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Commentaries & Replies

On “Confronting Africa’s Sobels”

Chris Mason

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This commentary is in response to the article, “Confronting Africa’s Sobels” by Robert L. Feldman and Michel Ben Arrous published in the Winter 2013-14 issue of Parameters (vol. 43, no. 4).

“

Confronting Africa’s Sobels” by Robert Feldman and Michel Ben Arrous is a solid and scholarly discussion of the problem of military personnel in Sierra Leone who crossed sides in Sierra Leone’s bloody civil war from 1991 to 2002. They acted as “soldiers by day and rebels by night” to maximize their ability to prey on their own civil population, often coordinating with insurgent bands to deconflict the despoliation of villages where both forces were operating. The authors point out that in Sierra Leone, rebel leaders and the army both recruited young men from the same demographic of the same ethnic group. They note that in most civil conflicts in Africa, where government soldiers and rebels are drawn from different ethno-linguistic groups, massacres and reprisals driven by ethnic conflict are the norm. However, they do not suggest the Sobel phenomenon may be limited to rare cases like Sierra Leone where ethnic animosities were not a major factor fueling the insurgency. Indeed, a major shortcoming of the article is that the authors suggest there are other examples of this phenomenon but do not cite additional cases. This commends the potential for further research into the Sobel issue to determine if it exists elsewhere or was unique to the civil war in Sierra Leone.

The article is most intriguing in its discussion of the role of private military companies in Africa, and least satisfying in its conclusions. The intractable issues of post-colonial Africa have frustrated diplomats and development agencies for decades, and the vague and chimerical suggestions of the authors—that a troubled African nation should simply “get its own house in order,” for example—are not policy prescriptions likely to cut the Gordian Knot of Africa’s manifold governance problems. Furthermore, it remains an open question whether foreign military training efforts in Africa, which include several hours of classroom lectures on respecting human rights and so on, actually change deep-rooted social values and behavior and “professionalize” African armies or simply make them more lethal and efficient. Certainly, they do nothing to improve the governments which give them their marching orders. As John Foster Dulles advised President Eisenhower sixty years ago, “strong armies do not make strong governments. Strong governments make strong armies.”

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The Authors Reply

Robert L. Feldman and Michel Ben Arrous

The authors thank Dr. Mason for his thoughtful critique of our article. With regards to his request for further examples, let us preface our response by stating that shifting loyalties and periodic changeovers from soldier to rebel are certainly not limited to Sierra Leone. As discussed below, Algeria, Pakistan, Mexico, and the Central African Republic had or have various iterations of the Sobel phenomenon. In Sierra Leone the phenomenon may best be seen as a dramatic configuration of nonspecific patterns. The duration of whatever state (soldier or rebel) can be longer, as in the Tuareg case discussed in the article. Repetitive instances of army passivity, as in Algeria during the 90s, when villagers were massacred in the immediate vicinity of army compounds, do not occur without a degree of complicity within security forces. A similar point has repeatedly been made regarding the reliability of Pakistani military and intelligence agencies and their reluctance to attack a number of Taliban bases. Other disturbing configurations are observed in drug wars, such as that in Mexico where vigilante groups, some of them duly integrated in the army, fight specific cartels while banding up with others.

What was unique to the war in Sierra Leone was the concentration of military, political, and economic power in an urban lumpenproletariat. Condemned as a “recruiting ground for thieves and criminals of all kinds,” the lumpenproletariat was analyzed by Karl Marx as a “social scum” unable to develop a political struggle on its own, a “passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of society” that could only become, on occasion, “the bribed tool of reactionary intrigue.” The underprivileged youth of Freetown proved Marx wrong. One may wonder if history isn’t repeating itself in the Central African Republic, as the border between anti-balaka militias (many of them wearing army uniforms) and the rank and file of the army, who are largely drawn from the same social margins, appears extremely fuzzy.

Perhaps the most widespread security threat in Africa today is the destruction of citizens’ confidence in the institutions that are supposed to protect them. Military training programs may help to curb this destructive process, but we concur with Dr. Mason that these are often inadequate. Concerted efforts also need to be made in other key sectors like the judiciary and the police, though previous efforts here, too, have often fallen far short of desired outcomes. In this regard, we may mention the issue of “poldits,” a portmanteau of “police” and “bandits,” in reference to off duty policemen or checkpoint officers who rent their uniforms and weapons to *coupeurs de route* (personal observations in Benin, Burundi, and Cameroon): this is yet another variation of the Sobel phenomenon.

