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978-1-107-04110-3 - The Pathologies of Power: Fear, Honor, Glory, and Hubris
in U.S. Foreign Policy

Christopher J. Fettweis

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The Pathologies of Power

The foreign policy of the United States is guided by deeply held beliefs, few of which are recognized, much less subjected to rational analysis, Christopher J. Fettweis writes in this, his third book. He identifies the foundations of those beliefs – fear, honor, glory, and hubris – and explains how they have inspired poor strategic decisions in Washington. He then proceeds to discuss their origins. The author analyzes recent foreign policy mistakes, including the Bay of Pigs invasion, the Vietnam war, and the Iraq war, and he considers the decision-making process behind them, as well as the beliefs inspiring those decisions. The American government's strategic performance, Professor Fettweis argues, can be improved if these pathological beliefs are acknowledged and eliminated.

Christopher J. Fettweis is an associate professor of political science at Tulane University. He is the author of *Dangerous Times?: The International Politics of Great Power Peace* (2010) and *Losing Hurts Twice as Bad: The Four Stages to Moving Beyond Iraq* (2008).

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CHRISTOPHER J. FETTWEIS

Tulane University



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For Kimberly Deborah

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Collective amnesia descends upon society following foreign policy disasters. People everywhere seem to exhibit symptoms of short-term memory loss; at the very least, few appear particularly eager to discuss what just occurred. Enterprising journalists might undertake first drafts of history, but for the most part the event barely registers in the popular imagination. For a certain period of time, one whose length is directly related to the magnitude of the disaster, the embarrassment and shame generated by national mistakes make them too raw for people to confront in any real depth. Lessons, if there are any, have to wait.

Vietnam was all but ignored by the media for quite some time following the fall of Saigon, for example, and was hardly mentioned at all during the presidential campaign of 1976.¹ Popular culture was equally reticent: no major film dealt with the reality of the war until 1979, and then not again until 1986. The uninformed newcomer to the United States in the mid-1970s could have been forgiven for being unaware that any tragic, unnecessary war had just been fought in Southeast Asia.

It is in these periods, however, that beliefs about such events solidify and narratives coalesce, if in private. Few people ever change the positions at which they subconsciously arrive during these seemingly

¹ George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975* (New York: Knopf, 1979), p. 273.

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somnambulant times. These brief respites are not merely efforts at mass denial, in other words, but crucial phases in society's long-term interpretation, in the process of coming to terms with what just occurred, or with what its country just did.

This book was written during such a period. The war in Iraq has officially ended, and hardly anyone wants to talk about it. The only consensus, if unspoken, is that mistakes were made. What they were, why they happened, or how they can be avoided in the future are questions few seem ready to confront. But whether the public is ready for it or not, the interpretation of Iraq cannot – and certainly should not – be postponed indefinitely. The opening of the George W. Bush Library in April 2013 offered apologists the opportunity to fire off the first round of revisionist history and to suggest that an utterly unrepentant Bush deserves praise since, after all, he tried his best. And he loves America so darn much.

That narrative cannot be allowed to take hold. No society – especially not the American society – likes to admit mistakes, but Iraq cannot be thought of otherwise. The war was the greatest catastrophe in post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy, one that has led to the deaths of untold tens of thousands and has left behind a chaotic, violent, sectarian mess. On the same day that two bombs killed three spectators of the Boston Marathon, a series of blasts in Iraq killed thirty-three people and wounded hundreds. Americans don't even hear such news anymore; it has become the norm in post-Saddam, George Bush Iraq, too commonplace to notice.

This book has been written to help us understand why the invasion of Iraq and other U.S. foreign policy mistakes occurred, going beyond surface explanations in search of deeper roots, in the ultimate hope of helping to prevent the next national disaster.

Like all others, this book was not written by its author alone. Special thanks go to Peter Burns, Brian Brox, Patrick Egan, Martin Mendoza, John Mueller, Joseph Parent, Aaron Schneider, Mark Vail, Dana Zartner, and a particularly thorough reviewer. I presented portions of this book a number of times over the last couple of years, including at a variety of conferences, the U.S. Naval War College, and the Mershon Center for International Security at Ohio State, and I received very helpful ideas and feedback in each instance. I am also thankful to

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