Crises of Legitimacy? Warfare, National Identity, and Counterinsurgency Tactics in the Public Imagination

An Interview with Barbara Elias

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For our special issue of the New American Studies Journal "American Crises" I had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Barbara Elias, Associate Professor at the department of Government and Legal Studies at Bowdoin College, Maine, who specializes in international relations, U.S. foreign policy, national security, and political Islam.

Foreign politics and military strategy constitute a significant part of US narratives of national identity and may thus also serves as indicators of crises of legitimacy and self-understanding, which manifests on levels of foreign relations, warfare, political and public support for foreign policy decisions, and confidence in both the legitimacy of state sanctioned violence and military strikes. How are we to understand the relation of civil society to the military? Do policy makers, military practitioners, and members of the academe communicate with one another, and if so, how? Such questions are relevant in ways that extend beyond the present moment, but they are particularly pressing after the nearly two decades of warfare in the Middle East following 9/11.

As former Director of the Afghanistan/Pakistan/Taliban Documentation Project at The National Security Archive in Washington D.C and a foreign policy specialist, Elias has generously agreed to discuss aspects of an "American Crises" connected to warfare. She specializes in issues involving counterinsurgency, proxy wars, military intervention, alliance politics, and power asymmetries. Our conversation touches on the practice contemporary warfare, alliance tactics, and their connection to questions of American national identity.

Karin Hoepker: Barbara, thank you for accepting our invitation and for agreeing to speak with me. For our "American Crises" issue I'd like to especially focus on your work in alliance tactics analysis, and hear more from you as a specialist in irregular warfare and political Islam, on where you see potential changes and continuities in your field. I'd be curious to hear your take on to what extent your research might support the sense of a shift in the United States' self-defined role as a dominant force in global politics, and how, from your perspective, classic theories of the nature of warfare, like Clausewitz, for example, may still be useful. Do counterinsurgency studies (COIN) open up new opportunities or maybe create new problems? On a more abstract level, as someone who comes at this from the humanities and is interested in social and cultural processes of knowledge production, I'd also like to ask you how you see your role, and that of specialists in your field, in describing, analyzing, and maybe also explaining modern warfare. Where do you locate responsibilities for knowledge production and where do you see ethical issues? And, connected to that, how would you define your role as an educator?

Even in the planning of this interview, current events have sadly overtaken us and the exit from Afghanistan seems almost strangely overshadowed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. While these are two very different conflicts, they both highlight a US-American struggle for redefining identity and legitimacy via its position within NATO and its relation to other allies, we can maybe use this moment of crisis as a starting point for our conversation.

Since part of your specialization, Barbara, centers around counter insurgency studies, irregular warfare, and the complex asymmetries of ally relations, let us begin with your work on Afghanistan. Has the American withdrawal impacted the way the United States perceives and defines itself as an actor in global foreign policy? It seems to me that the controversy over counterinsurgency studies as an attempt to redefine foreign policy and military strategy appears to surfaces at moments in history when more traditional approaches seem to fail and when the nation state might be said to suffer a global decline in power. Maybe you could open with a brief definition of counterinsurgency and counterinsurgency studies, and an explanation of where you see its relevance potential problems.

Barbara Elias: First of all: thank you for having me. Counterinsurgency can be fairly simply defined as essentially a kind of military and political effort to defeat an insurgency. By its very definition reactive, it is essentially a suppressive action to defeat, degrade, forcibly repress...The US military has lots of dif-

ferent synonyms to describe a suppressive act. As this definition of insurgency illustrates, the focus is really on the insurgency itself as a starting point, and the "counter" just the repressive reaction. Understanding counterinsurgency starts with an insurgency: probably its most simple definition a revolutionary movement that uses a combination of politics and violence to achieve its end of targeting a governmental power. An insurgency targets the government in a revolutionary sense, using political subversion as well as violence and military subversion. And a counterinsurgency is essentially a reactive effort to defeat an insurgency.

KH: That seems rather convenient, to define your own military action as a mere reaction.

