

**No Such Thing As A Little War: Beliefs, Intellectual History, and Liberal Military Intervention**

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My lords, I entreat you, and I entreat the government, not to forget that a great country like this can have no such thing as a little war. They must understand that if they enter on these operations they must do it on such a scale, and in such a manner, and with such determination as to the final object as to make it quite certain that these operations will succeed, and that at the very earliest possible period after the season opens.

The Duke of Wellington to Parliament, January 10, 1838, regarding French activities in Canada. *The Words of Wellington: Collected from His Despatches, Letters, and Speeches, with Anecdotes, Etc.* Compiled by Edith Walford (Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, London: 1869), p. 159.

Western great powers sometimes set ambitious liberal goals when intervening in an internal conflict in a smaller state. Vietnam and Afghanistan are two recent examples of military interventions with political objectives including liberalizing and democratizing the smaller states' governments. At times, despite the historical record, liberal states continue to press and even escalate their intervention while success remains elusive. At other times, great powers intervene militarily but do not press embattled governments to liberalize, democratize, or modernize, as with the U.S. military intervention in Panama in 1989. In a third type of intervention, Western powers decline to intervene militarily or decline to increase their level of intervention, as in Sudan in the 1990s. Sometimes, great powers even walk away from interventions with political objectives unmet, as with the United States in Somalia after the Black Hawk Down tragedy and in Lebanon after the barracks bombing of 1983.

This variation in political objectives on the part of liberal great powers raises questions about what drives military intervention, to what degree outcomes meet great power goals, when and how non-liberal states attempt to shape the domestic politics of smaller countries, whether great powers generally consider the domestic politics of weak states an important security concern, and if so, why. The immediate question for this paper is what makes "little wars" big: When the military balance is strongly in favor of the great intervening power, why do some interventions against weak non-state challengers escalate and drag on with rising costs for the great power as well as all others involved when the threat it faces objectively seems minor?

The question of how these great powers identify their political objectives in deciding to intervene militarily, or to increase their level of military intervention, is important for policy choices because these interventions can be costly in direct ways as

well as in opportunity costs at home and abroad. They can also be extended in duration, as demonstrated by the U.S. and European missions in Kosovo and Bosnia as well as Vietnam and Afghanistan. The belief that ambitious liberal political goals are attainable can extend these interventions when military and political leaders devote increasing time and resources to their attainment despite limited military and political progress. This question is also important for understanding how ideas shape policy choices through the mediums of individual beliefs and intellectual history.

John F. Kennedy's comment on U.S. political objectives for the Dominican Republic in 1961 lays out a trio of possible political outcomes for military intervention: "There are three possibilities in descending order of preference: a decent democratic regime, a continuation of the Trujillo regime or a Castro regime. We ought to aim at the first, but we really can't renounce the second until we are sure that we can avoid the third."<sup>1</sup> Existing research on military intervention explores types of intervention, outcomes, determinants of success, and the role of ideas and values in setting political objectives.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, little work explaining variation in intervention choices regarding political objectives. There is a rich literature on U.S. foreign and military policies in the periphery, but again we lack a theory explaining why in some cases the United States attempts to reform its smaller partner, and in other cases does not. Work on Britain's post World War II interventions, meanwhile, primarily focuses on individual cases or on a subset of cases involving counterinsurgency, leaving open questions about the choices of political objectives pursued.

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas J. Macdonald, *Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention for Reform in the Third World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) quoted on p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Regan, Page Fortna, David Edelstein, Robert Packenham, e.g.

In this paper, I argue that Western great powers are more likely to set ambitious liberal goals under three conditions. Ambitious policy choices are more likely, first, when studies on past military interventions present them as achieving ambitious goals at affordable cost. Second, Western states are more likely to try to achieve ambitious liberal goals when policymakers believe that a world of liberal states is a safer world for their own state and others and attaining it is possible at reasonable cost. Finally, liberal military intervention is more likely when policymakers believe that liberal values are universal and thus relatively easily spread through military intervention intended to shape the domestic politics of other states.

In developing a theory explaining the conditions under which we are more likely to see liberal intervention than non-liberal intervention, I draw on work about emotions at play in the decision for war, research in political psychology explaining biases towards wishful thinking and confirmation of existing beliefs, and policymakers' reliance on possibly inaccurate historical analogies to understand current policy problems.

