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Cutting Losses: Ending Limited Interventions

David C. Brooks

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ABSTRACT: This article compares three limited interventions—the Bay of Pigs (1961), Beirut (1983), and Mogadishu (1992-93). Using Clausewitz's idea that the pursuit of military victory must be linked to a "political object," this essay focuses on the "retreat skill set" that allowed Presidents Kennedy, Reagan, and Clinton to conclude interventions whose costs had outrun potential benefits. These interventions can instruct today's strategic leaders, who will confront terrorist movements located in the failed states and mega-cities of the 21st century.

"Once the expenditure . . . exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced"

Carl von Clausewitz¹

Most American presidents have committed military force believing the outcome will be successful. Nonetheless, as the past half-century has shown, America's uses of military force sometimes failed to yield satisfying results. This review compares three US interventions—the Bay of Pigs (1961); Beirut (1983); and Mogadishu (1992-93)—which fell short of the hopes of the administrations that launched them. These three cases, which span four decades and the end of the Cold War, share a number of striking and suggestive similarities. They speak to the problems not only of limited interventions, but also of larger operations, including our dilemmas in Afghanistan and Iraq, and likely challenges in future operations against terrorist actors. Each episode under study here was presidentially driven and used limited military force as a catalyst for political change in a target country. In every case, the target society had a recent history of political-military conflict and contained what demographers call a "youth bulge," a population curve skewed in favor of the young, which included many military-age males.² In all three, the mission's outcome shocked the American president who had authorized it. Finally, in each instance, the US chief executive chose to end the operation and cut his losses rather than pursue victory. The president made his decision when, to borrow from the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, the operation had reached the crossover point where its growing costs exceeded the value of its original "political object."³ All three were regarded as political "disasters" in their times. Nonetheless, two of these presidents easily won reelection and in all likelihood John F. Kennedy would have done the same.

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1 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 92.

2 Jack A. Goldstone, Eric P. Kaufmann, and Monica Duffy Toft, *Political Demography: How Population Changes are Reshaping International Security and National Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

3 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 92.

This analysis maintains that studies of American warfare are too “victory centric.” When scholars examine defeats, reversals, or frustrating results, they frequently use a victory-tinted lens. They ask, “What went wrong?” as they try to locate the reason for the absence of victory, a reason that is hopefully reversible in future operations. This approach treats victory as the norm and military frustration as an aberration, an attitude that distorts our understanding of conflict and its unpredictable results. Consequently, while this commentary elucidates certain classic problems in limited interventions, it focuses on “the loss-cutting skill set,” those abilities that enable strategic leaders to accept a tactical reverse to avoid remaining mired in a protracted and likely more costly imbroglio.

The cases start when the president received word his mission had gone awry. Historical background follows.⁴ Finally, this essay analyzes how three presidents responded to mission failure and relates those responses to recent and likely future political-military challenges.

JFK and Playa Girón

On 18 April 1961, President John F. Kennedy hosted the annual Congressional Reception. During the event, bad news came in from *Playa Girón* (Giron Beach), the landing site for the Bay of Pigs invasion. The president had inherited this enterprise. The scheme provided logistical backing and limited air support to a 1,200-man, CIA-trained brigade of Cuban exiles that would land in Cuba and overthrow Fidel Castro. Kennedy had continued the project, but he prohibited overt US military intervention.

By that evening, the Cuban exiles’ mission “was going in the shit house,” according to one JFK advisor.⁵ Castro’s pilots had sunk two of the exiles’ supply ships, stranding them on the beach. After the party, Kennedy’s advisors—including CIA Deputy Director Richard Bissell, the invasion’s chief architect, and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Arleigh Burke—urged direct US intervention. Suddenly, the new President faced possible war in Cuba.

A Complex Neighbor

Cuba was a difficult target. A large island with a mountainous interior, Cuba had been ruled for four centuries by Spain and, as a consequence, had become a society that featured sharp divisions of race and class. After 1898, Cuba fell under American influence. Turbulence and rampant corruption blighted the country’s politics. As Cuba entered the 1960s, its society contained something of a “youth bulge,” with just under a third of the population below the age of thirty.⁶ Rebel forces led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara came to power in 1959. Castro then polarized Cuba with a radical communist program. He attracted support from the young, the poor, rural peasants, and Cuba’s black population.