BE: Exactly. The name, the definitions themselves already reflect the asymmetries. We often call this asymmetric warfare; except that usually, when people talk about asymmetric warfare they are referring to resources and their distribution, and in that context, counterinsurgency usually refers to the side with distinctly better resources. Yet, beyond the question of resources, many different factors are built into asymmetric warfare and require consideration. Initiative is one of them. If the insurgent is starting a movement through an admixture of politics and violence, initiative affords a constant strategic and tactical advantage. However, you start the process—whether it is based on political movement, indoctrination, and governance or whether you use tactics of violence, targeting, striking, and then retreating as you see in guerrilla warfare—the counterinsurgency is reduced to responding action, which is usually much more difficult to achieve in terms of demonstrating capacity and legitimacy. So that, in itself, may create a huge asymmetry in a situation of conflict.

KH: Looking at the history of asymmetrical warfare and its study, it is maybe not so surprising that counterinsurgency studies have been closely connected to the process of decolonization. From what I recall, David Galula, as an early theorist of counterinsurgency in the 1960s, based his theories on observations of the Algerian revolution. And part of what he develops in *Counter-Insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, like a three-step clear-hold-build strategy, then becomes incorporated in Army Field Manuals that the US Army implements as a framework for addressing the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, right?

BE: Right. Written by General David Petraeus and James Amos, the 2006 <u>Army Field Manual 3-24</u> is meant to provide a line of orientation for how US military forces address exactly some of the problems we talked about, such as: how do you combine conventional combat tasks and skills with the challenges of dealing with essentially non-military agencies or actors.

KH: Since you originally trained as a historian and your work also has a historical scope, let me ask you how you would describe the historical trajectory from "classical" to "irregular" warfare: Would you rather emphasize similarities and make an argument that what we see are predominantly patterns of repetition and continuity, or would you rather emphasize differences? Is there significant change and some "totally new thing" that hasn't been around before and that now needs to be addressed? (And in your book *Why Allies Rebel* you include a broader scope, covering Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, Sri Lanka, Yemen, Lebanon, Cambodia, and Angola.)

BE: Like all good academics, we could make an argument for either side. But I find it useful to foreground similarities and lines of connection. It might be tempting to think about conventional wars as "textbook": simply as wars between uniformed professional militaries from opposing states–a classic idea of what warfare looks like. And, as a result, it might then be all too easy to look at irregular warfare, at terrorism or insurgency, and to see it as categorically different. What interests me, in contrast, is how many of the strategies, the logic of irregular and conventional warfare techniques, are not terribly dissimilar. They merely differ in terms of the actors employing them, which may be state or non-state, whether the targets are then civilian or military, and what role the domestic population plays. Are actors physically or psychologically targeting civilians as opposed to targeting state leaders, for example?

I think it is interesting to really think about the continuity, or the similarities that exists between conventional and unconventional warfare. Clausewitz's idea that war is the extension of politics, very much holds true in both cases. In both the conventional or an irregular sense of warfare, you have a political goal and are willing to employ violence to achieve that goal, or at least to attempt it. The use of violence or coercion can be very similar in unconventional and conventional warfare: for example, the US political decision to drop two atomic weapons on Japan in August of 1945 was very much a matter of strategy. The goal was not the destruction of Hiroshima or Nagasaki as important cities, but, arguably, the psychological message it would send to decision makers in Tokyo. And that is also

central technique in irregular warfare, where you employ violence not because you seek the physical destruction of the target that you are actually harming, but because you wish to use that pain and suffering for leverage—an argument that Thomas Shelling made very convincingly in <u>Arms and Influence</u>. Looking at it bluntly that pain and suffering is meant to serve political ends, to affect decision makers and to affect people, in ways that make it hard for decision makers to remain in their positions.

KH: I find it interesting that your example goes back to World War II and illustrates to what extent a previous clarity of definition that distinguishes types of warfare seems very much constructed. How we prefer to think of conventional warfare as supposedly "cleaner" and better regulated, because, in our imagination, it features people in uniform, nation states, and the actors involved are clear. Versus the "messier" forms that require dealing with an underground or auxiliary guerrilla forces—when in fact there is never really that much clarity. There are asymmetries, and networks of allies and adversaries, proxy conflicts and anything but clear lines of combat. Uses of violence are euphemistically encoded as forms of "coercion," and the dividing lines towards some of the techniques that seek "compliance" seem rather fluid in terms of defining the relationship between "aims" and "means." Though many of the analyses on Afghanistan seem to show that the absence of a clearly defined aim and political goal (such as: when would we consider this conflict won or finished) create even more problems.

