



American Power after the Berlin Wall

by Thomas H. Henriksen

New York: Palgrave MacMillan,
2007

216 pp. \$79.95

ISBN-13: 978-0-230-60094-2

Reviewed by

CLARK CAPSHAW

American Power after the Berlin Wall provides a rich narrative history of the use (and nonuse) of American military power in the nearly two decades following the fall of the Berlin Wall in late 1989. Thomas Henriksen takes the reader on a detailed journey through the U.S. reaction to crises in Central America, the Persian Gulf, Africa (Somalia, Liberia, Rwanda, the Congo, and Darfur), Haiti, the Balkans, North Korea, and ultimately, Afghanistan and Iraq. Despite densely packing his book with information, the author eschews any attempt to explain the history of the past two decades by appealing to grand themes such as those introduced in Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations*, Thomas Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, or Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. As a detailed narrative of the post-Cold War era, the book can be more appropriately viewed as a sequel to Louis Halle's seminal work, *The Cold War as History*.

Where Henriksen does venture into theorizing, his ambition is limited to giving the reader "an explanation

why the United States chose to intervene in a host of disparate crises" (p. 1) and, by extension, to explain those instances where the United States did not intervene. The author addresses some of the paradigms famously introduced by others—for instance, Huntington's "clash of civilizations," "democratization" theories that recommend the use of military power to reform authoritarian regimes and to promote democracy, and the neoconservative proposal (derived from a 1992 Defense Policy Guidance memorandum) arguing that the foreign policy of the United States should be focused on preventing the emergence of any military rival following the breakup of the Soviet Union. Henriksen demonstrates that each of these models is insufficient to explain the decisions made by the three U.S. administrations during the post-Berlin Wall period.

In contrast to what has happened since then, Henriksen argues, the Cold War period was relatively stable. Specifically, in addressing the destabilizing North Korean nuclear weapons issue, the author incisively states that "the Cold War, despite all its tribulations, resulted in a containment of not just the two superpowers but also their proxy states" (p. 125). Those proxy states, when deprived of their benefactors, became ripe for instability, as evidenced by the disintegration of the Balkan states, chaos in several African regions, and the growth of fundamentalist Islamic movements in countries that previously had been allied with either the United States or the Soviet Union.

Henriksen deals courageously with some of the more controversial aspects of U.S. interventions during the period. Concerning the use of American military power

to effect *regime change* even though U.S. vital interests might not be threatened, he argues that this was not a partisan issue—all three post-Berlin Wall administrations viewed it as a viable option: "Regime change became an almost accepted enterprise so that George H.W. Bush, William J. Clinton, and George W. Bush instigated ousters about once every 18 months . . . to secure political tranquility" (p. 33).

No contemporary U.S. military history would be complete if it ignored the lessons of the Vietnam War. Here, Henriksen does not disappoint. He shows how Vietnam shaped the debate in almost every decision to intervene. Of the continuing specter of Vietnam, he writes: "In the [first] Gulf War's immediate aftermath, the outcome appeared to banish Vietnam malaise from the American psyche . . . [but] ironically, the high-tech, low-casualty war against Iraq, in fact, reinforced the Vietnam Syndrome. [The first Gulf War] re-etched a baseline in the American consciousness for short duration wars with minuscule U.S. deaths that affirmed the immanence of the Indochina ghost, not exorcised it from the nation's memory bank" (p. 52). This same specter reappears in the semipublic debate over appropriate troop levels for the second Gulf War, when Army Chief of Staff General Eric Shinseki became a casualty of internecine warfare in the Pentagon.

Concerning appropriate troop levels, Henriksen argues that this has been a controversial issue not just in Iraq, but also in every single U.S. intervention where the military had an enduring role beyond combat operations: "Operation *Just Cause* demonstrated in spades that the United States could project

its military force just about anywhere in the post-Berlin Wall era. But it also signaled that Washington was prone to underestimate the required number of forces in postinvasion environments and to underprepare for after-combat operations" (p. 30).

Henriksen's conclusion is incisive, if perhaps overly optimistic in its assessment of the potential for the spread of democracy: "America's 'unipolar moment' is far from lapsed. But it must brace itself for a different kind of warfare. . . . It must transform its understanding of power to deal with a diffuse and elusive threat, while formulating a new grand strategy. By husbanding its strength, backing its friends, proclaiming an antijihadi message, hunting down terrorists, and keeping faith with humanitarian and democratic values . . . America will prevail over Islamic extremism and see democracy sprout from its own roots across the Middle East" (p. 216).

Probably the book's greatest liability is that it contains no analysis of the ascent of Asia—without doubt a pivotal shift in the balance of power in the post-Cold War world. The book delays any discussion of China until almost the end, and then treats it only in cursory fashion. Overall, Henriksen's book is a great read. One recommendation: read Halle's and Henriksen's books in sequence. This will be certain to give you a great appreciation for the rich history of the entire period—the Cold War and the post-Cold War—and will place each of the post-Cold War conflicts in context.

Dr. Clark Capshaw is an engineer and evaluator of aerial intelligence systems for the U.S. Army Test and Evaluation Command and an online instructor for the University of Phoenix.