4 Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York: Little Brown, 1971).

5 Kenneth O’Donnell quoted in Peter Wyden, *Bay of Pigs: The Untold Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), 268.

6 On Cuba’s 1960 demographics, see United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *Population Pyramids of the World from 1950-2100*, <http://populationpyramid.net/Cuba/1960/>.

Simultaneously, Castro's leftward lunge alienated middle- and upper-class Cubans, many of whom fled. The United States broke relations with Havana in 1961.⁷

JFK's Advisors at Odds

Kennedy received his first Bay of Pigs briefing one week after inauguration. The plan divided his advisors, a split represented by Richard Bissell, a CIA officer on one side, and Arthur Schlesinger, President Kennedy's Special Assistant, on the other. Bissell was confident the Cuban exiles could overthrow Castro. Seven years earlier, the CIA had organized dissident Guatemalan army officers to bring down Jacobo Arbenz, Guatemala's leftist President. The CIA believed it could do the same in Cuba.⁸ Moreover, Bissell and CIA Director Allen Dulles thought that, if the exiles faced defeat, Kennedy would order US intervention.⁹ In contrast, JFK advisor Arthur Schlesinger worried the exiles lacked an adequate political program. When the CIA passed the group's draft to Schlesinger, he found it filled with appeals to "the foreign investor, the banker, the dispossessed property owner, but [it] had very little to say to the worker, the farmer or the Negro."¹⁰ These doubts were compounded by an even greater strategic challenge. Before the exiles had even landed, their foe knew American strategy. Fidel Castro's comrade-in-arms, Che Guevara, had witnessed the 1954 coup in Guatemala. Consequently, Castro had purged the army and created large, armed militias that reportedly numbered as many as two hundred thousand.¹¹

Picking Up the Pieces

Pushed to intervene, Kennedy refused. He said later that the CIA and the Joint Chiefs "were sure I'd give in [and order in the U.S. military] . . . Well, they had me figured all wrong."¹² Though proud in private, Kennedy was contrite in public. He held a press conference where he said: "Victory has a hundred fathers, but defeat is an orphan." Later, in response to probing questions, Kennedy stated: "I am the responsible officer of the government."¹³ Days afterward, speaking to newspaper

7 On Castro's leadership style, see Edward Gonzalez, *Cuba Under Castro: The Limits of Charisma* (New York: Houghton Mifflin) 1974. For a historical background on Cuba and its complicated relationship with the United States, see Louis A. Pérez, *Cuba and the United States: Ties of Singular Intimacy* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2003).

8 The phrase "regime change" is of more recent vintage, but it appears to apply here. On the CIA-sponsored coup in Guatemala in 1954, see Stephen Kinzer and Stephen Schlesinger, *Bitter Fruit: The Story Of The American Coup In Guatemala* (Boston, Harvard University Press, 2005) and Richard Immerman, *The CIA in Guatemala: The Foreign Policy of Intervention* (Austin: University of Texas, 1983).

9 For Allen Dulles's opinion that the President might relax restrictions on the operation, see Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, "The Confessions of Allen Dulles: New Evidence on the Bay of Pigs," *Diplomatic History* 8, no. 4 (1984): 369; for Richard Bissell's opinion on the same issue, see Richard M. Bissell, "Response to Lucien S. Vandenbroucke, 'The Confessions of Allen Dulles: New Evidence on the Bay of Pigs,'" *Diplomatic History* 8, no. 4 (1984): 380.

10 Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 260.

11 Jon Lee Anderson, *Che Guevara: A Revolutionary Life* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 142-145; Jorge G. Castañeda, *Compañero: The Life and Death of Che Guevara* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 69-71; Wyden, *Bay of Pigs*, 323.

12 Robert Dallek, *An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy 1917-1963* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 2003), 365.