On “The True Tragedy of American Power”

J. Thomas Moriarty II

This commentary is in response to the article, “On the True Tragedy of American Power” by Isaiah Wilson published in the Winter 2013-14 issue of Parameters (vol. 43, no. 4).

In “The True Tragedy of American Power,” Colonel Isaiah Wilson III argues that US policymakers often conflate the use of force with power. He argues, “Power is the foundation of force; but an excessive employment of force—not just military, but economic and political—can erode the power foundation.”¹ With a conceptual tip of the hat to the classics, he analogizes the United States to a tragic hero and focuses on the negative repercussions of an overreliance on force, especially military force, in meeting global responsibilities.

Wilson should be commended for offering a valuable discussion on the differences between power and force. That said, while Wilson’s emphasis on the consequences of excessive force has merit, it comes at the expense of fully developing the exact causal relationship between power and force, and, specifically, the role of power in limiting the availability of certain force options.

Wilson’s warning for how excessive force can lead to a decrease in state power is wise. However, this begs the question of why powerful states feel the need to employ force excessively in the first place. If a broad explanation of power is the ability to get states to do something they are not likely to do on their own, then a state that feels a need to use a disproportionate amount of force is, by definition, a state that lacks power or is in decline. Powerful states do not need to rely primarily on force; weak states do. Importantly, a state with declining power finds itself limited not only in its ability to achieve its goals without the use of force but also in the types of force it can employ. For example, a loss in economic power reduces the ability of that state to utilize economic force to settle its affairs. Thus, conceptually speaking, decreases in a state’s power create the conditions for overreliance on force, which, eventually, causes even greater power loss.

The increasing dependence of the United States on military force is not the result of leaders mistaking force for power, as Wilson argues; rather, it arises ironically from the attempts of the United States since the end of World War II to create a stable international system. A consequence of developing democratic and economically diverse countries throughout the world is that these states have begun to challenge US dominance in international affairs.² As these states increase their political and economic powers, the United States has seen its ability to influence others through the use of these advantages decline. Faced with this loss of power, the United States has begun to rely on the one

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1 Isaiah Wilson, “The True Tragedy of American Power,” *Parameters* 43, no. 4 (Fall 2014):17.

2 Arthur Stein, “The Hegemon’s Dilemma,” *International Organization* 38, no. 2 (Spring 1984):355-386.

element of national power for which it retains dominance—its military. If there is a true American tragedy, it's almost certainly this. It is not that policymakers misunderstand the distinction between force and power; instead, it is their flawed belief that military force can halt the loss of power in other arenas.

Analogizing the United States as a tragic hero is problematic. Central to a tragic hero is a sense of inevitability, an inability to reverse the looming doom that awaits. While the decline in US power was, and is, inevitable, the United States need not suffer Hamlet's horrific fate; it need not be a tragic hero. The United States must accept limits to both its power and its military force. In this vein, Colonel Wilson and I are in complete agreement.

The Author Replies

Isaiah Wilson III

My sincere thanks and compliments to Dr. J. Thomas Moriarty II for his commentary and his thoughtful critique of the propositions and arguments I offered in my article. The issue—of the present, past, and future of American uses of force and our understanding and appreciation of the difference between “force” and “power”—is a fundamental one, not merely as a point of academic debates, but critically determinative of our Nation's future roles, responsibilities, and most importantly, reputation and legitimacy of future US global leadership . . . its suasive “power” both at home and abroad. Dr. Moriarty's response keeps this debate alive and dynamic, at a most precipitous moment: at a time when the potential “tragedy” of mistaking force and acts of force as acts of real power could prove most deleterious to both the United States' future presence and prestige in world affairs and, more impactful, to future global stability, security, and prosperity.

