

# *Hybrid War and the Gray Zone: Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking*

**Donald Stoker, Ph.D.**

Senior Fellow, Atlas Organization, Washington, DC

Distinguished Fulbright Professor, Diplomatic Academy, Vienna, Austria, 2017-2018

Professor of Strategy and Policy, US Naval War College Monterey Program, 1999-2017

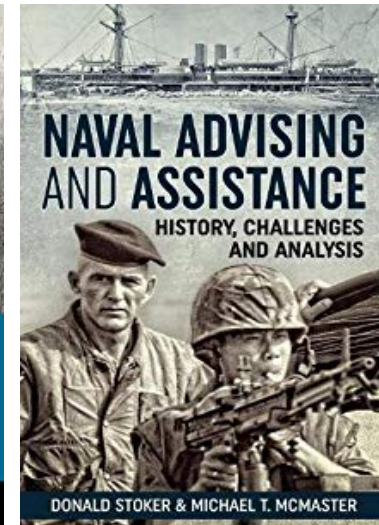
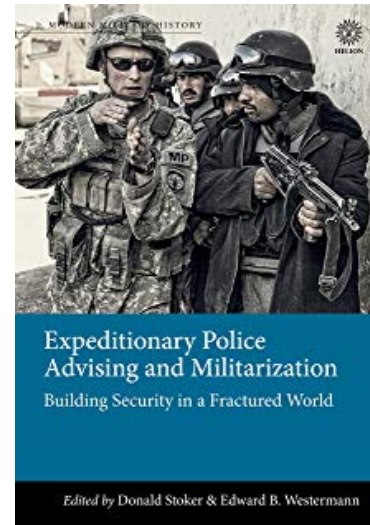
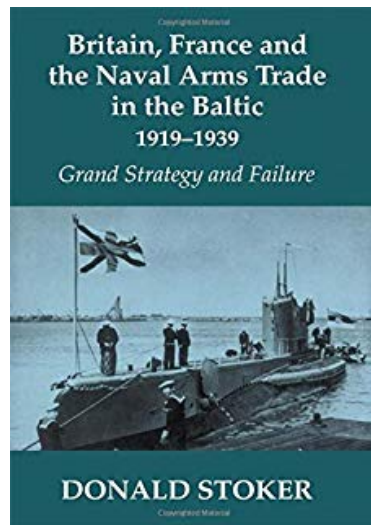
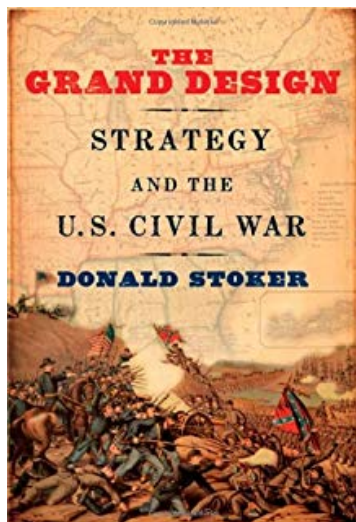
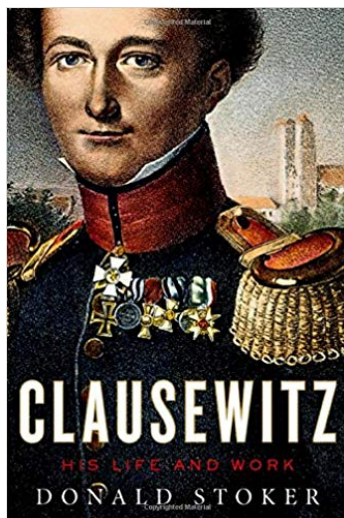
Email: [donaldstoker@gmail.com](mailto:donaldstoker@gmail.com)

**Craig Whiteside, Ph.D.**

Associate Professor, US Naval War College Monterey Program

Lieutenant Colonel (USA, Ret.)

Email: [cawhites@nps.edu](mailto:cawhites@nps.edu)



# WHY AMERICA LOSES WARS

LIMITED WAR AND  
US STRATEGY  
FROM THE KOREAN WAR  
TO THE PRESENT

DONALD STOKER

Cambridge University Press, 2019

## *Book Thesis*

- US military and political leaders don't know how to *think* about war, particularly so-called "limited wars."
- If you don't know how to think about a war, how do you win it?
- The result is defeat or "forever wars."
- So-called "Hybrid War" and the "Gray Zone" are merely the latest examples in a long history of bad US limited war theorizing.

# *What are the problems with so-called “Hybrid War” and “The Gray Zone”?*

- 1) They are bad theory.** They confuse issues rather than clarify them. Also, it is often difficult to tell whether tactics, operations, strategy, or political aims are being described.
- 2) They are bad (or forgotten) history.** The arguments in support of these terms 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. *War* should not be confused with *warfare*, which usually is defined as the undertaking of the military actions themselves.
- 4) They undermine US political and strategic thinking.** This produces flawed political and strategic guidance, resulting in policy and strategy built upon sand. Worse, American rivals *like* the confusion.