13 David Greenberg, "The Goal: Admitting Failure Without Being a Failure," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/14/weekinreview/14green.html?_r=0; see also: "The American Presidency Project," *The President's News Conference*, April 21, 1961, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8077>

editors, Kennedy rhetorically shook his fist at Castro, asserting that the United States would intervene against further “communist penetration” in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁴

This combination of frankness and fist-shaking worked. Kennedy scored an 83 percent approval rating in the next Gallup poll. A perplexed Kennedy remarked, “The worse I do, the more popular I get.”¹⁵ Despite his popularity, the President’s Cuba tribulations continued. The United States later gave Cuba \$53 million in aid to free the men captured at the Bay of Pigs.¹⁶

Ronald Reagan: Bad News from Beirut

On Saturday, 22 October 1983, President Ronald Reagan was at the Augusta National Golf Course.¹⁷ At 2:30 a.m., National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane called and told him that a suicide bomber had driven a dynamite-laden truck into the Marine barracks in Beirut, and 241 Marines had perished.¹⁸

How did this happen? US forces had entered Lebanon to forestall conflict, not fall victim to it. Israel had invaded Lebanon on 6 June 1982 to eliminate the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). Yet Israel’s attack drew international criticism. The besieged PLO looked for a way out. The United States contributed troops to a multinational operation to extricate the PLO.¹⁹ All went smoothly and 15,000 PLO fighters left for Tunisia and the multinational forces withdrew.²⁰

Success, however, proved fleeting. In September, a one-two punch hit Lebanon. On 14 September, Lebanese President Bashir Gemayal, a Maronite Christian and US ally, was assassinated. From 17 to 19 September, Lebanese Phalangist militia massacred 700 Palestinian refugees in Israeli-controlled territory.²¹ On 29 September, President Reagan returned 1,200 Marines to Beirut to “provide an interposition force” so the Lebanese government could pacify the country.²²

14 Edward T. Folliard, “Bay of Pigs,” *The Washington Post*, April 21, 1961, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/2000/popup0421.htm>.

15 Dallek, *An Unfinished Life*.

16 The aid came in the form of baby food and medicine, which was exchanged for the imprisoned Cuban exiles. “The Bay of Pigs,” linked from the *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/JFK/JFK-in-History/The-Bay-of-Pigs.aspx>

17 Ronald Reagan, *An American Life: The Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011). Kindle Edition.

18 Reagan, *An American Life*. The truck and its cargo exploded with an estimated force of 12,000 pounds of TNT; Thomas Collelo, ed., *Lebanon: A Country Study* (Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1989), 207.

19 David Howell Petracus, “The American Military and the Lessons of Vietnam: A study in Military Influence and the Use of Force in the Post-Vietnam Era,” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1987), 173.

20 Ibid., 174.

21 Ibid., 176.

22 Adam B. Lowther provides an excellent summary of Lebanon’s disintegration. Adam B. Lowther, *Americans and Asymmetric Conflict* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007), 5; accessed April 6, 2013, from Praeger Security International Online database: <http://psi.praeger.com.ezproxy6.ndu.edu/doc.aspx?d=/books/gpg/C9635/C9635-538.xml>

Many Societies, One State

Lebanon had a long history of ethno-religious division.²³ The country's main groups—Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, Shiites, and Druze—all possessed distinct lineages, loyalties, and religious visions. Israel's victory in 1948 and Jordan's King Hussein's expulsion of the PLO in 1970 sent thousands of Palestinians into Lebanon, adding to the volatile mix. Desperate to control the PLO, the Lebanese government asked Damascus for help, so the Syrians expanded their influence. In 1975, civil war erupted and the Christians were pitted against Muslims.²⁴ In reality, the contest was multisided with both the Israelis and the Syrians supporting local factions.²⁵ By 1983, fighting had destroyed much of Beirut. Religious division drove the violence, but even more than in the case of Cuba, demographic factors fed conflict. With over a third of the population under age 30 and fully a quarter under age 20, there were ample recruits for sectarian factions, and this same youth bulge was guaranteed to strain the social systems of any attempt at national governance.²⁶

A Vision-Driven Mission

In returning the Marines to Lebanon, President Reagan, Secretary of State George Shultz, and National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane were motivated by a broader vision for Middle East peace. In Lebanon's tragedy, they saw possibility. Reagan hoped peace in Lebanon would create a "golden opportunity . . . toward achieving a long-term settlement."²⁷ The administration launched a plan that would offer the Palestinians a semi-autonomous territory federated with Jordan.²⁸

Where some saw opportunity, however, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger saw danger. Weinberger did not perceive a US vital interest in Lebanon and opposed the deployment.²⁹ In the end, the mission went forward, albeit cautiously. About 1,500 Marines took positions at the Beirut airport, and strict rules of engagement governed their operations.

