

Why America Loses War: Limited War and U.S. Strategy from the Korean War to the Present

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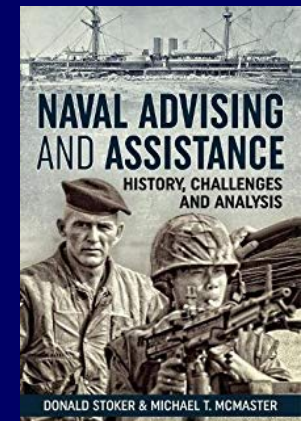
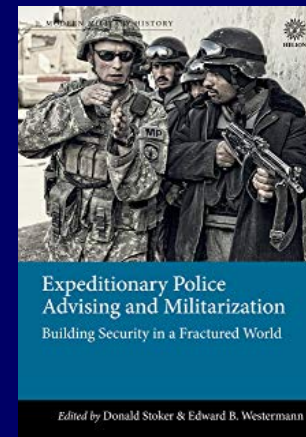
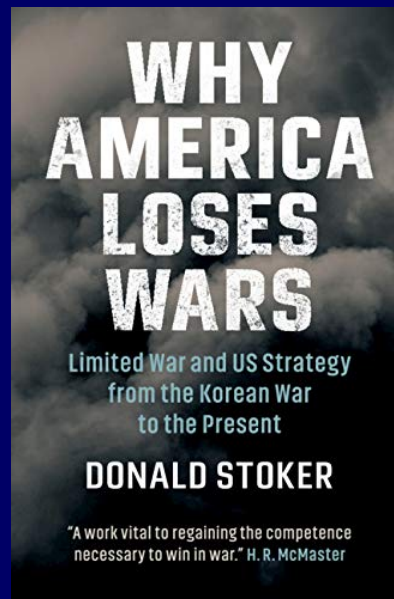
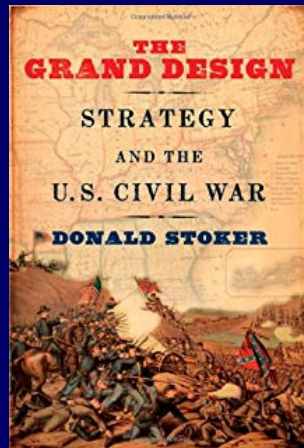
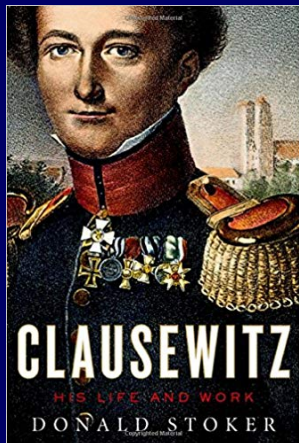
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WHY AMERICA LOSES WARS

Limited War and US Strategy
from the Korean War
to the Present

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"A work vital to regaining the competence
necessary to win in war." H. R. McMaster

- The U.S. has been at war since 2001 and seems incapable of clearly winning or even ending its wars.
- Why?
- American political and military leaders do not know how to *think* about war.

Why Study “Limited War”?

- How I came to study this topic.
- Every U.S. war since 1945 branded “limited.”
 - Even if it was not!
- Victory too often eluded the U.S.: Why?
- Or things went much differently than expected.
Why?
- Is this the most likely form of war for the U.S.
and its allies?
- American limited war ideas are a BIG part of the
problem.
- Limited War ideas underpin U.S. strategic
thinking.

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Thesis and Outline

Many US military and political leaders don't know how to *think* about war, particularly limited war.

- They don't know the difference between war and peace.
- Victory in war is not valued or understood.

To address these we explore:

- The problem of definition.
- The importance of the political aim.
- The constraints and their effects.
- Strategy and its problems.
- Problems ending the war and securing the peace.

This reveals the results of flawed thinking.

1. We Have Forgotten the Difference Between War and Peace.

Some Examples:

- (June 1950) Pres. Truman press conference. “We are not at war.”
- (Nov. 2015) SedDef Ash Carter testimony. “We’re at war.” But “It’s not war in the technical sense.”
- (2019) Addiction to bad theory such as Gray Zone and Hybrid War (more on this later).