BE: Yes, in that sense, unconventional warfare causes us to reflect on conventional warfare beyond the limitations or also the seductiveness of clarity, rules, and "clean" language. For we assume that in conventional warfare the relationship between adversaries is more clearly regulated: there are sets of rules, sanctions, however effective, for violation, and essentially a minimum of agreed-upon moral norms. In irregular warfare adversaries often don't agree to the same sets of rules, and, insurgents or regular fighters actively try to undermine them because they are, by definition, dissatisfied with the status quo. They are losing in the system, and they want to undermine it by fighting it and by denying its legitimacy. Which returns us to the problem of asymmetry as a central characteristic.

Irregular warfare calls into question classical warfare and notions of legality, how the very bases of rules and boundaries were negotiated (and under whose participation). It also makes us wonder where we draw lines of what we consider acceptable, including constructs such as "mutually assured destruction." How did we ever adapt to the idea that you stabilize peace sensibly by threatening Armaged-

don upon each other at all times? One might wonder about a definition of "peace" that is based on the possibility of constant, mutual annihilation at any time, yet we have grown accustomed to this and its language of "walls of deterrence," and should question whom that kind of language actually serves.

KH: Your point about language also brings to mind the contrast between the Afghanistan conflict and the Gulf wars. Initially, the first Gulf War was presented as this new "theater of war," a fast, clean, new form, seemingly "hyperreal" and remote, with embedded journalists and minimized collateral and civilian damage due to new, eye-in-the-sky and Pioneer drone technology (though, today, we may see in a very different light what drone strikes did to populations).

BE: Like the idea of the "surgical strike," suggesting precision, clean cuts, and almost a savior mentality. Eliminating the threats is somehow protective, but at the same time you're employing massive amounts of violence. The idea that you can employ precision targeting for a particular Al Qaeda leader, for example in Yemen, Syria, or Mali. The idea that if that individual is targeted and killed that would have no effect, do no greater harm within the political body surrounding that individual. When every person is in fact also deeply embedded within the political, social, cultural fabric of that society. Once they engage in insurgency, they do not stop being a father or a mother or the town doctor. Hence the idea of "surgical" targeting is a really dangerous metaphor, denying the complexity of the application of violence within a very highly politically integrated target.

KH: In your work, you also make a compelling argument about the failure to understand one's own relational position as foreign power within a more complex, multilateral field of actors, especially when few of those stakeholders are actually classic government or military leaders of nation states. You focus in part on the difficulties that specifically the United States had in instigating policy implementation and in negotiating ally cooperation, even when steps aimed at securing supporting political, economic stability in Iraq and Afghanistan. Your analyses point towards the necessity to closely entwine military intervention with functional policymaking in the region. In asymmetrical cooperative processes, large allies seem to persistently hit a roadblock due to what might be called a failure of understanding, where large allies seem to repeatedly neglect the possibility that they could encounter non-compliance in their local partners. Almost as if, due to sheer overwhelming quantity of money or pressure thrown at them, small partners cannot help but comply (and I'm of course a bit polem-

ical here). But your data seems to point towards the persistence of a blind spot or underestimation of small ally interests, where the United States wrongly assesses their own leverage in influencing these smaller partners. And your analysis identifies such patterns, groups them according to interest constellations, power relations, and potential outcomes in, to me, really insightful ways.

BE: I think that, sadly, Afghanistan provides maybe the clearest illustration for a need to better understand such failures. Focusing on the Americans in Afghanistan early on and the Americans in Iraq, we see policy recommendations of the United States to partners in Baghdad or in Kabul or in Erbil (because, though that seems to be often forgotten, the United States was managing an Iraqi Kurdish government as an ally separate from the Shi'a-dominated Iraqi regime in Baghdad). And these recommendations come with the idea, especially from an American perspective, that US-designed security and governance policies should be so self-evident and sound that they would be heeded. Not just due to a hubris of American authority in general, but the unquestioning assumption that local partners will comply because the logic of the policies is self-evident and universal. It is testimony to an American mindset that tends to be blind to how much of what needs to be done is subject to its own interpretation and instead overestimates the existence of a self-evident universal set of correctives. The underlying assumption being that the local partners of course want a democracy, of course want to model themselves after the US. Clearly, there are American policy makers who are more self-aware, and they do see differences, but the overall trend tends towards a strange inability to imagine a distinct set of interests in local allies. And a subsequent frustration and fallout that leads Americans to washing their hands of what is eventually declared a lost cause.