Failure to distinguish between applications of strategic tools from strategy itself, combined with flawed displacement of force (to include over-use of military treatments) over time can lead to the decline and fall of great powers. This is the tragedy to which I am speaking. The “tragedy” is not merely additive, it is multiplicative . . . logarithmic. Choosing how one “displaces available force(s) over time” is an essential part of the power equation . . . of strategy itself; especially critical in times of compounding security dilemmas under austerity. Being capable of producing reliable, durable, enduring, and legitimate power solutions to geostrategic problems under conditions of rapidly declining force resources, first demands a clear-eyed and accurate understanding of the difference between force (ways and means) and power—the former being a necessary part of the latter, but considered separate from principled and value-informed ends, woefully insufficient proxies to real long-lasting power. Additionally, seeing, understanding, and leveraging the power potential in “other's” forces available (that is, the power of multilateralism; collective actioning) as part of our own power equation offers genuine possibilities for overcoming America's current tragic

flaw, and consequently, America's tragedy. Dr. Moriarty would be well reminded (as should we all) to take some solace in the fact that America may only be in "Act III," the "Climax of Action," of this five-act tragedy, where the Hero stands at a crossroads, still at a point of choice, of decision and opportunity to avoid the "Falling Action." As in all of Shakespeare's tragedies, dark tragic endings seem inevitable primarily in retrospect, once the hero's fall is complete. Tragedy dooms its hero, but it promises to its audience that a sense of the tragic—of the limits of force—might save them from the hero's fate. In this sense, tragedies are not inevitable, but rather reversible. Conflicts in force and power can be resolved, and eventually will be, whether through a catastrophe, the downfall of the hero, or through his victory and transfiguration. Once again, as in past times, why and how America chooses to intervene will matter most.

On “Rebalancing US Military Power”

J. Kane Tomlin

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*This commentary is in response to the article, “Rebalancing US Military Power,” by Dr. Anna Simons published in the Winter 2013 issue of *Parameters* (vol. 43, no. 4).*

It is always a pleasure to read diplo-military articles, as I have long been an advocate of a full spectrum approach to conflict that includes diplomacy at one end and military force at the other. Dr. Simons presents compelling arguments for the use of “partnering” as both a strategically and tactically superior option to the current US post-Cold War role as a world leader in an increasingly asymmetric and destabilized world. However, I feel that some of her arguments could be more fully developed and that her lack of focus on military advisors’ leadership requirements along with chronological details limits the applicability of her recommendations. I would like to develop her thesis further and respectfully include actionable recommendations that would more effectively turn the concept of “partnering” into policies that could be implemented.

Dr. Simons’s economic arguments are particularly valid, as the “development of a global land power network” and “limit[ing] boots on the ground” are admirable goals. However, looking to the Marshall Plan’s post-WWII successes, one should add significant time commitments in addition to troop levels (or lack thereof). Her partnering argument becomes much more compelling when policymakers realize these endeavors take decades to cement, in contrast to Dr. Simons’s assertion in the article. Therefore, the economic and resource requirements of a partnership versus a counter-“everything under the sun” approach becomes more attractive provided academics and diplomats without field experience do not overlook the leadership requirements. As any combatant commander will attest, leadership is paramount to success in partnering.

Rather than accept Dr. Simon’s thesis outright, I argue the actual shift to partnering is a two-step process that should not be shortchanged in pursuit of expediency. True partnership and professionalization requires direct leadership instead of mere advising. Only leadership’s trust building function leads to true partnering as a longer-term sustainment strategy. Many successes in WWII were predicated on American military leadership in a direct role during combat operations. Merrill’s Marauders and General Stillwell’s Chinese forces are both examples of successful diplo-warfare precisely because these generals led their forces from the front. Distrust of advisors grows exponentially when the partner nation’s military leadership feels the advisors view themselves as superior. The element of leading from the front is overlooked in this article.

SFC Tomlin is currently serving as the Course Manager and Master Diver in charge of the Engineer Diving Officer Course at the Naval Diving and Salvage Training Center. SFC Tomlin has two tours to Iraq and has served as the Diving Liaison Officer to USFI in charge of all Army diving operations. SFC Tomlin has a Master’s Degree in Homeland Security and is pursuing a Doctorate in Strategic Security from Henley Putnam University.