Why does this matter?

- *War and peace aren’t the same!*
- Different problems require different solutions.
- Incorrect reactions can lead to a war.
- Chinese and Russians do not suffer this confusion.

Related to This: The Problem of Victory

Limited war literature taught us victory is bad or impossible.

‘The subject of this essay is an unpopular one: *not winning*. This is not the same as losing. It means fighting a limited war to a draw. In limited war circumstances, victory can no longer be cast in the traditional mold. We cannot aspire to “win” in the historical sense of annihilating the enemy.’ CAPT H.B. Seim, *USNI Proceedings*, Aug. 1951.

“In limited war ‘winning’ is an inappropriate and dangerous goal, and a state which finds itself close to it should immediately begin to practise restraint.” J. Garnett, in *Contemporary Strategy*, 1982.

‘I was struck in the meeting by the service chiefs’ seeming detachment from the wars we were in and their focus on future contingencies and stress on the force. Not one uttered a single sentence on the need for us to win in Iraq.’ (2006) Robert Gates, *Duty*, p.39.

“But what I'm not interested in doing is posing or pursuing some notion of American leadership or America winning, or whatever other slogans they come up with that has no relationship to what is actually going to work to protect the American people,... I'm too busy for that.” Barack Obama, Press Conference, Nov. 19, 2015.

If not at war, does winning it or ending it matter?

2. *Limited War: The Problem of Definition*

“A limited war is one in which the belligerents restrict the purposes for which they fight to concrete, well-defined objectives that do not demand the utmost military effort of which the belligerents are capable and that can be accommodated in a negotiated settlement. The battle is confined to a local geographical area and directed against selected targets.... It demands of the belligerents only a fractional commitment of their human and physical resources....” Robert Osgood, *Limited War* (1957), 1-2.

‘What distinguishes limited war from total war? The answer is that limited war involves an important kind and degree of restraint—deliberate restraint. As a rule we do not apply the term “limited war” to conflicts which are limited naturally by the fact that one or both sides lack the capacity to make them total.... In such wars the possibility of total or unrestricted conflict is always present as an obvious and immediately available alternative to limited operations.....

The restraint must also be massive. One basic restraint always has to be present if the term “limited war” is to have any meaning at all: the strategic bombing of cities with nuclear weapons must be avoided....’ Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (1965), 310-11.

The Problems With These Definitions (And All Others)

- Definitions Mix Ends (Pol.Obj.), Ways (Strat/Ops), and Means (Effort).
- Define “Limited War” in relation to so-called “Total War” (or “General War,” “Major War,” etc.).
 - “Total War” means nothing because one cannot define when a war becomes “Total” (means based).
- Demands mutual restraint, which cannot be enforced (usually means based, but sometimes geography, etc.).
- Problem: Means dependent definitions.
 - This is too subjective to be useful for analysis.

***Results: We have no basis for analysis!
Means focus draws focus from the aim!***

Defining “Limited War”

“War can be of two kinds, in the sense that either the objective is to *overthrow the enemy* – [unlimited war] to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please; or *merely to occupy some of his frontier-districts* [limited war] so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations.” (Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 69).

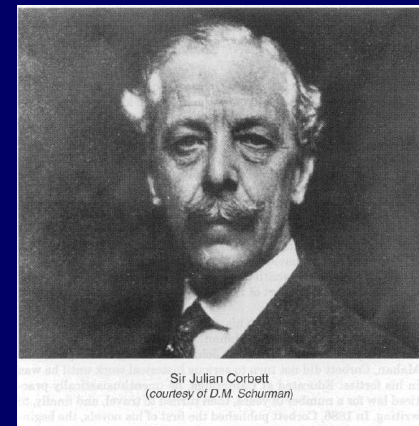
- A war fought for regime change [Unlimited]
- A war fought for something less [Limited]

This gives us a concrete basis for analysis!



All wars fit under this rubric!

- Clausewitz also discusses this in *Carl von Clausewitz: Two Letters on Strategy*, Peter Paret and Daniel Moran, eds. and trans. (Combat Studies Institute, 1984), pp. 1-3.
- Sir Julian Corbett imposes “unlimited” and “limited” on Clausewitz, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (Longmann’s, 1911), pp. 41-52.