KH: That's a fascinating analysis. This failure to imagine otherness in allies and the frustration that comes with it might also offer new ways to look at why, on a less rational or affective level, Western nations may actually have more than just a foreign policy and human rights incentive to support Ukraine. Not just because that may, unquestionably, be the right thing to do, but because it might, at least initially, be more gratifying in terms of affective identification and broader public support.

Let's return to the question of legitimacy and crisis and try and connect it back to the way in which we understand warfare as, to a certain extent, a state of emergency, which also creates maybe a crisis of knowledge, of transparency, of publicly communicated information otherwise deemed crucial to democratic states.

Obviously, when it comes to military interventions, national security issues are often declared to take precedent over transparency, information becomes classified, and we even see debates over to what extent politicians, a foreign secretary, or security advisors must be fully accountable to congress. This need for secrecy is what makes it excusable, at least for some people, when somebody like Donald Rumsfeld, misleads Congress and the public. *Washington Post* reporter Craig Whitlock has written a thorough analysis of the state of information and secrecy in the expansive research he conducted for his brilliant and extremely readable <u>The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War (Simon & Schuster, 2021)</u>.

BE: The war in Iraq was an unmitigated disaster in a lot of ways, and I think politically the story is far from finished and will have a long wake as part of an ongoing process connected to the treatment of information, the political misuse of classified information, and how national security threats were presented and understood by the American public in the lead-up to the war in Iraq.

In addition, one aspect of information and public opinion that we haven't spoken of yet is how there are the segments of the American population that volunteered to fight in Iraq and that paid a very personal price for that war, whether through death, a deployed family member, injury, or post-traumatic stress disorder that that haunts so many American families. And there is the anger and the distrust that stems from having invested so much of their personal selves into something that was ultimately untrue. Which then also created its own truth because once the US was occupying Iraq, it generated its own set of national security crises that were true. And, speaking of crisis, I see a trajectory from that point, from these experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the crisis of faith in legitimacy and political purpose and military leadership that left many Americans wondering, what are we doing here, what are we fighting for—who do I believe? Which led all the way to the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the January 6, 2021 insurrection when Donald Trump lost reelection. A dangerous insurrection and the storming of the US Capitol Building, in part by a segment of the US population was convinced that the election was stolen, and that democracy had failed, and they weren't being told the truth as part of not being told the truth for quite some time.

I am not trying to defend the individuals who stormed Congress, but I want to contextualize this moment as part of a larger story about a crisis in American democracy and in American National Security decision making that has to do with what we have talked about: legitimacy, transparency, secrecy, and forms of

partisanship that seek to seize the narrative and shape available information into destructive untruths. And that is at odds with our idealized notion of an American society where you do have access to information, where you elect your public officials with sound knowledge, and where your public officials apparently work for you. So, there is no doubt that Iraq and Afghanistan, and these questions about legitimacy and information and disinformation play into some of the crises in American democracy that I think we are in the midst of that go to the heart of domestic U.S. politics, not just foreign politics.

KH: January 6 and the history of distrust in government has a long and rather convoluted history, signaled also by the Gadsden flags and other appropriated paraphernalia. So I find it very helpful that you point towards the military and social aspect and an underlying sense of betrayal. I remember reading an <u>opinion piece in the Washington Post in December 2021</u> by three retired generals, who voice genuine concern about the role of military or ex-military personnel in the case of another attempt at insurrection. This also corroborates your point of a growing social rift that is tied to a crisis of legitimacy and understanding, but also to society's view and treatment of the military, and of veterans, which is often a class issue and creates a loss of confidence and of trust.