Although welcomed initially, the Marines' relations with various Lebanese groups soon soured. In the fall of 1982, US forces bolstered the Lebanese army in its fight against Syrian allies, effectively evaporating any notion of the Marines' neutrality.³⁰ On 16 April 1983, a van laden with explosives detonated at the US Embassy, killing scores of Americans and Lebanese employees.³¹ Then on 25 October, a second vehicle-borne bomb delivered the fatal blow that destroyed the Marine barracks. The peacekeeping mission had become a massacre.

23 Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), 173.

24 Lowther, *Americans and Asymmetric Conflict*, 1-4.

25 Elizabeth Picard, *Lebanon: A Shattered Country* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1988), 148.

26 For a graphical representation of Lebanon's 1980 population-age skew, see United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *Population Pyramids of the World from 1950-2100*, <http://populationpyramid.net/Lebanon/1960/>

27 Reagan, *An American Life*.

28 Robert C. McFarlane, *Special Trust* (New York: Cadell and Davies, 1994), 212.

29 Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 146.

30 Timothy J. Geraghty, "25 Years Later: We Came in Peace," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, 134/10/1,268 (2008): 3.

31 Reagan, *An American Life*; Lowther, *Americans and Asymmetric Conflict*, 7.

Reagan Responds

The bombing devastated and angered President Reagan. Nonetheless, he saw little purpose in retribution since, in his words, it was “difficult to establish . . . who was responsible.”³² Reagan spoke to the nation on 27 October 1983. In this address, he had a bit of the “luck of the Irish.” Just two days before, the United States had invaded Grenada. Years later, Secretary Shultz noted how the images of victory from Grenada balanced the bad news from Beirut.³³ Beyond Grenada, “the Great Communicator” was at his best that evening. He explained why he had sent the Marines to Lebanon, taking responsibility for the tragedy. Reagan cited Beirut, Grenada, and the Soviet shoot-down of a Korean airliner to demonstrate that the world was filled with danger, and he called for continued US engagement in the Middle East.³⁴

In the following months, the Marines hunkered down at the airport and later moved to ships off shore. The United States undertook air strikes and battleship bombardments against Syrian positions but launched no specific retaliation for the Marine barracks bombing. In a confrontation with the Syrians, anti-aircraft fire downed two US aircraft. The Syrians captured US Navy pilot Lieutenant Robert O. Goodman and held him from December 1983 to January 1984, when he was released to the Reverend Jesse Jackson.³⁵ In March, President Reagan withdrew the Marines. As he later wrote: “Our policy wasn’t working. We couldn’t . . . run the risk of another suicide attack . . . [And] no one wanted to commit our troops to a full-scale war in the Middle East.”³⁶

Clinton and Mogadishu

President Clinton altered his Sunday schedule for 2 October 1993. Typically, he attended a Methodist church, but on this day he went to a special mass at St. Matthew's Cathedral.³⁷ While the President listened to the sermon, his aides monitored breaking events in Somalia. American troops were in that country as part of a United Nations (UN) mission (UNOSOM II) to conduct famine relief. For some time, the military muscle of the mission, Task Force Ranger (TFR), had pursued Mohammed Farah Aidid, a recalcitrant Somali warlord whose followers had killed twenty-four Pakistani peacekeepers.³⁸

After the service, Clinton returned to the White House and gathered with his advisors. The reports from Mogadishu turned ominous. Instead of capturing Aidid, Task Force Ranger had encountered a hail of resistance. Somali militia had killed six Americans and combat raged. In response, Clinton exploded, saying: “I can’t believe we’re being pushed

32 Reagan, *An American Life*.

33 George Shultz, *Turmoil and Triumph: Diplomacy, Power, and the Victory of the American Ideal* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1995). Kindle Edition.

34 President Ronald Reagan's Televised Address to the United States, October 27, 1983, *The Beirut Memorial Online: They Came in Peace*, <http://www.beirut-memorial.org/history/reagan.html>

35 See *Ebony Update*, May 1987, http://books.google.com/books?id=Gp2ts_89clMC&pg=PA124&dq=robert+o.+goodman&source=bl&ots=v98SVE95ks&sig=--G2aenqBDNJ8wBvDqJubg110i8&hl=en&sa=X&ei=uIRfuf38DYSJ0QHmu4GgBw&sqi=2&ved=0CE0Q6AEwBw#v=onepage&q=robert%20o.%20goodman&f=false

36 Reagan, *An American Life*.

37 George Stephanopoulos, *All Too Human: A Political Education* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000). 211. Kindle Edition.