But We Must Begin With the Value of the Object: Why? Everything Else Flows from This!

“Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of the object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in magnitude and also in duration. Once the expenditure of the effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.” (*On War*, p. 92).

“The political object—the original motive for the war—will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires.” (*On War*, p. 81).

Political Objective (End)

Military Strategy and Operations (Ways)

Effort (Means)

Other issues are factors contributing to the nature of limited war, as well as the nature of the specific war itself.

The Danger of Not Understanding the Political Aim and Its Effects

Example: The Korean War, 1950-1953:

Initial Aim: Limited. Secure South Korea.

Truman administration decision to invade North Korea (1950).

- Note: political objectives or aims *change*. They do not escalate. Escalation applies to the means used to prosecute the war.
- Changed aim from limited to unlimited.
- This changed the nature of the war.
- This affected other powers, especially China.
- Which elected to intervene.
- Changing the aim changes everything!
- This tells you what you want.
- Influences the cost of getting it.
- It defines victory.
- How do you know what “win” means if you don’t know the aim you’re seeking?

3. Wars Fought for Limited Political Objectives: The Key Constraints

- **All wars have constraints:**
- Wars fought for limited political objectives are likely to have more.
- They are also more likely to affect the war's execution.
- Political objectives of the combatants are key!

The Key Constraints

- The opponent's political objective or aim and the relative value of the objects sought.
- (The effects of the other constraints, and the imposition of the constraints themselves flow from the importance of the object).
- Time.
 - The internal political environment, including public opinion.
 - The international political environment.
 - Geography.
 - Military means (including nuclear weapons).
 - Unknowns not considered or envisioned.

Understanding the Nature of the War

Understanding the Constraints

- **Note: All wars have constraints!**
- **Question: Are the constraints actual or self-imposed?**

Are the constraints “Actual”?

- Meaning there are constraints the combatant has no choice but to accept.

Or “Self-imposed”?

- Meaning the combatant creates or imposes the constraints.
 - Sometimes this is wise.
 - Constraints are not necessarily bad.
 - Often situations arise where it would be irrational to not have limits.

One could argue that most constraints are self-imposed.

Examples:

- Korea: limited use of ground force in late spring and early summer 1951 when the U.S. could have possibly destroyed the Chinese army and forced a peace.
- Vietnam: geographical constraint of not invading North Vietnam. Wise or not. But should the US have been constrained from moving into Laos?
- Air power in the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf Wars.

Limited War: The Means Constraint

Problem: Some believe that a war fought for a limited objective *must* also use “limited” means.

Answer: NO! To think this is to not understand the nature of the war in which you are involved.

- One should use sufficient means to achieve the political objective.

Result of Such Thinking: Increases chances of failing to allocate *sufficient* means.

How does this play out in the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf Wars?

Clausewitz: “The smaller the sacrifice we demand from our opponent, the smaller presumably will be the means of resistance he will employ, and the smaller his means, the smaller will ours be required to be. Similarly the smaller our political object, the less value shall we set upon it and the more easily we shall be induced to abandon it.” (*On War*, p. 81)

A Wicked Means Problem: Atomic and Nuclear Weapons

- Fears of atomic and nuclear weapons key driver in traditional “Limited War” theory.
 - And with good reason!
- Much early limited war theory argued for limited nuclear war, meaning, generally, that the weapons could be used in a tactical manner without provoking a full-scale Soviet response.
- Soviet thinking: Any use will result in full nuclear exchange
- Relevance today because of India-Pakistan issues, North Korea issues, potential South China Sea issues.
- But this is still a “means” issue.
 - But one with enormous political ramifications!

4. *The Problem of Strategy*

Strategy: “The larger uses of military force in pursuit of a political objective.”

Some elements of good strategy:

- Based on a clear, obtainable political objective.
- Based on rational assessment of self and enemy capabilities and situations.
- Accurate assessment of third-party issues.
- Understanding of own and opponent’s centers of gravity.
- Understanding of the relationship between ends, ways, means.
- Awareness of the limits of military force.
- Understanding of and ability to use force to achieve the political objective.
- Solid strategic and operational planning.
- Clear vision for the postwar situation.