# *What is so-called Hybrid War?*

## **The Urtext:**

Frank G. Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Rise of Hybrid Wars* (Arlington, VA: Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, December 2007), [http://www.potomac institute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac\\_hybridwar\\_0108.pdf](http://www.potomac institute.org/images/stories/publications/potomac_hybridwar_0108.pdf).

## **Hoffman's definition (Italics in the original):**

*“Hybrid Wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder. These multi-modal activities can be conducted by separate units, or even by the same unit, but are generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects.”*

- But – Surveying the literature, hybrid war is described as a new kind of war, a new threat, and a new kind of warfare.
- The definitions encompass nearly every characteristic of war.



# *1. Hybrid War is Bad Theory. What Proves This?*

**Good theory is supposed to:**

- “clarify concepts and ideas...that are confused and entangled.” Be historically grounded. Train the leader’s mind. (Clausewitz).
- Provide a logical, universally acceptable foundation for analysis.

**But what are the problems with definitions of *Hybrid War*?**

*Hybrid War* is badly defined and it is often unclear what is being argued. Hybridists insist they have identified a new kind of war.

- There is nothing new here.
- One can boil down most hybrid discussions to tactical means.
- *A means- and methods- based argument fails to provide a firm definitional basis for the construction of theory.*
- Means and methods, largely tactical, describe part of the nature of the war, but they do not give us a new form of war.

# *Why Hybrid War is Bad Theory Continued...*

**Hybrid War repeats an earlier, Cold War intellectual error.**

## **“Fringe War:”**

“is localized, yet global; it consists primarily of a series of minor engagements for limited objectives; it is carried out by relatively small forces; it utilizes puppet or satellite groups as a smokescreen to mask the single coordinated communist effort; it is waged in many different manners, both military and non-military.”

Source: Harvey B. Seim, “The Navy and the Fringe War,” *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 77 (August 1951), 838.

## *2. Hybrid War is Bad History*

- The original hybrid work argues that the various “modes” of warfare, meaning conventional and unconventional methods, only merge within certain conflicts.
- The author holds up three examples where this supposedly does not happen: the Vietnam War, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Revolutionary War.
- This is bad history.

# “Hybrid War” is Bad History Continued...

## Schematic of Vietnamese Communist Revolutionary War

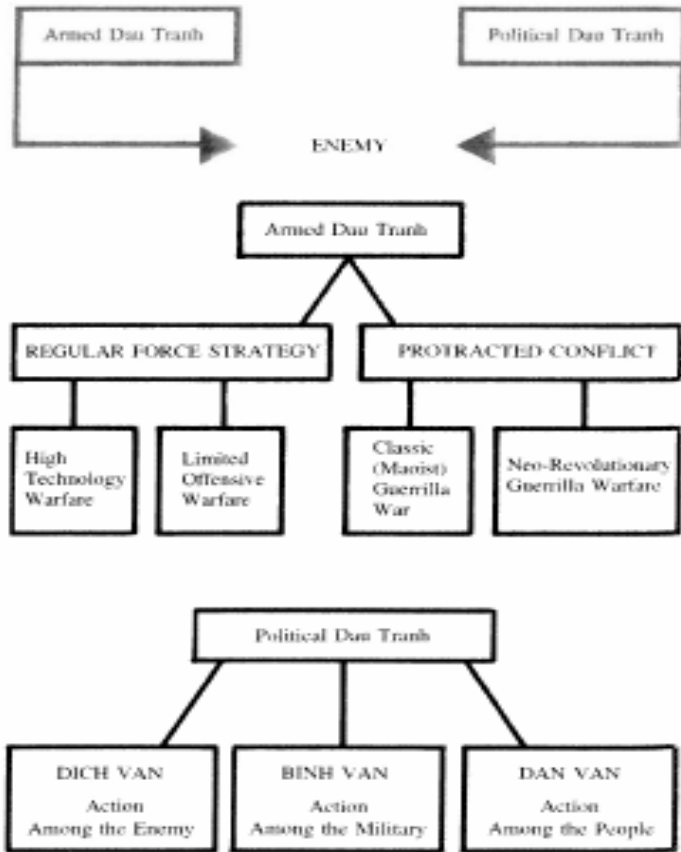


Figure 2 Schematic of Vietnamese Communist Revolutionary War

Dau Tranh = “Struggle”

Source: Pike, *The People’s Army of Vietnam*, 212

## The Napoleonic Wars

- Blending of so-called regular and irregular war consistent in the Napoleonic Wars.
- Spain – Conventional and Guerrilla
- Russian militia a constant.
- *Landwehr* filling out Prussian units.