While Dr. Simon's familial relationship analogy is accurate in many respects, it does not take into account what I coin the "father-son" element. Similar to the parent-child relationship in later stages, the early stages of a leadership-based partnership require leadership by example. Just as a young son learns to "be a man" by watching his father's example, young militaries learn professional behaviors by seeing them in action. No amount of formal training can replace the "follow me and do what I do" style of a direct leader. Additionally, just as a son emulates his father's example in order to win approval, host nation militaries try to earn praise by following the example of leaders they trust and respect. Tactically, this is the first step to professionalizing the host nation's military. Subsequently, the relationship should morph into a "marriage" type espoused by Dr. Simons. Failure to lead and earn trust means the recommendations in this article are doomed to fail.

Civic action as the ultimate litmus test of military readiness to partner is a fantastic recommendation and should leverage the existing Civil Affairs organization within the military. I also agree flag officers should retain the authority to curtail these operations when the host nation's military proves unable or unwilling to provide basic civil services for their citizens. I argue the partnership envisioned by Dr. Simons should be tactically implemented as a two-stage process; first, in a direct leadership role of the host nation's military, and then in an advisory role once trust is earned between both parties. I also think that coercive diplomacy and prioritization of American interests are viable diplomatic options for gaining rapid tactical advantages in spite of the indictment they are given in the article. Unfortunately, there is simply not room in this commentary to expound fully, though many will agree that creating an asymmetry of motivation to comply with US desires is sometimes necessary (*vis-à-vis* Pakistan's air space after 9/11).

While the professional soldier has a long and illustrious history associated with the storied ideal of the "warrior poet," Dr. Simons is advocating for a new twist on an old ideal—the Warrior Diplomat. Conceptually, this is a sound and timely ideal that limits American expenditure of manpower and treasure. This goal becomes more important in endeavors that increasingly require long time commitments to avoid the fate we see in Iraq today. With the addition of leadership skills to Dr. Simons's list of required traits, her ideals can certainly be implemented "on the cheap" compared to the large scale COIN strategy recently promoted by General Petraeus. In an era of shrinking budgets and growing crises around the globe, Dr. Simons's recommendations are much more realistic.

The Author Replies

Anna Simons

Many thanks to SFC Tomlin for the seriousness with which he took my arguments. I agree with him: partnering should last decades, if not longer. However, I also want to be clear:

determining whether we have a worthwhile partner should not take decades. Indeed, it should not even take a decade.

We Americans should be very cautious and not fall for laws of “averages” when it comes to partnering, advising, stability operations, nation-building, counterinsurgency, or anything else involving other countries’ militaries. Yes, according to current conventional wisdom, a successful counterinsurgency takes at least a decade to wage. But this is precisely why I concentrated on the Huk Rebellion. What Ramon Magsaysay and Edward Lansdale accomplished not only represents a short, decisive success, but should suggest that every case is sufficiently unique; none should be treated as an average anything. Otherwise, it becomes too easy to want to reach for manuals rather than do what Lansdale did: read the situation in the Philippines for itself, and not for something else.

I also turned to Lansdale because the success he assisted with required minimal time, minimal money, and a minimal footprint—but a great deal of nondoctrinaire thinking and a willing partner. Magsaysay’s willingness, along with his and Lansdale’s wife, were key. Willingness to turn the Filipino Army around preceded legitimacy. And, again, willingness should never be too hard for advisors to accurately gauge.

As for the issue of “direct leadership,” I agree with SFC Tomlin. Taking charge was surely the easiest way for American and British leaders to attain results during World War II. However, sensibilities and sensitivities have shifted considerably since then. It is hard if not impossible to imagine where an American would be allowed to ‘lead’ another military’s forces today. Guerrilla forces, maybe. But a unit in a sovereign country’s military? We did not even attempt that in Afghanistan or Iraq. Nor is it clear whether it would be locals or the American electorate who would resist such a notion more vigorously.

At the same time, SFC Tomlin alludes to the attributes advisors should possess. I again agree. They do need to lead by example – which means their comportment needs to be beyond reproach. They must embody the best our military has to offer in terms of maturity and expertise. Of course, this means that what American advisors communicate nonverbally is as important as anything they say. In fact, I’d submit that the 21st century challenge for “warrior-diplomats” or for any Americans sent abroad to advise foreign forces is to be able to lead without taking charge.