

The Big Stick: the Limits of Soft Power and the Necessity of Military Force

By Eliot A. Cohen

Basic Books, 2017

304 pp., \$16.98

ISBN-13: 978-0-46504-472-6

REVIEWED BY JOSEPH J. COLLINS

The *Big Stick* is an excellent book that does what its title advertises. Eliot Cohen, a dean of American strategic thought and a former counselor to U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, dissects American military power, analyzes the threats that power faces, and the rudimentary rules for its usage. This is a rare book that appeals to both the expert and the dedicated citizen looking for a guide to future strategy. It reminds us that “to go far” in this world, we must “speak softly and carry a big stick,” a saying popularized by Theodore Roosevelt before he became President. Cohen analyzes the stick and tells the reader how and when to swing it with a tenor and vigor that President Roosevelt would appreciate.

Cohen confronts his critics upfront arguing that the world is not becoming more peaceful, and pushes aside those scholars who would have us believe in “pacific realism,” neglecting the dynamics of regimes, values, and religion, and believing that the

greatest threat to the United States is its own intervention policies. Cohen finds softer forms of power such as sanctions to be useful but limited in their effects, and he criticizes those who would characterize our efforts as incompetent. He offers that “the use of force is always fraught. But so too is passivity; it is also a choice. In 2012–16, the Western states refused to intervene in the Syrian civil war, which then metastasized into a much larger Middle Eastern conflict.” Finally, Cohen reminds those interested in “nation building at home” that military spending is actually a modest portion of our national product and does not preclude more investment in American infrastructure.

In his second chapter, Cohen assesses our past 15 years at war—a barrier to thinking clearly about the future of American military power. *The Big Stick* joins other recent books in highlighting the U.S. and allied failure to understand our friends and enemies.¹ Cohen criticizes our slow adaptation to conditions on the ground, and the mixed blessing of help from our allies, some of whom were short of being fully engaged. He describes progress in Afghanistan as fragile and the Iraq War as a mistake, but reminds us that we should not forget the benefits brought to the people in both of those countries, as well as the accomplishments of the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s murderous regime and the tyrannical Taliban in Afghanistan.

Cohen then launches into an effective inventory and assessment of U.S. military power, complete with six longitudinal tables. He finds the structures to be externally familiar but internally much changed. Cohen sees our greatest strength in “global logistical infrastructure” and capabilities. He highlights

Dr. Joseph J. Collins, is the Director of the National Defense University’s Center for Complex Operations and the Publisher of PRISM.

U.S. tactical prowess but at the same time he notes that “strategic thinking about the nature of war, and how to align military means with political ends, is a very different matter. There, arguably, it has done poorly.” He finds the lack of excellent strategic thinking to be connected to the ineffectiveness of the nation’s war colleges, which he cites for poor control over their student input, short-tenured senior leadership, excessive administration, and a lack of attention to faculty research. The student population has remained the same as the force has shrunk, which he describes as tantamount to watering down the quality of the student body. He concludes that “in an era of growing strategic complexity and uncertainty,” the need to improve strategic education “is one of the more important tasks faced by the American military.”

The next four chapters of *The Big Stick* concern the threats to the United States posed by China; radical Islamic terrorists, whom he calls *jihadis*; the dangerous states—Russia, North Korea, and Iran; and ungoverned spaces and the commons. These chapters are uniformly excellent, but the treatment of China stands out for its insight and import. Cohen warns against the exotic “Fu Manchu conception of Chinese military power.” He argues for taking the Chinese seriously, conducting insightful analysis, and working toward a full understanding of Chinese strategic culture and battlefield behavior, a subject he has previously addressed in detail in his 1990 book with John Gooch on *Military Misfortunes: the Anatomy of Failure in War*.²

In his chapter on the War on Terror, Cohen advocates continuing direct action; capturing and turning terrorist leaders;

dividing the jihadi opposition; and winning the war of ideas. He then highlights the importance of securing and stabilizing territory taken from terrorists and reminds the reader of our failure to do so in Libya, where we delivered the population from oppression into chaos. Wars begin with political factors and must end with them as well.

Cohen’s treatment of Russia, Iran, and North Korea is short but nuanced. In the end, he recommends four measures for dealing with them: deterrence; the reassurance of allies, especially in Europe; improving our capabilities against sub-conventional conflict; and finally, in extremis, building capabilities to disarm Iran or North Korea preemptively, “if they ever seem likely to make use of their nuclear weapons.”

The Big Stick concludes with Cohen’s recommendations on how and when to use force. He carefully reminds us of the role of “accident, contingency, and randomness that pervade human affairs” and make war the province of chance. He finds the Weinberger doctrine wanting. Cohen abjures detailed grand strategies in favor of conceptual white papers and recommends some basic principles. In his terms, they are: understand your war for what it is, not what you wish it to be; plans are important but being able to adapt is more important; prefer to go short, but prepare to go long [duration]; engage in today’s fight, but prepare for tomorrow’s challenge; adroit strategy matters [but] perseverance matters more; and a president can launch a war [but] to win it, he or she must sustain congressional and popular support. While these bits of wisdom are simple, they are also profound, and backed

up by dozens of more concrete recommendations in this work.

The readers of this book—expert and novice alike—will find it nicely written, carefully thought out, and forcefully argued. It will spur lots of criticism, especially from the neorealists who will not hold back their fire. The Big Stick is both an enduring principle and a superb book, one that will inspire imitators and critics alike. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ For example, Ben Barry, *Harsh Lessons: Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Changing Character of War* (London: Routledge for IISS, 2017), 75–84. See also: Richard Hooker and Joseph Collins, eds., *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 2015), 71–4.

² Eliot A. Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: the Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, 1990, reissued 2006).

War and the Art of Governance: Consolidating Combat Success into Political Victory

By Nadia Schadlow
Georgetown University Press, 2017
344 pp., \$32.95
ISBN-13: 978-1-62616-410-9

REVIEWED BY RONALD E. NEUMANN

W*ar and the Art of Governance* is an important book for looking beyond the frequently cited mistakes of Afghanistan and Iraq to put the very serious problems of stabilization and governance into a larger historical framework. The book is somewhat weakened by an almost total focus on the military and organizational aspects of the problems without adequately exploring the political dimensions of the many case studies it focuses on. Nevertheless, its concentration on the need to radically alter certain deeply ingrained habits of both the Army and of policymakers is an important contribution to policy and doctrine.

Ms. Schadlow's primary thesis is that from the Mexican War to the war in Iraq, America has consistently grappled with:

Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann (ret.) is President of the American Academy of Diplomacy. A former U.S. Ambassador to Algeria, Bahrain, and Afghanistan, he also served as a senior official in Iraq from February 2004 to June 2007.