Washington's enthusiasm for the minority Gemayel government. With conflicting political objectives "each contingent tended to fight its own separate war."[60] Similar problems surfaced in other wars, notably in Korea and Russia.[61]

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly, the factors that make for success or failure in a small war are complicated. Only tenative judgements may be made from the experience of the past. Nevertheless, some conclusions seem warranted. First, the risks of small war involvement are significant and rising. The U.S. has had great difficulty in small guerrilla wars, and this difficulty increases when the adversary receives outside assistance. Such assistance

is more likely now that America is a superpower in a bipolar world. Allies may do the U.S. more harm than good and small wars are often peripheral to American strategic interests.

On the other hand, small wars are by no means destined to end in a Vietnam-style morass. Where guerrilla warfare is impossible, as in Grenada, or where the adversary is unable to obtain outside assistance, prospects for success are higher. Contrary to the fears of many policy makers, public opinion is unlikely to prevent successful prosecution of a small war. Rather, the public reacts to military success or failure in forming its opinions.

Can this analysis be used to predict the results of a future small war and help policy makers manage or avoid the conflict? Only with the greatest caution, for each event is unique and the relative importance of each variable will change from case to case. However, reference to the framework presented here may help in assessing policy options. For example, direct intervention in Central America seems a hazardous course. Given the geography and politics of the region, any war there would probably develop into a protracted guerrilla conflict with the Sandinistas receiving aid from the U.S.S.R., Cuba and possibly other Latin American states. U.S. local allies, the contras and the non-Communist governments in the region, clearly have their weaknesses. The analysis seems to support the decision to avoid a direct confrontation with Nicaragua, whatever other means are employed to deal with the Sandinista regime.

Endnotes

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3. Ibid.
4. Thomas Schelling, in Thomas Schelling, Samuel Huntington, Richard Neustadt and Stanley Hoffman, "Vietnam Reappraised," *International Security* 6, no. 1 (Summer 1981), p. 26.
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11. For realist views over a long period see Nicholas Spykman, *America's Strategy In World Politics* (New York: Harcourt, Bruce and Co., 1942); Bernard K. Gordon, *Toward Disengagement in Asia* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969); Jack E. Holmes, *The Mood-Interest Theory Of American Foreign Policy* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1985); and Donald E. Neuchterlein, *America Overcommitted: United States National Interests in the 1980's* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1985).
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