Books representing the U.S. foreign policy establishment’s right wing, such as Bret Stephens’s America in Retreat (2014), and left wing, such as Barry Posen’s Restraint (2014), argue for strategic alternatives to recent U.S. foreign policy. Eliot Cohen’s The Big Stick, representing the center of that establishment, rejects the very notion of grand strategy. The director of Strategic Studies at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, author of influential books, including Supreme Command (2002) and Conquered into Liberty (2011), and a former counselor in George W. Bush’s State Department, Cohen takes the conduct of U.S. policy since 2001 as the definition, by and large, of the only reasonable way in which it can be and should be conducted. The job of American foreign policy is to use military power as the “guarantor of world order.” That means a bigger military to be used “chronically” to fight every kind of war, even more committed than recently to bolstering alliances and governing the ungovernable. But, because this book tells us that the distinction between war and peace is illusory, there is one thing that we must never ever think of doing with this “big stick”—namely, win wars and live in peace.

This book is full of straw men. In defense of the past quarter century’s foreign policy, Cohen writes that despite the rise of “neo-isolationism,” most Americans “care about America’s place in the world” and want our policy to be “tougher.” In fact, the American people’s patriotism and desire to be tough on enemies does not lessen their disdain for wars ill-conceived and incompetently waged. Pinning an invidious label on the American people’s rejection of current policy avoids coming to terms with the reasons for that rejection. Against objections to foreign policy in pursuit of world order—from failures “in every major war ever since at least Vietnam if not Korea” to disasters wrought by mucking ignorantly in foreign cultures—Cohen answers that “it is difficult to find other nations that have garnered more success in the world in their uses of force.”

Besides, according to Cohen, we’ve had great successes. “The 1991 Gulf War reversed an invasion that nearly overthrew the order of the Persian Gulf.” Calling that operation a success, as Cohen did in a 1992 debate with me in the pages of Commentary magazine, ignores the reality that waging war on Saddam Hussein had made an enemy where there hadn’t been one, and, above all that, doing so inconclusively. Far from firming up any order, it had destroyed respect for America while energizing jihad. The Gulf War succeeded in carrying out U.S. government policy all right. But it was dumb. The idiocy of its authors—George H.W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and Colin Powell—became less deniable as the years rolled by and the complications snowballed. Nevertheless, Cohen treats as canonical the notion that victory consists of success in implementing policy, regardless of how dumb. “Even the Vietnam war achieved important objectives in Southeast Asia.” As evidence, he cites Singapore founder Lee Kuan Yew’s approval of the Vietnam War. Cohen wants more such successes. Americans do not.

Moreover, according to Cohen, we have no choice but to spread “democratic values” because we cannot “hope to flourish in
a world increasingly hostile to those values." Never mind that America’s founding generation and the four that followed thought and acted on the premise that America was and would remain unique in its dedication to “the laws of nature and of nature’s God.” Alas, fewer adherents to the Declaration of Independence’s premises may be found in the world today (America included) than in 1776. George Washington counseled peace, friendship, and reciprocity toward all nations without becoming embroiled in the affairs of those nations, much less making them resemble the U.S. But Cohen writes that because foreign conflict and corruption will—must—infect us, we must do our best to wipe it out. This, he says, is the realistic idealism shared by Woodrow Wilson and even by John Quincy Adams. And if you believe that, chances are you have never read either.

Chapter 2, “fifteen years of war,” argues that, although America’s foreign policy class could have managed the War on Terror better (his only suggestion is that more men should have been sent to reform Iraq sooner and should still be on the job), there was really no alternative to doing more or less what was done, in the name of world order. Nor, he writes, has there ever been. Ronald Reagan had also tried “to restore the global military balance with the Soviet Union.” (He doesn’t mention Reagan’s own view of the matter: “we win, they lose.”) Cohen then goes out on a limb to prophesy that the present war, which will last indefinitely, will have profound effects on America. What these may be, how to conduct the war to our benefit, or how to end it, he does not hint.

For Cohen, everybody is, has always been, and will always be in Necessity’s grip. George W. Bush’s administration had come to office “dismissive of peacekeeping and nation-building, found themselves committed to not one but two vast projects of nation-building in Afghanistan and Iraq.” Found themselves? Nonsense. They decided. Why? Cohen’s explanation for the Occupation of Iraq excludes the highly charged internal lobbying by State and CIA as well as the equally intense campaign by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to save their Sunni clients in Iraq. He limits himself to “they also saw an opportunity to open what had traditionally been one of the Arab world’s most advanced and secular societies to a different and more liberal future.” But “seeing” something this non-existent is proof of incompetence, while abandoning the basis on which one is elected in order to pursue such a prospect is hardly democratic.