In the following pages I review the literature on military intervention, present my theory explaining the policy choice of liberal military intervention, lay out my research design, and ask a series of questions of the cases I will analyze.

## **Literature Review**

The idealistic and security-based strands in U.S. foreign policy are well known, from Samuel Huntington and Henry Kissinger to contemporary research. Leading explanations for variation in the political objectives of great power military intervention focus particularly on U.S. choices. Powerful explanations include unipolarity in the post-Cold War period and a related explanation based on the opportunities provided by this

preponderance of U.S. power; the choices of individual leaders; and changing beliefs about the role of the United States in the world.

Most recently in structural arguments, John Mearsheimer argues that unipolarity enables post-Cold War efforts to spread liberal values to other states.<sup>3</sup> Michael Desch argues that liberalism itself cannot explain greater U.S. adventurism since the end of the superpower competition because liberalism is a constant in U.S. foreign policy. Desch thus identifies greater U.S. freedom of action as what makes aggressive liberalism a greater problem in the contemporary period.<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Monten's explanation for the shift from U.S. efforts to exemplify its values to trying to spread them in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the increase in U.S. relative power. Monten argues that the expansion of U.S. material capabilities and the presence of a national domestic ideology supporting intervention to spread U.S. values explain periods of active U.S. democracy promotion. Monten also includes unipolarity as a factor.<sup>5</sup> Robert Packenham, focusing on policymakers' belief in modernization theory, a teleological view of political, economic, and social development, argues that during the Cold War the United States had the freedom to indulge in liberal exploits in the periphery, but not in core areas also of interest to the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> John M. Owen addresses a larger phenomenon, that of states building and maintaining institutions within other states dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Owen argues that the target

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3 John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

4 Michael C. Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security* Vol. 32, No. 3 (Winter 2007/08), pp. 7–43.

5 Jonathan Monten, "The Roots of the Bush Doctrine: Power, Nationalism, and Democracy Promotion in U.S. Strategy," *International Security* Vol. 29, No. 4 (Spring 2005), pp. 112–156.

6 Robert A. Packenham, *Liberal America and the Third World: Political Development Ideas in Foreign Aid and Social Science* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973).

states tend to be of strategic importance, and notes that these interventions tend to occur in periods of high transnational ideological tension and international insecurity. Domestic institutions can change the international balance of power, Owen argues, if the intervening state draws the target into its sphere of influence.<sup>7</sup>

Authors arguing for agency rather than structure as the prime mover in Western great power intervention point to the beliefs of individual U.S. presidents, senior policymakers' fear of losing relative power, and changing beliefs about the appropriate U.S. role in the world. Elizabeth Nathan Saunders argues that U.S. military interventions to transform foreign institutions and societies vary by presidential administration. Leaders either see threats emerging from the domestic institutions of other states, or from other states' policies.<sup>8</sup> Jeffery Taliaferro argues that senior officials initiate risky diplomatic or military commitments on the periphery when they fear a loss in their state's relative power.<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Legros identifies foreign policy ideas about the U.S. relationship with international society as an important driver of revisionist or liberal interventions.<sup>10</sup>

These arguments about the role of structure and agency in liberal military intervention are rigorously researched and argued. None addresses my research question. It is important to note that none have attempted to. My research project builds upon these authors' work rather than attempting to supersede it. I ask what explains the variation in political objectives in U.S. and U.K. interventions into internal conflicts since World War II. The authors whose work I have discussed do not answer this question, or attempt to, in

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7 John M. Owen IV, "The Foreign Imposition of Domestic Institutions," *International Organization* Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring 2002), pp. 375-409.

8 Elizabeth Nathan Saunders, *Leaders at War: How Presidents Shape Military Interventions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

9 Jeffrey Taliaferro, *Balancing Risks: Great Power Intervention in the Periphery* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

10 Jeffrey Legros, *Rethinking the World: Great Power Strategies and International Order* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

six ways. First, most of these arguments address the United States alone; they do not investigate variation in liberal great power interventions. Second, structure, in the form of unipolarity, cannot explain variation in Cold War objectives or similarities between patterns in Cold War and post-Cold War military intervention. Third, Owen's argument does not explain variation in the Cold War and post-Cold War periods or within U.S. administrations, or intervention in non-strategic areas. It is true, however, that definitions of "strategic" vary across time. Fourth, in terms of agency-based explanations, Saunders does not explain variation in political objectives within administrations, while Taliaferro does not look at internal conflict. Finally, Legros focuses on state-to-state interactions rather than state concern with the domestic politics of smaller states.