And that adds yet another dimension to problems of policy, information, legitimacy, and disclosure, because it also illustrates another tier to the organizational problem and another possibility for disconnect. There is a divergence between public policy and military strategy in the broadest sense, on the one hand, and then the very concrete problem of policy, military execution, and the people who are actually the boots on the ground. Within that very complex field that you navigate with your areas of expertise, where do you see your role as an academic? Someone who analyzes in retrospect? You're a scholar, not a policy maker, not a military practitioner, and yet you could also, of course, be a civilian advisor. So, in your self-definition, what's your role, and also, what is your ethical take on this? How close do you want to get to your own subject matter, how interested are you to maybe see the knowledge you produce turned into better policy, better strategy, maybe also more transparent communication?

BE: Well, for me personally, at least, and I imagine many academics feel like this, the first and foremost ethical guideline is, no matter what you do, do no harm. I think that there's an astonishing history of American political scientists and sociologists whose research provided opportunities, or at least cover, for policies that were harmful. And so, I want to make sure that, before you press send, you clearly

consider how the subject is embedded with a sense of the human. No matter how abstract, these are human subjects that we're writing about, and it is crucial to not fall for the veneer of your own language and the sanitized words that are often used, especially in security studies. At the end of the day, it is vital to ensure that you really are focusing on the human costs and policy implications of what you're advocating.

There is, for instance, a whole strain of Counterinsurgency Studies that rejects the idea of population-centered counterinsurgency. They reject the idea that you can "win hearts and minds" and protect the population from the insurgents. They argue that it is too messy and that you cannot ask military institutions to do something that is essentially alien to their role as warriors, who should work with an enemy-centric approach, targeting "bad guys" and leaving the social and the political for local forces to handle. But what are the implications for advocating ignoring civilians and just focusing on increasing violence? What are the costs of "victory" and is that really a "victory" if it burns the whole country?

So, I think that there is enormous cause for constant humility in our work and for thinking about the very human components of what we are actually measuring, testing, and studying as academics to make sure that you don't enable or empower monstrous policies. And just because there is a strategic logic to a policy does not mean that it should be implemented. Or that myopic ideas about "success" in that one minor area that you study does not translate to larger successes and maybe it's okay to lose a war to save your own country from being a place that would employ torture and erode its own democratic processes and principles.

KH: Humility seems like a good principle, as you said, and I really like your insistence on complexity. There might often a certain amount of seductiveness to thinking along the "cleaner" lines of a "mental experiment," to merely conceive of your own work as a model free from its applications. While some probably enjoy the sense of empowerment or importance that comes with the interest or approval of military brass or policymakers, an insistence on complexity always makes your "academic product" unwieldy and probably also gets a fair share of pushback from the military advisors who find you impractical.

In David Michelle's film *The War Machine*, the first thing that might strike the audience about the depiction of the military is the utter exasperation. How politics is too complicated, and policies for "winning hearts and minds" are just too messy. On top of having to spend ungodly amounts of time, you also have to deal

with generating and looking at <u>Power Point presentations</u>. There is a deep frustration with an unsolvable problem of a hybrid role of being military, peacemakers, winning sympathies amongst locals of a culture that you practically know nothing about. The depiction is obviously hyperbolic and satirical and I don't know whether you thought there was a fair portrayal of Gen. McChrystal, for example, but to me it seemed to offer an entirely new perspective on what war movies can communicate.

BE: Well, full disclosure in the name of humility—I have never been to Afghanistan and did not witness that war firsthand, but instead read thousands of documents about the war and I have been lucky enough to also speak to American, British, and Afghans coming from the US war in Afghanistan, and in the light of that I think that there were certain key aspects the movie hit straight on. Like the devastating banality of the war from 2004 to 2019, with the base being a place to play video games and have its own McDonald's, as if nothing was wrong, while the process of the war was really going on, fought by the Taliban across Afghanistan as a political war out of reach from Americans there. Yet, at the same time, Americans were there, suspended in this non-space of forward operating bases, but also a very real geographical presence and with a spectrum from violence to politics and back that exists within the political, social, and cultural geography of Afghanistan.

In terms of alliances and asymmetries I studied, between large intervening powers and local allies, I found the role of Hamid Karzai, played by Ben Kingsley, amazing. There's one scene that stuck with me. The thinly disguised McChrystal-character, General Glenn McMahon (played by Brad Pitt) is asking Karzai to authorize an operation and goes to great lengths to get him to sign off on it and to ascertain the chain of command is linked to the President of Afghanistan. But Karzai meets his attempts with utter astonishment and slight amusement, telling the newly arrived allied forces ISAF-commander that nobody had ever asked him to authorize anything, and then he looks at the General and says, "I thank you for inviting me to the theater—all of it."