38 *Ibid.*, 212

around by these two-bit pricks.”³⁹ George Stephanopoulos, Clinton’s Senior Advisor on Policy and Strategy, sympathized with the president. The US intervention had saved thousands of Somalis by guaranteeing them access to food aid. Now, instead of providing security, US troops were trapped and taking casualties in the rabbit warren that was Mogadishu.

Land of the Clans

Somalia was an impoverished society, but not a simple one. Clan and sub-clan affiliations dominated the country’s culture.⁴⁰ The warrior ethos of Somali men powered the clan system. British scholar I. M. Lewis traced the roots of Somali males’ militant individualism to their history as herdsman, which cultivated a sense in each Somali man that he had to rely on himself and his clan to defend his family and flock.⁴¹ Somalia’s history bore out Lewis’s reading. In the early 20th century, the country spawned a celebrated hero of Muslim anticolonial resistance: Mohammed Abdullah Hassan. Dubbed “the Mad Mullah,” Hassan fought the British, the Italians, and the Ethiopians from 1900-1920. For a time, he established a Muslim state in the Somali hinterland. A literate man, Hassan once sent a taunting note to his British pursuers that read like a Somali warrior *haiku*.

I like war, and you do not . . . The country is of no use to you. If you want
wood and stone you can get them in plenty. There are also many ant heaps.
The sun is very hot.⁴²

Eventually, the British broke the Mad Mullah’s Muslim state with air power. Even so, they never captured Abdullah Hassan.⁴³

Since Hassan’s time, Somalia lurched between anarchy and strong-man rule. Nine years after gaining independence in 1960, Major General Mohammed Siad Barre took power in a coup. He governed with an iron hand for two decades. In January 1991, Barre was forced from power by an opposition that devolved into factions with his departure. The resulting chaos led to starvation, and clan leaders used control of food aid as a weapon. By 1992, Somalia’s suffering had gone global, attracting the attention of the United Nations and the United States.⁴⁴ Despite the horrific conditions, Somalia possessed the most dramatic “youth bulge” of the cases under study here, with about a third of the population under age 20, an ominous statistic in a country with strong clan and

39 Ibid., 214.

40 Ioan Lewis, *Blood and Bone: The Call of Kinship in Somali Society* (Lawrenceville, NJ: Red Sea Press, 1994).

41 John L. Hirsch and Robert B. Oakley, *Somalia and Operation Restore Hope: Reflections on Peacemaking and Peacekeeping* (Washington DC: Institute of Peace Press, 1995), 4.

42 Andrew Cockburn, “Somalia: A Failed State?” *National Geographic Online*, July 2002, <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0207/feature3/>

43 The so-called “Mad Mullah” died of influenza in December, 1920. Abdisalam M. Issa-Salwe, “The Failure of The Daraawiish State, The Clash Between Somali Clanship and State System,” (Paper Presented at the 5th International Congress of Somali Studies, December 1993, Thames Valley University, London, UK) <http://www.somaliawatch.org/archivemar03/040629602.htm>

44 Joshua L. Gleis, *Withdrawing Under Fire: Lessons Learned from Islamist Insurgencies* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2011), 62.

military traditions.⁴⁵ Pressure grew on the United Nations and the Bush administration to respond to the unfolding horror in the Horn of Africa.