Strategy Example:

A Typology of Insurrection or Insurgency

- Proper analysis *should* yield proper approaches.
- Example: Core elements of addressing an insurrection or insurgency or counterinsurgency.
- Strategically (not tactically) three things matter the most:
 1. Control of the population.
 2. Control of sanctuary.
 3. Control of outside support.
- Insurrections will usually win if they get these.
- Will usually lose if they do not.
- Not an absolute (there are few absolutes in strategy).
- But this typology can be used – strategically – not tactically – for analysis.

5. The Problem of Ending the War and Securing the Peace

Critical: Limited wars are almost *always* ended by negotiations.

Problem: Almost no one plans for this!

“...the more imperative the need not to take the first step without considering the last.” (Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 584).

Exception: Russo-Japanese War, 1904-1905.

Why this matters: End the war properly, or you might get to do it again.

Some Things To Keep In Mind When Trying to End the War

- Understand what victory/success/peace look like.
- The timing!
- Negotiations are a weapon!
- Coalitions complicate matters!
 - Every combatant has their own political objectives!
- An armistice (or ceasefire) is not the same as a peace treaty (but sometimes this is the best you can do).

“When the enemy’s envoys speak in humble terms, but he continues his preparations, he will advance. When their language is deceptive but the enemy pretentiously advances, he will retreat. When the envoys speak in apologetic terms, he wishes a respite. When without a previous understanding the enemy asks for a truce, he is plotting.” (Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*)

So, what is the result?

A Review of the Problems:

- Difficulty defining and understanding “limited war.”
- No insistence upon winning the war, or a failure to value this.
- Poor understanding of the Ends-Ways-Means relationship.
- Insufficient understanding of the effects of constraints.
- No insistence upon ending the war, and poor planning for this.

Result:

- Defeat or Perpetual or Protracted or “Forever” War.

“Victory is the main object in war. If this is long delayed, weapons are blunted and morale depressed....For there has never been a protracted war from which a country has benefited.” Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, 73.

“[W]ar is becoming perpetual or endless quite simply because the liberal world is *unable to imagine conclusive endings* to the wars it is currently fighting.” Caroline Holmqvist, *Policing Wars*, 2014, on the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts.

Result: Shoddy Thinking – Some Examples:

“Hybrid War” and “The Gray Zone”

- 1) They are examples of poorly constructed new theory that more often than not cloud rather than clarify. Also, it is often difficult to tell whether tactics, operations, strategy, or political aims are being described.
- 2) They distort or ignore history, sometimes by claiming to be new when we have seen similar confusion in the past. They paint an inaccurate historical picture and are unaware of or fail to acknowledge their respective antecedents.
- 3) They feed a dangerous tendency to confuse war and peace. This precludes clear analysis of either. *War and peace are not the same.* Thus the solutions for dealing with their respective challenges are not the same.
- 4) They undermine US strategic thinking via the construction of critical political and strategic documents based upon flawed ideas, even sometimes resulting in strategic guidance derived from a focus on tactical matters. Worse, American rivals *like* the confusion.

Why Study “Limited War”?

- Russia’s war against Ukraine
 - Example of a modern war for a limited political aim.
- Achieved what appears to have been political objectives.
 - But the war also hasn’t ended
 - Is this because Putin doesn’t want it to?
- Much study by India.
- The South China Sea situation.
- The Korean Peninsula situation.
- Most likely type of war involving Europe or US?
- Probably....



A solution to our problem?

1. Read my book!
2. Question supposedly new concepts and old methodologies.
3. Most important: Learn to *think* clearly and systematically about matters of war and peace.
4. Return to basic principles of analysis.

The Political Objective

Grand Strategy

Strategy

Operations

Tactics

*The
Problem of
the Level
of Analysis*

*Building
the
Foundation
for Analysis*

Conclusion

“The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish...the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions.” (Clausewitz, *On War*, 88-89)

If we cannot even properly define and thus understand a conflict, do we have any hope of understanding what is required to win it?