KH: That's a great line.

BE: And he seems to express gratitude, appreciate the fact that the Americans are playing this so well. The political becomes self-consciously framed within the medium of fiction and the movie reflects political theater, the staging of Afghan sovereignty.

And the Afghan stakeholders are shown as "inviting into theater" for signing an authorization. And that also unmasks the script for the war that was, with seductive clarity, written in PowerPoint. While an awareness, not just of the ritual, but the farcical nature may also prevent any true participation and commitment.

KH: Speaking of perception, you also mentioned your own access to political and military processes through documents—and we've already touched on the problem of knowledge production and information. So I have a question regarding your own process and methodology and what are in fact the materials that you're working with. Could you maybe try and describe what your materials are, how do you collect data, how do you negotiate the problem of classified information?

BE: I often use the Freedom of Information Act to request documents be considered for declassification review, and I usually focus on documents from the US Department of State, the Department of Defense, the CIA, and a lot of the intelligence agencies in the United States (depending on how you count: there are 16 or 17 different intelligence agencies, after all). I go to each and ask them for their documents and, of course, just because I request doesn't mean they may come; but there is utility in requesting and then initiating at least the legal process for review. To the agencies' credit, I am often surprised what is released. For example, the Department of State is very good at conducting reviews and releasing materials. And sometimes with really interesting results. For instance, there has been some astonishment about the role of Pakistan in terms of complicating US efforts in Afghanistan against the Taliban. I requested documents related to Pakistani involvement in Afghanistan, starting from 2001. And the State Department was readily releasing materials that talked very pointedly about Islamabad having very complicated political interest in Afghanistan and that they would continue to support the Taliban, and even Al Qaeda in parts. So that was something that was always there and the Department of State was willing to declassify the record more or less in real time; it just it took a while for popular attention to come around to acknowledging it. So, generally, I'm able to get a good amount of information through asking for documents to be declassified. I also rely on reports to Congress which regularly requires that certain agencies release information for Congress to conduct a widespread review, and so those documents are usually coming out of the Department of Defense and quarterly reports to Congress. The United States also appointed Inspector Generals in Iraq and

Afghanistan to watch over financing and assess whether US policies were succeeding or not, as an internal but independent watchdog agency within the war machine. Those IG reports are amazing and in real time, calling things out as they are happening. I wouldn't say it is flawless, but those agencies, the Special Inspector General for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan (SIGAR) and Special Inspector General for the Reconstruction of Iraq (SIGIR) were two aspects of the U.S. war that the US got right—accountability and review were vital.

KH: I admit that I was really surprised by the astonishing archival culture—the sheer number of memos, for instance, Rumsfeld's "snowflakes," the interviews that were conducted as part of oral history projects, or the SIGAR "Lessons Learned" that you already mentioned. Maybe we are doubly attentive to that, since, archiving during the last presidency was clearly a different issue, handling classified materials as if they were private property. Of course leaked materials tend to get more coverage, like Ambassador Karl W. Eikenberry's diplomatic cables <u>leaked to the New York Times in November 2009</u>, but then, just the fact that there is that archiving and that request processes are available inspires a certain amount of trust.

Self-reflection and actually learning from mistakes, also brings me to maybe our final aspect here, namely your role as an educator.

To me it seems as if recently there are perhaps efforts to encourage more dialogue between military experience, specialist knowledge, and the academic field beyond their respective bubbles. You teach at a "little ivy" college with a strong department of government and legal studies. But you also speak to and teach students at West Point. You recently became a senior fellow of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, an initiative that comes out of Empirical Studies of Conflict (ESOC) at Princeton and the Modern War Institute at West Point.

Within that rather heterogeneous field, I would like to know how you visualize your own role? Asking provocatively, do you see yourself as someone training future politicians, leaders of the military-industrial complex, or what? In your mind, who are your students and how do you see yourself as an educator?