Negotiation and "Disarmament Lite"

The UN's first Somalia mission (UNOSOM I, April-December 1992) failed because its military forces could not handle local warlords like Mohammed Farah Aidid. (UNOSOM I never had more than 1,000 personnel on the ground.) In the wake of the UN's failure, a reluctant Bush administration pondered its options. National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft expressed the skeptics' case best when, during one meeting he said: "Sure, we can get in . . . But how do we get out?"⁴⁶

Nonetheless, Washington yielded to international pressure and organized a new Unified Task Force (UNITAF), US-led and sanctioned by the UN, that went ashore on 5 December 1992. UNITAF contained 37,000 soldiers from 14 countries, including 25,000 Americans. The task force's muscled-up military was matched with a method heavy on diplomacy. President Bush sent Ambassador Robert Oakley to Somalia. He negotiated with clan warlords, in particular Mohammed Farah Aidid. Oakley saw such talks as a pragmatic necessity. The warlords were hardly models of statesmanship, but they were not necessarily ideologically anti-American. No effort was made to forcibly disarm the clans.⁴⁷ This approach—a significant military presence, negotiations with warlords, and "disarmament lite"—brought relative peace to Mogadishu from March to June 1993.⁴⁸

Mission Creep or Mission Leap?

With conditions stabilized, UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Gali wanted the United Nations to assume an expanded mission that included: full disarmament, resettling refugees, and restoring "law and order throughout Somalia."⁴⁹ Toward this end, UNOSOM II took over in May 1993. A Turkish general headed the operation with US Admiral Jonathan Howe acting as Boutros-Gali's special representative. UNOSOM II was far smaller than UNITAF, with a maximum of 12,000 troops.⁵⁰

Relations between the UN and the Somalis, particularly Aidid, plunged under UNOSOM II. Aidid did not respect the UN, while Boutros-Gali and Admiral Howe saw an outlaw in the Somali clan

45 For Somalia's population pyramid in 1990, see United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *Population Pyramids of the World from 1950-2100*, <http://populationpyramid.net/Somalia/1990/>

46 Gleis, *Withdrawing Under Fire*, 63.

47 Ibid.

48 Jonathan Stevenson, *Losing Mogadishu: Testing U.S. Policy in Somalia* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995), 90.

49 The UN Refugee Agency, *Resolution 814 (1993) Adopted by the Security Council at its 3188th Meeting, on 26 March 1993*, <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/3b00f21143.html>; for Boutros-Gali's and Admiral Howe's conviction that Somalia required "a comprehensive disarmament," see Robert F. Baumann, Lawrence A. Yates, and Versalle F. Washington, *My Clan Against the World*, US and Coalition Forces in Somalia 1992-1994 (Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004), 100-101; for a diplomatic perspective on the gear-shift from UNITAF to UNOSOM II, see Hirsch and Oakley, *Somalia and Operation Restore Hope*, 101-114.

50 Gleis, *Withdrawing Under Fire*, 67.

leader.⁵¹ After an abortive 5 June 1993 raid on Aidid's radio station, UN forces attacked several of his power centers.⁵² Days later, the UN command published a wanted poster that put a \$25,000 bounty on Aidid's head, in effect making him "Public Enemy Number One" as far as the UN mission was concerned.⁵³

While the UN/US forces pursued Mogadishu's most-wanted warlord, the Clinton administration sought to trim its exposure in Somalia, withdrawing heavy weapons and, in the early fall, denying requests for armor and AC-130 gunships. As frustration over the Aidid manhunt mounted, US commanders got help in Task Force Ranger. On 4 October, TF Ranger raided Aidid's headquarters in an operation remembered as "Black Hawk Down."⁵⁴

The story of the Battle of Mogadishu is well known.⁵⁵ For this study, only key features that contributed to US defeat are relevant. First, the US airmobile tactics did not surprise the Somalis, who had seen the United States use such an approach several times before.⁵⁶ Second, the Somalis, likely with Islamist assistance, put timers on rocket-propelled grenades to use against helicopters. Employing this tactic, Aidid's militiamen downed two of TF Ranger's Blackhawks.⁵⁷ Finally, Task Force Ranger confronted a sociological challenge. Once the shooting started, armed Somalis attacked from all sides, using children as spotters and women as human shields.⁵⁸ Although American marksmanship skewed the casualty balance—the United States lost 18 soldiers, with 1 captured (helicopter pilot Mike Durant) while the Somalis lost between 500 and 2,000—when global media broadcast Somali mobs dragging a US soldier's corpse through the streets, the mission was seen as a failure.⁵⁹

Clinton Responds

On 6 October, Clinton's national security team met. The commanders in Mogadishu wanted to hunt down Aidid.⁶⁰ Nonetheless, Clinton refused. He feared that, even were Aidid captured, Washington "would own Somalia, and there was no guarantee that we could put it together . . ."⁶¹ Clinton sent Ambassador Oakley to negotiate to free Mike Durant, which the Ambassador did after eleven days of talks with Aidid.⁶² US forces increased and the Clinton administration imposed a 6-month deadline for withdrawal. On 7 October 1993, Clinton addressed the

51 Aidid harbored a personal grudge against Boutros-Gali, an Egyptian diplomat whom Aidid suspected had supported former Aidid's old foe, Somali dictator Siad Barre. See Baumann, Yates, and Washington, "My Clan Against the World," 118.

