Review - America's Allies and War

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Jason W. Davidson's ***America's Allies and War: Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq*** makes a rigorous scholarly contribution to answering a timely question: Why do America's allies – Britain, France, and Italy – sometimes provide military support to U.S.-led uses of force and sometimes refuse? The original research at the core of this book consists of over fifty interviews with British, Italian and French analysts and policy-makers, including high-ranking diplomatic officials and a former head of state. Arguably the most outstanding aspect of *America's Allies and War* is the systematic and even-handed manner in which it demolishes popular notions of alliance politics – such as the depiction of European NATO allies as free-riding pacifists – whilst making an important theoretical contribution to the burden-sharing literature and International Relations scholarship in general.

Burden-sharing: The Facts

This book emerged from the question of how the shape and make-up of alliances have impacted upon U.S. military interventions since the Vietnam War. Above all, the author was interested in explaining why Western allies committed to certain U.S.-led military interventions and not others. The book begins by pointing out the existing contradiction between what scholars and analysts view as two self-evident propositions: 1) American allies hardly, if ever, contribute to U.S.-led uses of force; 2) if they can free ride and consume U.S. security on the cheap, U.S. allies will choose to. The key findings of *America's Allies and War* pose a serious challenge to those assumptions. This book explores the pattern of allied contributions (or lack thereof) to U.S. interventions over 21 distinct case studies, analysing the positions of Britain, France and Italy in seven interventions. This book gives a strong scholarly spine to the politicised debate about NATO turning into a two-tiered alliance, a concern stoked by former Defense Secretary Robert Gates' high-profile parting shot this year.

The key findings of this book are that U.S. allies are most likely to contribute to U.S.-led interventions if they value their alliance with the United States at the time, if they perceive a credible threat to their *own* national security, or if their perceived international prestige is implicated in the decision of whether or not to use force alongside the U.S. The 'free riding' explanation of Transatlantic burden-sharing does not explain why some allies, such as Tony Blair's Britain in 2003, do not simply maintain security on the cheap – by supporting Washington politically but nor militarily – when it would be in their rational self-interest to do so. In other words, Europeans *have* in fact contributed militarily to many U.S.-led interventions, some of which were only marginally relevant to their own national interests. Furthermore, this book proves that the U.S. highly values its allies 'showing the flag' alongside American troops, for the political benefits which this confers upon Washington in terms of enhanced legitimacy, domestic political support, and allies' concrete show of support for the United States in treasure and, more crucially, blood.

America's need for allied flags in military missions is expressed lucidly in former Secretary of State Dean Rusk's comment, cited in chapter three, admonishing the British for not sending troops to South Vietnam:*"all we needed was one regiment…don't expect us to save you again."*

The Importance of Prestige

Perhaps Davidson's most interesting finding is the recurring observation of how important the concept of prestige (the social recognition of states' power or ranking) is in explaining the allied use of force. Britain, France and Italy, in various cases, perceived military intervention in U.S.-led campaigns as being in their national interests when their prestige or 'rank' was seen as being on the line. To which extent this is a generalisable finding is up for debate. But this book provides comprehensive support for the idea that states, like people, care about the way they are perceived by their peers – sometimes to the extent of risking the lives of their soldiers to defend their status in the international hierarchy of states.

This conclusion opens the door to further research questions, for example: Can the enhanced 'prestige' of a state, as decision-makers seem to assume, be transformed into leverage in specific negotiations? How do diplomatic officials convey and/or translate their self-perceived prestige into concrete bargaining currency? Or is this a self-delusional quality of all state leaders, especially those – such as the UK, France and Italy – with legacies of great power status to stoke, like the smoke rising from a long-extinguished fire ?

Realism Found Alive (in the EU!)

An important implication of this book, which the author could have claimed more credit for, is the idea that the stereotypically war-averse Europeans, far from being starry-eyed pacifists, are often led by heads of state whose realist credentials would make the European founding fathers of realism proud. More generally, it is refreshing in itself to find such a rigorous, yet dispassionate defence of (neoclassical) realism. Davidson's analysis provides a point-by-point rebuttal against constructivist explanations of each case study, giving the theory credit where it is due, but ultimately concluding that realist arguments about threat perceptions, prestige and alliance value, rather than norms and identities, explain why Great Britain, France and Italy either agreed or refused to follow their major ally to war.

