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Book Review: Boots and Suits: Historical Cases and Contemporary Lessons in Military Diplomacy

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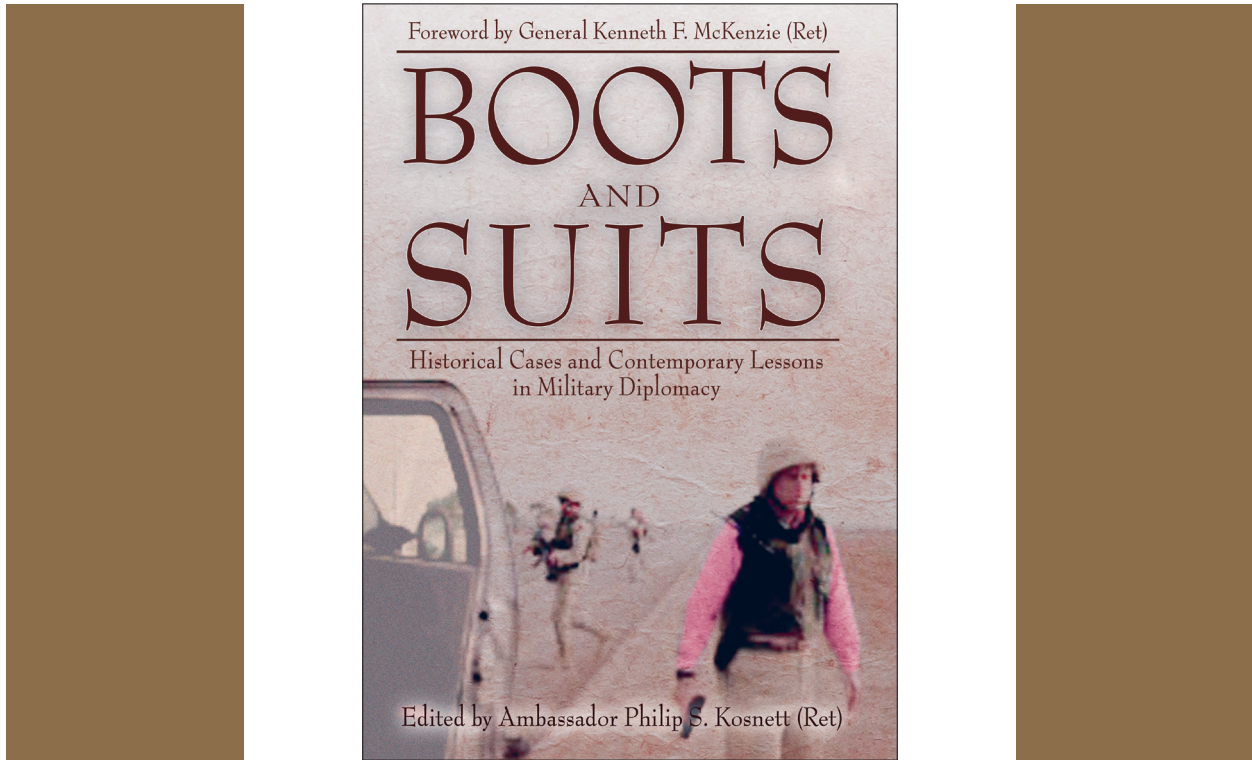
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When I was a student, I kept a small book on the shelf above my desk called *The Revenge of the Melians* (National Defense University, 2000) by US Marine Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. Taking its title from the famous “Melian Dialogue” in Thucydides’s *History of the Peloponnesian War*, McKenzie’s book analyzes asymmetries of power and draws lessons therefrom. I was reminded of that book and its author a few years ago during the withdrawal of US and allied forces from Afghanistan. McKenzie was the commander of US Central Command at the time, and it was clear to me then—and more so after reading his foreword to this new, much longer book—that some military officers take diplomacy, and its absence, seriously.

In his foreword, McKenzie defines “the military instrument of national power” as “a powerful tool for statecraft, one capable of bolstering diplomacy and diminishing the prospects for conflict by enhancing stability and security,” and adds that “the military contribution must be in harness, it must be subordinate, and must ultimately yield control and direction to diplomacy and policy” (xii). This definition of the concept of military diplomacy is about as clear as any I have seen. Like many concepts, it is contested. This collection of essays shows just how contested, and how significant, it is.

Philip S. Kosnett, the volume's editor, divides his understanding of the concept into the familiar military categories of strategy, operations, and tactics (7–11). He has further organized the book into three parts—“Historical Experience,” “Contemporary Challenges,” and “Lessons from Practitioners”—with 14 case studies on a diverse number of subjects from the diplomacy of the Confederacy to US-Chinese competition in the Pacific and the Provincial Reconstruction

Team experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq. Aside from studies of the Netherlands, Russia, and the United Nations, all the chapters focus on some aspect of US foreign policy. The authors are a mixed group of academics and government officials, and the book is uniformly well annotated and augmented with photographs, charts, maps, and tables. Each case study includes a set of policy lessons that—along with the study questions in Kosnett’s introduction, his own list of policy lessons in the conclusion, and a thoughtful section on further study (including films)—make this book useful for teachers, students, and aspiring (or even veteran) military diplomats.

The book’s lessons include dos and don’ts and common-sense statements that, as demonstrated, are remarkably easy to overlook in practice—for example, “policy makers and military officers must be aware of the pitfalls of excessive weapons sales to countries that cannot absorb sophisticated hardware” (74); “civilians and militaries should both be involved in the discussion around civil-military humanitarian coordination” (281); and “achieving joined-up leadership starts at the top and must be modeled throughout the organization” (356). Like the case studies they accompany, most of the lessons relate to certain actions: supplying weapons, taming clients, executing interventions and occupations, and assisting security forces. With the exception of an excellent how-to guide on being a military attaché (284–312), there is less discussion of the more procedural and continuous aspects of military diplomacy in peacetime—for example, the daily management of a military base, the implementation of an arms control treaty, or the coordination of a press release. In other words, a second volume of this book would be welcome.

As often noted, the United States conducts a diplomacy-free foreign policy, having come to rely mainly on military power to get its way. This book does not dwell upon that charge. Instead, it provides a valuable reminder that military relationships do not happen in isolation. They possess political and cultural influence (today fashionably known as “soft power”) in addition to their arsenals. They have been auxiliaries and sometimes substitutes for more traditional forms of diplomacy and have succeeded when their diplomatic character was acknowledged and understood rather than denied or deplored.

The United States today worries about bigger adversaries than the Melians. In this environment, one more familiar lesson applies—those who can no longer easily wield power with weapons and wallets need to learn to live by their wits. They should read this book.

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