## **Theory**

This study asks why Western great powers sometimes set ambitious liberal political objectives for military intervention in illiberal states experiencing an internal conflict, and sometimes continue expending considerable resources on attaining them. I consider systemic and domestic drivers of liberal interventionism. Systemic factors appear in the form of security threats. Domestic factors appear as ideological beliefs.

In terms of theoretical framing, neither offensive nor defensive Realism helps us understand liberal military intervention because the relative power of the smaller state and the non-state actor threatening it is minuscule compare to that of the intervening great power. It is true that perception of the insurgent threat is significant for the great power or it would not choose to intervene at all.<sup>11</sup> During the bipolarity of the Cold War, the threat of internal conflict in client states was less about the insurgency itself, or the loss of the target state's government as an ally, and more about each superpower's fear that the other

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<sup>11</sup> Walt perception of threat.

would gain relative strength if it gained an ally in a small state. On the Western side, there was also the ideological publicity value of supporting the spread of liberal values. Yet there was still variation in the security-seeking strategies of liberal great powers, sometimes seeking ambitious liberal goals and sometimes not. It remains unclear under what conditions states pursue liberal grand strategic policy choices regarding the domestic politics of smaller states.

The question remains: Why does a great power sometimes select liberal goals as the path to successful defense of the threatened government? Why does it continue pressing for its political objectives in the face of little or no progress? I hypothesize that a liberal great power makes this choice when its policymakers hold a certain set of ideas about how to increase national and international security. These ideas are, first, that more democratic states mean greater international security because democratic states are more stable domestically and less disruptive internationally;<sup>12</sup> second, that democratic values are universal and thus relatively straightforward to spread;<sup>13</sup> and third, that historical cases similar to the current policy problem show that success in liberal military intervention is possible at reasonable cost.<sup>14</sup> Together, these beliefs lead to liberal interventionist policy choices intended to increase national and international security. In

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12 David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

13 Michael Fitzsimmons, "Hard Hearts and Open Minds?: Governance, Identity and the Intellectual Foundations of Counterinsurgency Strategy," *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 31, Issue 3 (2008), pp. 337-365; Jeffrey H. Michaels and Matthew Ford, "Bandwagonistas: Rhetorical Re-Description, Strategic Choice, And The Politics Of Counterinsurgency," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* Vol. 22, Issue 2 (2011), pp. 352-384.

14 Yuen Foon Khong, *Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Richard E Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision Makers* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

fact, however, when used to set political objectives for military intervention, these optimistic assessments often lead to unexpected and even undesirable policy outcomes.<sup>15</sup>

In my theory explaining under what conditions great powers intervene militarily to attain ambitious liberal goals, the dependent variable is variation in U.S. and U.K. security-seeking strategies regarding military intervention in internal conflict. The independent variables are a set of beliefs or ideas (I use the terms interchangeably) about regime type, liberal values, and historical analogies.

First is the belief that a world of liberal democratic states is a safer world, that is, that long-term domestic political stability and international security are a function of regime type. I operationalize this as policymaker references to democratization increasing national and/or international security. The second is the belief that Western liberal values are universal and thus relatively easily spread or shared. I operationalize this variable as policymaker discussions about the difficulty or costs of the political objectives they set versus the ease in gaining these political objectives. Third is media or policymaker presentation of past cases as analogous to the current problem that show achievement of ambitious liberal goals at affordable cost. I operationalize this variable as comparison of the case under discussion to any previous military intervention considered to have successfully advanced liberal values. Together, these factors shape great power policymaker beliefs about what political objectives are attainable through military intervention.

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<sup>15</sup> Robert Jervis identifies wishful thinking and confirmation bias as two cognitive biases shaping policymaker choices. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976); Stephen Van Evera argues that optimism about costs and outcomes makes war more likely. *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001). While both authors discuss inter-state conflict, it is worth considering the role of these factors in intra-state conflict as well as military intervention.

The leading alternative hypothesis explaining variation in political objectives within and across governments and administrations is a careful assessment of the characteristics of the target or client state leading policymakers to conclude that their ambitious liberal goals are necessary and attainable. Such an analysis might include consideration of the great power's behavior and the political, economic, and social structures of the target state in terms of their suitability for democratization.<sup>16</sup> Alternative explanations that do not account for the empirical variation in political objections that I have identified include: strategic culture, domestic interests,<sup>17</sup> altruism, and credibility or reputation. They cannot explain variation because each is a constant for the great power.