Necessity is responsible as well for the occupation of Afghanistan: “Having defeated the Taliban, it is difficult to imagine how the United States could then have withdrawn from a chaotic Afghanistan, repeating what was generally conceded to be a mistake in the wake of the anti-Soviet insurgency there in the 1980s.” Fact: there never was a U.S. presence in Afghanistan during or after the anti-Soviet insurgency. The United States had supported the Mujahedeen through Pakistani intelligence in Islamabad, to which one CIA liaison officer (plus a half-time equivalent) was attached. That Cohen and friends couldn’t imagine the U.S. not occupying Afghanistan hardly negates the fact that lots of other observers were pointing out that America had done well in Afghanistan by minding its own interests, and warned that getting into the details of Afghan life is a historic recipe for disaster.

The book’s core is chapter 3, “the American Hand,” which is meant to show the big stick’s dimensions and uses. Because of America’s “large and com-

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petent" armed forces—and her economy, demographics, institutions, and alliances—no other country, or collection of countries, has a better hand to play in international politics. Cohen sidesteps the fact that, the armed forces’ competence in battle notwithstanding, our foreign policy establishment has an unbroken record of incompetence in war. The problem is not with the size or sturdiness of the stick, but the purposes to which it is put.

The chapter stresses macro-figures such as levels of population, GDP, and military spending. Top-line U.S. military spending has hovered above one third of the entire world’s since before the end of the Cold War. “What has the American defense budget purchased?” asks Cohen. He answers—with little more than catalogs of weapons, starting with nuclear forces—“more than enough…to obliterate any opponent.” That’s justplain ignorant. Obliterate what, why, to what end? Today’s U.S. nuclear arsenal can’t put a dent in a billion Chinese, nor in Chinese missile forces—because the missiles are mobile or in tunnels; we don’t know where they are. The same can be said concerning Russia’s or North Korea’s missiles. The U.S. government does not address the question of what our nuclear forces should be able to destroy in order to safeguard America—nor does Eliot Cohen.

The same goes for defending against nukes. He writes: “The greatest strategic change in the last thirty years has been a bipartisan acceptance of active defense—the ability to shoot down incoming missiles—as a necessary component of the force structure.” But after mentioning that “technology, thinking, and most important geopolitics” have discredited mutual assured destruction,” that missile defense “has been proven to work,” and that it involves Aegis-class cruisers and destroyers as well as land-based interceptors chiefly in Alaska, he adds that “the United States has insisted that it is not attempting to defend against the large Russian and Chinese nuclear arsenals that could swamp these defenses in any case.” All true. But why so? Cohen punts, concluding, “a redesigned and modernized nuclear arsenal and the strategic concepts to accompany it are therefore one requirement of the new nuclear era.” What might these new strategic concepts be? How come the U.S. government is acting so self-contradictorily? Why doesn’t Cohen argue that the U.S. should defend the American people against the maw nuclear threats by ceasing to limit our defenses to a handful of interceptors and by abandoning the treaty-based distinction between national and theater defenses?

Cohen’s discussions of conventional weapons are just as unsatisfying. He makes a persuasive case that our weapons are old and outdated, largely because the process of innovation has ground to an expensive crawl. But he tells us nothing about what this obsolescence means in practice or how to overcome it. Yes, the M-1 Abrams tank was designed in the 1970s, and employs the electronics of an old F-16 fighter plane. But that does not explain why the new Russian Armata T-14 tank outclasses it. That is largely because of the Russian “reactive armor,” which senses incoming projectiles and sends out explosives to meet them. Why don’t U.S. tanks have this? Our government has rejected reactive armor because using it in urban warfare would increase collateral civilian casualties. And since the U.S. government’s promotion of “world order” prioritizes limiting civilian casualties in urban warfare, it’s better…to get our tankers killed.

Cohen’s description of technological advances also blinds him to some of warfare’s most important, enduring truths. Yes, because precision weapons have reduced the importance of sheer mass on the battlefield, even guerrillas can now enjoy the benefits of GPS, sure-shot missiles, and surveillance by satellites and even drones. As a result, “the U.S. military’s routine assumption of secure rear areas no longer holds.” What does that mean in practice? For Cohen it seems to mean the danger of infiltration by guerrillas. But there’s a lot more to it than that. For one thing, artillery preparation for attacks, enhanced by precise targeting, is more important than ever. As artilleryman and father of Russian strategic forces Nikolai Ogarkov pointed out, ballistic missiles used for precursor strikes on rear areas in the opening phase of operations prejudice their outcomes.