52 Baumann, Yates, and Washington, *My Clan Against the World*, 125.

53 *Frontline Interview with Admiral Jonathan Howe*, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/ambush/interviews/howe.html>

54 The term "Black Hawk Down" is the title of the classic book on the Battle of Mogadishu by Mark Bowden. Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999).

55 The best tactical account is Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*.

56 Stevenson, *Losing Mogadishu*, 94.

57 Baumann, Yates, and Washington, *My Clan Against the World*, 144.

58 Ibid., 147.

59 Stevenson, *Losing Mogadishu*, 94-95; Gleis, *Withdrawing Under Fire*, 73. On bodies dragged through the streets, see Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*, 398.

60 Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*, 379-380.

61 William Jefferson Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 551.

62 Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*, 401-402.

nation. He pledged the United States would leave Somalia “on our terms.” In concluding, he said, “Our mission from this day forward is to increase our strength . . . , bring our soldiers out, and bring them home.”⁶³ By March 1994, all American forces had left Mogadishu.

Beyond Traditional Lessons

The three interventions examined share certain patterns. First, in no case did the president “drill down” and rigorously question the mission’s plan prior to its execution. All three chief executives were “hands-off” leaders, something that Kennedy and Clinton regretted and swore they would never repeat. In Cuba and Somalia, US opponents understood the strategies and tactics employed against them and, thus, could thwart the same. Both Beirut and Somalia fell victim to “mission creep” (or, better said, mission leap) as political goals expanded without the means to accomplish them. In every case, sociological factors upended US plans: Castro’s militia and the urban combat arenas in Beirut and Mogadishu favored local forces. Finally, each president was bedeviled by a hostage crisis: Kennedy had to ransom the Cuban exiles; Reagan had to rely on Jesse Jackson to free Navy pilot Goodman; and Clinton had Ambassador Oakley negotiate Robert Durant’s recovery.

None of the above are offered as traditional lessons in the sense of constituting easily correctable tactical errors that, but for their commission, victory would have ensued. Instead, they represent classic (and perhaps fatal) symptoms of limited interventions gone bad. In the view of this author, each of these interventions had entered what economists call “the area of diminishing returns.” Even a perfect amphibious assault would not have overcome Castro’s militia at this early, militant stage in the revolution he led. Even a better defended Beirut barracks would not have permitted the Marines to control Lebanon’s surging sectarian groups. And had Clinton continued after Mohammed Farah Aidid, his capture was hardly assured and the ensuing combat, while almost certainly featuring a kill ratio in favor of the United States, would also have likely multiplied enemies among Mogadishu’s teeming militias.

While the three presidents can be faulted for launching these operations, they deserve credit for recognizing—belatedly—that the interventions had entered the operational phase where rising costs had rendered their original political objectives either too risky or beyond reach.⁶⁴ Seeing further difficulties down the road and no natural end point, all three presidents cut their losses. In the aftermath, all proved “great communicators” who wove effective “retreat narratives” wherein they explained their decisions to withdraw and took responsibility for the defeats that occurred. Finally, all three rhetorically shook their fists at their enemies and in two cases added forces even as they made plans to bring the troops home.

The record suggests presidents must take care when considering interventions long on promise (a new Cuba, Middle East peace, an orderly Somalia) and short on means. In all three cases, a “youth bulge” guaranteed that the shaky states or political entities the United States

⁶³ Clinton, William Jefferson, *Address on Somalia (October 7, 1993)* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, The Miller Center), <http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4566>

⁶⁴ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 92.