### **Research Design**

This is an historical evaluative study of liberal great power goal-setting for military intervention in internal conflicts in smaller states.<sup>18</sup> I define military intervention as the use of military power in support of a political objective within another state experiencing internal conflict. I focus specifically on the goals set in deciding to support a threatened government. Military power may include aid, training, arms, advising, and combat forces. I do not consider humanitarian or peacekeeping operations because these are explicitly based on normative concerns. The puzzle I investigate involves intervening to shape domestic politics in normative ways, specifically to attain liberal political objectives, in order to protect or increase the intervener's security.

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<sup>16</sup> David Edenstein, *Occupational Hazards: Success and Failure in Military Occupation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Jason Brownlee, "Can America Nation-build?," *World Politics* Vol. 59 Issue 2 (January 2007), pp. 314-340.

<sup>17</sup> Jack Snyder, *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> "Evaluates factual and theoretical beliefs that guided official or unofficial policy actors, and / or evaluates the consequences of the policies they pursued." Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 92.

The most familiar recent terminology for such ambitious liberal objectives is nation building or state building.<sup>19</sup> Political objectives can range in ambition from establishment of liberal democracy to more effective and efficient governance, a tighter and more secure government hold on power, the military and political defeat of the anti-government adversary, a reduction in political violence, a peace agreement, and long-term political stability.

One example of an ambitious liberal goal is pacification in Vietnam, that is, “all action to eliminate organized Viet Cong military activity and nurture economic, political and social development of a viable economy.”<sup>20</sup> Another, also from Vietnam, is rural reconstruction: development activities “principally of a social-economic-political nature identified as ‘nation building’ intended to “strengthen and improve the effectiveness of the local government thus to solidify the support of the people for that government and to demonstrate visibly to other non-secure areas the benefits that accrue in a peaceful area operating under the rule of law.”<sup>21</sup>

Another example is NATO’s 2005 goal for a “self-sustaining, moderate, and democratic Afghan government.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the U.S. National Security Strategy 2010 goal for Iraq and Afghanistan was “building the capacity necessary for security,

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19 “Nation building [or state building] normally implies the attempt to create democratic and secure states,” Marina Von Hippel, “Democracy by Force: A Renewed Commitment to Nation-Building,” *Washington Quarterly* 23 (Winter 2000), p. 96.

20 MACV Command Historian’s Collection, Series VIII, “U.S. Army Support Command Vietnam Debriefing Report,” Maj. Gen. Delk M. Oden, 1 June 1963-1 April 1965, Chief, army section, MAAG-Vietnam 1 June 1963-15 May 1964, commanding general, U.S. Army Support Command, Vietnam 1 July 1964-1 April 1965, U.S. Military History Institute (MIH), Carlisle, PA.

21 U.S. Military Advisory and Assistance Group, Vietnam, Collection, Folder: “U.S. Military Assistance Command VN,” Memo Subject: The concept of rural reconstruction and certain definitions and procedures, Serial #0577, 23 April 1965, To: Advisors, MG Richard G. Stilwell, chief of staff, for commander, MHI.

22 NATO Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe, SACEUR OPLAN 10302 (Revise 1), ISAF, December 2005, p. 1.

economic growth, and good governance [as] the only path to long term peace and security.”<sup>23</sup> In Yemen in 2010, the U.S. policy was to address security and counter terrorism and “the profound political, economic, and social challenges that help al Qaeda and related affiliates to operate and flourish.”<sup>24</sup>

Even more ambitiously, the U.S. Counterinsurgency Guide calls for increasing the legitimacy of the counterinsurgent state, that is, increasing “the degree to which it honors and upholds human rights and fundamental freedoms; the degree to which it responds to the opinions of its citizens; whether it exercises effective sovereignty; [and] the degree to which it provides reasonable limits on the power of government over individual rights.”<sup>25</sup>

Types of military intervention include: invasion, occupation, and annexation (as the United States absorbed Texas from Mexico); invasion, occupation, and departure (as with the United States in post-World War II Japan and Germany); sending combat forces to fight an opposing anti-government force (as with U.S. combat forces in Vietnam from 1965-1973); sending advisory and/or training forces and other support (as in the U.S. advisory era in Vietnam, 1954-1965); and providing military and other aid and political advice (as with the United States in South Korea).