The oddities of Japan and Germany, however, would make viable counter-points to Davidson's thesis. These states' pacifist identities and constitutions – which obviously restrain their potential use of force due to their belligerent histories – could be argued to make their war-averse cultures trump, in many cases, the high values they both place on the U.S. alliance, as well as any sense of threat or prestige.

Why Policy-makers Should Read This Book

Policy-makers on both sides of the Atlantic should read this book for its insightful and relevant policy recommendations. Above all, it is the counter-intuitive and myth-busting conclusions of Davidson's systematic study which deserve praise. Domestic politics, for example, does not generally decide whether an ally will support the U.S. militarily or not; however, once embarked upon, even an initially popular U.S.-led intervention will probably soon sour as the images and suffering of war filter back to directly affect the public's sensory perceptions. This study confirms the fickleness of public opinion in supporting limited, U.S.-led military interventions. (Other studies, however, have shed light on the fact that democracies are perhaps even *more* belligerent than other forms of political organisation in total wars, because of the grass roots social mobilisation which open societies are capable of generating for struggles perceived as matters of life or death to the democratic polity). The lesson for policy-makers, then, would be: Even a pro-intervention public will soon tire of low-level conflicts; public support changes like the wind.

Finally, one can imagine that a future edition of Davidson's book will be enlarged to accommodate one (or more?) additional cases of U.S.-led military campaigns. The Libyan intervention occurred as this book went into print, a case which would fit in with this book's theme so well because of a clear inconsistency with the other cases: Great Britain and France, on this occasion, seemed to force the hand of the U.S. to intervene. Some themes and episodes in this book do hold particular relevance for ongoing events. For example, President François Mitterrand proudly emphasising – for the French sense of *grandeur* – that it was the first country to send troops into Beirut in June 1982 is eerily similar to President Nicolas Sarkozy's insistence, in March 2011, that French jets be the first to bomb Libyan tanks heading for Benghazi. The case of the 1992 famine in Somalia is also haunting, for what it says about humanitarian interventions in which prospective interveners do not have an acute sense of threat or national interest involved: they are unlikely to intervene to save innocent lives. Meanwhile, the case of Kosovo also highlights the unresolved moral and legal paradox surrounding U.S.-led peace enforcement missions, and whether the legitimate goal of diplomacy should be to enforce peace by any means (through the threat or use of force if necessary), or secure peace at any cost (through non-coercive instruments of statecraft until the bitter end).

This book is accessible to all interested general readers, but preliminary notions of IR debates are admittedly a prerequisite for understanding the extent of Davidson's scholarly contribution. In any case, *America's Allies and War* cannot be critiqued for lacking scholarly rigour; it is meticulously referenced, systematic in its analysis, and persuasively argued. I would recommend it to all students, academics and policy-makers interested in knowing which factors decide allied commitments to U.S.-led military interventions. The book's findings are applicable to non-European U.S. allies, such as Australia, which would make an interesting additional case to consider.

We Have No Eternal Allies

Davidson concludes that the historical record supports Lord Palmerston's dictum: *"We have no eternal allies, and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are perpetual and eternal."* Of course, this is not to say that states' national interests do not evolve over time; the case studies in this book clearly show that they do. But the point is rather that states seem to follow their own perceived interests in their decisions on whether to use force in international crises, even when in conjunction with the United States. Ultimately, this conclusion is applicable beyond this book's narrow focus on Transatlantic burden-sharing. Recalling Alexander III's own maxim: *"Russia has no friends, because of its hugeness. It has only two reliable allies: its army and fleet."* This conclusion may not match how we hope or think the world ought to be in the early 2010s. But is does seem an accurate enough depiction of the way governments, especially U.S. allies, decide on the use of force in international relations.

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