含 Containment, end state, and exit strategy are a kind of strategic pixie dust, the sprinkling of which over the complex problems of contemporary policy problems may seem to make them manageable. In fact they do not manage them. They oversimplify them, and because their intended results are often unattainable, these concepts paralyze decision makers.... Understanding strategy in the years to come will require walking away from these concepts and devising new ones in line with the political and strategic realities of our times.
Because human conflicts are inherently intractable, because "accident, contingency, and randomness...pervade human affairs," any kind of "architectonic concept of ends and means," any kind of "integrated thinking about what a country wants to do in the world" and how it wants to do it is impossible and illusory. America's leaders should disabuse the American people of such illusions and teach them to live in permanent uncertainty. "Grand strategy," he concludes, "is an idea whose time will never come, because the human condition will not permit it."

What leads Cohen to express so forthrightly such radical, disturbing propositions? "[I]n retrospect," he writes, "I realize that the failure to conduct effective military governance and counterinsurgency in the early years in Iraq stemmed from the armed forces' excessively narrow concept of war before it.... [I]t was generally believed that the proper use of American power was overwhelmingly the defeat of a conventional opponent. The follow up would be someone else's task.

It may be news to Cohen, but defeat of the enemy is the one and only thing that military forces do well. Again and again, most recently in Iraq, our policies have validated Napoleon's quip that one can do anything with bayonets except sit on them. For Cohen to presume that the choice of George W. Bush's national security team, of which he was part, to occupy Iraq was no choice at all but a necessary response to reality—and a model for mankind to boot—is a stunning combination of ignorance and arrogance.

The bulk of the chapter tries to take apart Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger's 1984 guidelines for the use of military power (written by the great Fred Iklé, under secretary of defense for policy). The first, that force should be limited to occasions "vital to our national interest or that of our allies," Cohen pronounces "[s]elf-evidently untrue." How come? Because the U.S. has often done otherwise. This is the logic he applies to the other guidelines as well: what is right is whatever we do.

Weinberger had written that when the military is committed, it should be done "wholeheartedly and with a clear intention of winning." Cohen objects with a straw man: "the United States may decide not to use its full force to obliterate an opponent." Indeed, it may not. Does that mean it can't or shouldn't?

That is what he implies because, he writes, "winning" is inherently meaningless.

Weinberger had prescribed formulating "clearly defined political and military objectives" and understanding "how our forces can accomplish" them. But for our author, this "flies in the face of military history" because "no use of force is ever completely predictable." By this truism, Cohen justifies the separation of ends from means. This nullification of the very notion of strategy describes how our foreign policy establishment has handled U.S. military forces for several decades. He writes that, contrary to Weinberger, "warfare is...never a last resort." True for the U.S. nowadays. But is that a good thing? As for Weinberger's notion that the American people should be asked in advance for their support for war in pursuit of clearly defined objectives, Cohen tends to regard it as unnecessary or impossible; the people will consent once they taste the result. And if they don't?

Although Weinberger's principles had "a real purchase with the American military, he lost the argument," writes Cohen. How did he lose it? The national security establishment acted otherwise. For Cohen, that is epistemology.

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Finally, Cohen's sixth rule: "A president can launch a war; to win it, he or she must sustain congressional and popular support." In plain English, this too is common sense. But in contemporary Establishmentese, it is the opposite. Cohen can barely "forgive" Weinberger's lack of realism for insisting on a president's constitutional duty to obtain support from the public through Congress before starting wars. You see, Weinberger and Reagan "lived in a world in which one could plausibly believe the United States would have to use force rarely, if at all." But in today's world, in which wars last indefinitely, so that one must above all persevere, presidents are forced to rally support by explaining wars "repeatedly" and at length. Thus Cohen can laud presidents Bush and Obama in the same breath as Churchill and Thucydides' Pericles. But he ignores that the latter had rallied support by speaking evident truths, while no amount of spin will ever be able to convince Americans to spend blood and treasure for such as Cohen to "play," without end, at whatever "world order" they find themselves imagining. The difference is so apparent, so commonsensical, that you'd have to be a member of America's foreign policy establishment, like Eliot Cohen, to miss it.

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