The universe of cases is all great power military intervention into internal conflict. The domain is U.S. and U.K. military interventions into internal conflicts since World

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23 The White House, “National Security Strategy of the United States,” May 2010, pp. 26, 21. [www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss.../national\\_security\\_strategy.pdf](http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss.../national_security_strategy.pdf)

24 Jeffrey D. Feltman, Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, “Yemen: Confronting al Qaeda, Preventing State Failure,” Testimony, Senate Foreign Relations Committee, January 20, 2010. <http://www.state.gov/p/nea/rls/rm/135505.htm>

25 U.S. Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative, *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2009), p. 29.

War II.<sup>26</sup> Case selection criteria include data richness, similarity to contemporary policy problems, variation in intervention political objectives, and in the duration of political objectives.<sup>27</sup>

Examples include continued ambitious U.S. goals on South Vietnam across four administrations, compared to acceptance of less ambitious goals in South Korea; continued ambitious goals for El Salvador during its civil war but a decline in expectations for what intervention could achieve in the Philippines during the Huk insurgency; and limited U.K. and U.S. pressure on Greece for reforms during the civil war.

Cases for consideration include the British decision to intervene strictly militarily in northern Oman's Jebel Akhdar uprising in 1958 compared to its ambitious liberal goals in Dhofar in 1965-1976, because they provide a natural experiment; U.S. intervention in Grenada and Panama, with more ambitious goals in Grenada; the U.S. intervention decision in Vietnam in 1954 compared to the 1973 decision to escalate militarily in order to withdraw; and the U.S. and U.K. agreement that the United States would, and the British would not, intervene in Lebanon in 1958 with relatively limited political goals.

Questions to ask of the cases I select include: In historical cases policymakers cite as analogous to their current problem, how is the intervention and outcome presented? What difficulties are highlighted? What difficulties are downplayed? How is success

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<sup>26</sup> I draw on the datasets of Patrick M. Regan, *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers: Outside Intervention in Intrastate Conflict* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Benjamin Fordham's list of U.S. uses of force, 1870-1995, July 1, 2001; and John Owen's dataset on foreign impositions of domestic institutions, 1550-1999, in John M. Owen IV, "The Foreign Imposition of Domestic Institutions," *International Organization* Vol. 56, No. 2 (Spring 2002), pp. 375-409.

<sup>27</sup> I may expand this study to include dogs that fall silent or begin to howl later (e.g., Darfur, Sudan; Somalia; and Bosnia) because phasing may matter. It is worth asking under what conditions political objectives grow more ambitious in the process of planning and executing an intervention.

presented? Are these emphases reflected in policymaker statements on intervention choices at hand, including in identification of anticipated costs, benefits, and risks? And, what do policymakers use to support their arguments for intervention and for less ambitious goals?

Within the cases I select, I will examine the contemporaneous public record, and private record when possible, for mention of past counterinsurgency or intervention successes that served as models for the problem at hand. When policymakers or pundits cite historical cases as analogous, I ask a series of questions. How is the intervention and outcome presented? What difficulties are highlighted and downplayed? How is success presented in terms of possible or actual costs? Are these emphases reflected in policymaker comments on intervention choices at hand, including in identification of anticipated costs, benefits, and risks? Are there similarities across cases? Is there evidence of causation available in tracing the beliefs I identify? When historical cases are not cited as analogous, I ask on what basis policymakers construct their understanding of what political objectives are necessary and attainable in the conflict under discussion.

I will also examine the record for indications of policymaker security concerns to determine how decision makers connected ideological change with security. The decision to seek ambitious liberal political objectives could be the result of the great power's assessment of the characteristics of the client state and determination that ambitious liberal goals are attainable there.

Tracing evidence through contemporaneous discussions by policymakers and those seeking to influence them on the immediate problem at hand, I also try to determine to what degree beliefs about liberal values shape policymaker decisions to seek ambitious liberal goals or not. Do policymakers believe that liberal values are universal? That they

are easily spread? Do they believe that liberal states are less aggressive or otherwise threatening? I do not argue that ideas determine policy choices. I do argue that ideas about the power of liberalism to create security influence policy choices.

**[CASES]**

**[CONCLUSION]**