

THE RISE AND FALL OF AMERICAN MILITARY POWER

Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power

By Rachel Maddow

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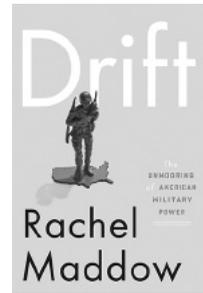
Rachel Maddow is probably the best well-known woman commentator in the twenty-first century. Host of *The Rachel Maddow Show* on MSNBC, her brand is one of biting humor and striking analysis from a liberal perspective. I expect she would be amused and flattered that a review of her book, *Drift*, is included in *Parameters*. To dismiss Maddow out-of-hand as a liberal policy wonk would be imprudent given her credentials as a Rhodes Scholar who holds a Doctorate of Philosophy in Politics from Oxford University.

Drift is her first book and could easily have been written as a string of half-hour commentaries on the state of the US military. Given the nine chapters with prologue and epilogue, this would fit the format of a week-long series for her news show. As the “Unmooring” title suggests, Maddow’s premise is the manifestation of American military power is insufficiently linked to the national discourse on its use. Her concerns are American military power has migrated from that envisioned by the founding fathers, debate between the executive and legislative branches on its use is ineffective, and, perhaps most important, there is a dangerous lack of engagement and accountability with the American people.

Accordingly, Maddow opens the book with a 1795 quote from then-Congressman (and “Father of the Constitution”) James Madison, “Of all enemies to public liberty, war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded. . . . War is the parent of armies; from these proceed debts and taxes. . . . In war, too, the discretionary power of the Executive is extended. . . . and all the means of seducing the minds are added to those of subduing the force of the people.”

Her focus is on military power that emerged with the national experience of the Vietnam War. Two key items sprung from that conflict—the restructuring of the Army Guard and Reserve by then-Chief of Staff Creighton Abrams and the War Powers Resolution of 1973—serve as the foundation of Maddow’s discourse on the American attitude toward persistent conflict and war. She contends it is, “as if peace . . . made us edgy, as if we no longer knew, absent an armed conflict, how to be our best selves.”

Her analysis of modern US history has four main tenets that interested this reviewer, which individually and collectively decoupled the US military from its society. The reforms of General Abrams were designed to ensure that citizen-soldiers were inextricably bound to deployments for major military operations, such that when the president and Congress committed to war, the nation was also committed across a wide swath of its population. Concurrently, the War Powers Resolution was a clear attempt by Congress to check the presidential power to commit US forces without informing Congress and obtaining its authorization. While enacted during the term of a Republican president (Richard Nixon), the challenge to executive power existed prior to and since with



New York: Crown, 2012

276 pages

\$25.00

presidents of both political parties. Maddow provides several examples from Grenada, Iraq, and Bosnia to contemporary operations.

The restructuring of the US military as a volunteer force with limited numbers to perform the “inherently governmental in nature” functions of warfighting led to the understandable emergence of outsourcing other functions with programs such as the Logistics Civilian Augmentation Program (LOGCAP). The use of contractors has become an accepted practice where the number of contract personnel (those that can be counted) routinely exceeds the number of deployed uniformed servicemembers in the operations of the past two decades. Maddow has two issues with this—first, this shadow military in the guise of contractors exists with little or no oversight and, second, its members are not held accountable for their misdeeds in theaters of operations. The result, she posits, is the president and Congress can deploy the military without directly affecting the majority of the US population. If uniformed members performed the contracted functions, then a larger number of reserve component servicemembers would be involved in military operations—hence, more “skin in the game” for our citizens. The last tenet is the overlapping responsibilities of warfighting between the US military, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Agency, where the latter two have little oversight from Congress and virtually no visibility with the American people who fund their operations.

Conservatives will take issue with Maddow’s deconstruction of President Ronald Reagan, who is their icon of executive leadership and power. Military readers may be uncomfortable with her examination and critique of military operations over the past two decades. The value of Maddow’s work is the presentation of facts and her journalistic interpretation of their impact. The reader may be distracted by quips and stinging commentary—focus instead on the themes and the logic of her argument. This reviewer found several parallels to the analysis and conclusions of conservative scholar Andrew Bacevich in his *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (see *Parameters* review Winter 2005-2006).

What we see is the incremental adjustment of policy to adapt to changing environmental conditions and to address existing problems. The rationale for individual decisions are understandable—presidents want the power to respond to developing problems and crises, senior military leaders seek to have the will of the nation (read people) supporting the force, and both civilian and military leaders have been educated to protect core competencies by otherwise sourcing enabling functions. The collective impact is a loosely coupled manifestation of military power in its institutional structure, its delineated responsibilities, and the national discourse of how it is applied.

Maddow effectively makes the case “drift” has occurred and provides the challenge to US leaders to examine our current position in the global landscape and, with intentionality, to firmly reattach the lines to our dock of national values and interest. As such, this book is a highly recommended addition to the library of national security professionals who value diverse perspectives and well-reasoned analysis.

Beyond using military power “to do things and control others,” Nye later explained, “to get others to do what they otherwise would not,” the United States could draw on its soft power—its noncoercive power—to cement its leadership position in the world. Hard power was easy to measure, of course. After the United States won the Cold War, American liberalism had unparalleled appeal around the world. Everyone wanted to vote, everyone wanted jeans, and everyone wanted free speech—so much so that the political theorist Francis Fukuyama coined the phrase “the end of history” to capture the idea that whole world was careening toward a political endpoint already reached by the West. —€ Go Back. Premium Content. The Rise and Fall of Soft Power.