hoped to support (all of them long shots: a Cuban exile-dominated government, stabilized Lebanese/Somali regimes) would have had a plethora of clients to satisfy and, more importantly, their enemies would have had an ample recruiting pool. In two cases, the urban context (Beirut and Mogadishu) masked US opponents and muted US firepower. In Beirut and Somalia, America's adversaries appeared indifferent to casualties. Lebanese radicals obliterated themselves with their bombs. And in Mogadishu, years later Mohamed Farah Aidid's son publicly celebrated the Somalis' 1993 "victory" over the United States (despite the casualty skew and despite his being a former US Marine).⁶⁵

These experiences are worth remembering because limited interventions are unlikely to disappear. The continued struggle against terrorism—combined with the fatigue factor resulting from the recent long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—could create conditions where operations of the type described here come under consideration. (Indeed, as this is being written, France is intervening against Islamists in Mali.) The cases described remind us how such operations can bring on a host of knotty problems, including urban spaces that muffle firepower, the likelihood that casualties inflicted on adversaries inspire, rather than diminish, local resistance, and the difficulty in attributing acts of terrorism. In fact, in a world where population growth is fueling rampant urbanization, these factors could return with a vengeance.

One key figure who emerges from these three cases, and whose role speaks to possible future limited interventions, is Ambassador Robert Oakley. His pragmatic approach to peacekeeping in Somalia, which involved maintaining "constant dialogue and close vigilance over a tough adversary like Aidid," while also keeping Aidid in the dialogue loop, along with the other Somali warlords, reduced violence and improved the situation.⁶⁶ Later, when the subsequent UN mission and its American authorities designated Aidid "public enemy number one" (when he was but one of many Somali warlords), the situation deteriorated into confrontation, combat, and hostage-taking. Oakley's pragmatism in undertaking admittedly morally ambiguous dealings with a figure like Aidid deserves more scrutiny than this paper can provide. Nonetheless, in future operations, Oakley's work could provide a template for the sort of ground-level facilitator adapted to the warlord demimonde; one who could bring about "good enough" results that might enhance the possibilities for the likely limited successes a limited intervention could produce.⁶⁷

Though the interventions here were discrete and small in scale, their stories also throw light on problems that affected much larger operations. For example, mission creep (or mission leap/mission morph) factored heavily in both the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, as operations originally dedicated to a short-term concept of "regime change" morphed into decade-long, multiagency efforts at nation-building. Likewise, in

65 Ron Kampeas, "From Marine to Warlord: The Strange Journey of Hussein Farrah Aidid," *Associated Press*, February 11, 2002, http://www.boston.com/news/daily/11/somali_warlord.htm

66 Hirsch and Oakley, *Somalia and Operation Restore Hope*, 157.

67 Much of diplomatic training involves learning the protocol of state-to-state relations governed by the Vienna Convention. Doing diplomacy with substate/nonstate actors (militias, factions, warlords) is likely an art in itself, one that would benefit from greater study. Oakley provides an excellent example.

those cases, the initial military forces deployed proved too small for the multiple tasks at hand, requiring subsequent military “surges” in both countries.⁶⁸ Moreover, strategic leaders in large-scale interventions—as with the presidents under study here—often confront the problem of diminishing returns and have to decide when the result is “good enough” to bring the troops home.⁶⁹ Just as this paper considers JFK, Reagan, and Clinton, a larger such study could also consider and compare Presidents De Gaulle (Algeria), Nixon (Vietnam), and Obama (Iraq, Afghanistan) as strategic leaders who also faced the *hold ‘em or fold ‘em* dilemma at a far higher level of military scale and political import.

In the end, the decisions made by Presidents Kennedy, Reagan, and Clinton proved sound. Their stories should instruct future leaders who, while they may plan on victories, will likely also have to manage reversals, particularly in a world with more mega-cities and potentially at least partly radicalized populations. In undertaking intervention in turbulent societies, a strategic leader must know, in Brent Scowcroft’s wise words, not only “how to get in,” but also how—and when—to get out.

68 On the Iraq surge, see Thomas Ricks, *The Gamble: General Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, Random House, 2009). On Afghanistan, see Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

69 The phrase “good enough” is derived from “Afghan good enough,” an appraisal that the United States and its NATO allies reportedly were making of the possibilities in Afghanistan in 2012. See Helen Cooper and Tom Shanker, “U.S. Redefines Afghan Success Before Conference,” *The New York Times*, May 17, 2012, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/18/world/asia/us-redefines-afghan-success-before-conference.html?smid=pl-share&_r=0