BE: This brings me back to the earlier point on the necessity (and also the affordances) of humility, for the process that unfolds in the classroom. Some of the people in my classes are future leaders who are going to be in positions around important tables making critical decisions about policy, or on the battlefield. The thing that I try most to convey to them is that the really difficult job is that of—cliché but true—speaking truth to power, being the person to raise their hand to say: "this all sounds so neat on a PowerPoint, but is it?"

Building legitimacy by engaging with the local population, asking what may that look like and where do you expect that to go, and where does it fit in the structure...The hard part is asking those impossible question that may not have answers, but there's a utility in asking them, and to be brave enough to ask a question that no one can answer is a process of inspiring humility, especially when we're talking about employing lethal force.

Because you better have a clear idea about the effects if you are going to actually employ violence for a political purpose. And to never let go of that idea that there has to be clarity, and if there isn't then it's up to you to ask: why? And clarify this again: not expecting your commander or boss to have an answer, but there is utility and a huge public service and public good in asking. So, trying to inspire that in the classroom by talking about what is not there, and whose voices are omitted in this history, who has not been represented. And then to own those things even in my own syllabus, to say, this is not flawless; please also critique who isn't included here, who are we not reading, who didn't get the chance to tell their story, what questions are we missing, and what are the cases that we are not looking at.

I hope to succeed at making what is familiar strange, as a way of inspiring humility; trying to really make the United States a weird country for Americans taking a class on foreign policy—to recognize the weirdness of what seemed self-evident, recognize the strange products of very particular moments in political and social history coming together.

KH: Imagining otherness seems important for training different techniques of thinking, a very different approach from let's say the more anecdotal styles of telling war stories to establish your own credibility. It seems to me that, for the longest time, your field has been very much dominated by white male senior colleagues. Are you under the impression that your field may change gradually with younger colleagues, more women, more diversity, possibly also encouraging different selections of students?

BE: There has long been an assumption that the white male experiences is the "normal" American experience. It is enormously important to complicate this, and luckily more and more young scholars from diverse backgrounds are interested in security issues. This is critical to national security because of the failure of imagination that exists within mainstream understandings of international relations and security. Having much more creative and broad viewpoints would provide a lot more insight and better policy; I think that's undeniable. And counterinsurgency itself has been interesting here. Because counterinsurgency has been such a difficult problem for the US military, there has been more of a willingness to engage with voices that had been previously marginalized in studies of conventional warfare. While a scholar of color, or a female scholar, or a female scholar of color would likely not have been invited to a discussion about Soviet tank formations during the Cold War, there is much more of a willingness to listen to diverse voices when you're addressing new political warfare in what is considered a very foreign place. Consequently, there is more space within the academy or military for young people from diverse backgrounds to rise through the ranks in a direct response to highly political, complicated wars that aren't going well. In a sense, the wars themselves have created opportunities in academic research, a dynamic written about by <u>Prof. Laleh Khalili</u>, who writes about loads of fascinating things.

KH: As a slightly more hopeful perspective that might be good note to end on: an influx of other voices might begin to transform the field beyond previous, more instrumental approaches to diversity—when having your translator or "local informant" was already the extent of diversity (films like *War Machine* and *Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot* satirically target this lack of openness and diverse perspective and the problems it creates). But if academic political studies begin to include more voices and perspectives and are willing to have conversations with policy makers, military practitioners, and also a more general public, then maybe that opens up possibilities for change. And along those lines, Barbara: thank you for having this conversation with me. I appreciate the work that you do and thank you for sharing some of it with me and making it more accessible.

BE: Thank you for having me.

For further reading on modern wars, we asked Barbara Elias to suggest some of her favorite fiction and non-fiction reading accessible to non-specialists:

- Chivers, C.J. *The Fighters*. Simon & Schuster, 2018.
- Filkins, Dexter. *The Forever War*. Vintage, 2009.
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- Malkasian, Carter. *The American War in Afghanistan: A History*. Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Matar, Hisham. *The Return: Fathers, Sons and the Land in Between*. Penguin Press, 2017.
- Mukhopadhyay, Dipali. *Warlords, Strongman Governors, and the State in Afghanistan*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Young, Marilyn B. "'I was thinking, as I often do these days, of war:' The United States in the Twenty-First Century." *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 36, No 1 (January 2012), pp. 1–15.

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