## The American Revolution

“My design is to collect all the force that can possibly be drawn from other quarters to this post, so as to reduce the security of this army to the greatest certainty possible, and to be in a condition of embracing any fair opportunity, that may offer, to make an attack on advantageous terms—In the mean time I intend by light Bodies of militia, seconded and encouraged by a few Continental Troops, to harass and diminish their number by continual Skirmishes.” Geo. Washington, June 17, 1777

**Best Argument: Every War Hybrid! But if every war is hybrid, no war is hybrid!**



### *3. Hybrid War Confuses War and Peace: Hybrid War and the So-Called Gerasimov Doctrine*

- Hybrid idea most often linked to Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine.
- Supposedly based on ideas of General Valery Gerasimov (February 2013).
- Gerasimov idea pushed by Mark Galeotti—Who recently recanted and apologized.

Gerasimov: **nonmilitary means** “in many cases,” “have exceeded the power of force and weapons in their effectiveness,” but gives no example of this. “The focus of applied methods of conflict has altered in the direction of the broad use of political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and **other nonmilitary measures**—applied in coordination with the protest potential of the population.” “**All of this is supplemented by military means of a concealed character**, including carrying out actions of **informational conflict** and the actions of **special-operations forces**. The open use of forces—often **under the guise** of peacekeeping and crisis regulation—is resorted to only at a certain state, primarily for the achievement of final success in the conflict.”

- **Belief in Gerasimov’s ideas confuses peace and war.**
- **Subversion is a peacetime constant. It is also a tool of war.**
- **The use of disguised military forces is war, whether one admits it or not.**
- **Putin’s Russia fought a war against Ukraine. Not merely subversion.**

(Gerasimov apparently delivered a speech in Moscow in early November 2017 in which he insisted the US and other Western forces were using hybrid war against Russia).

## ***4. Result: Creation of Flawed US Policy and Strategy***

- *A focus on hybrid war produces the tacticization of strategy.*
- Example: The 2015 US *National Military Strategy*: “Hybrid Conflict”  
“Blends conventional and irregular forces to create ambiguity, seize the initiative, and paralyze the adversary. May [sic] include use of both traditional military and asymmetric systems.”
- This is merely an expression of the means and methods used to wage war.
- All warfare blends conventional and irregular forces and traditional and “asymmetric systems,” war’s very nature creates ambiguity, seizing the initiative is part of the job when waging a war, as is paralyzing the enemy.
- (Note: Not in 2017 *National Security Strategy*, but in declassified evaluation of 2018 *National Defense Strategy*.)

### ***Some other critics of the term...***

Hew Strachan: “Asymmetry and hybridisation have become catch-alls applied to any war in which the two sides have not been made up of armies organised and equipped on similar lines.”

Colin Gray: “The trouble with the hybrid war concept is that it encourages the innovative theorist to venture without limit into the swamp of inclusivity, indeed of a form of encyclopedism.”

Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 82; Colin S. Gray, *Categorical Confusion? The Strategic Implications of Recognizing Challenges Either as Irregular or Traditional* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, February 2012), 40-41.

# *War in the Gray Zone—Confusion in Black and White*

## The Key Texts:

- Recent modern incarnation appears to come from Congressional testimony by SOCCOM General Joseph Votel, March 18, 2015.
- Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* (Carlisle: Army War College Press, 2015).
- But forgotten: Asbjorn Eide, et al, “Combating Lawlessness in Gray Zone Conflicts Through Minimum Humanitarian Standards,” *The American Journal of International Law* (January 1995), pp. 215-23.

## The Gray Zone Defined (Sometimes):

- Mazarr offers no clear definition.
- The best that can be derived from it is: a “new standard form of conflict” is emerging from “revisionist states” that are “competing below the threshold of major war.” (Which doesn’t mean anything).
- Gray Zone has come to generally mean the space between peace and war, which shows us the root of the problem, as we will see. (See Philip Kapusta, SOCOM White Paper, September 9, 2015.)

# *1. The Gray Zone is Bad Theory*

**Why? It is badly defined.**

- Mazarr defines it in relation to “major war,” which has no clear meaning.
- He mixes the levels of war, branding the same types of actions anything from tactics to strategy.

**If you accept the definition that the Gray Zone is the space between peace and war...**

- Problem: *There is no space between peace and war.*
- War: organized violence for a political purpose.
- You are at war or you are not.
- Refusing to admit this does not create a Gray Zone.
- *One must divide peace and war to have a logical basis for analysis. Peace and war are not the same.*
- More on this in a moment...

**It is bad theory because it provides no logical, universally applicable foundation for analysis. It does not clarify. It confuses.**

## *2. The Gray Zone is Bad History*

Mazarr argues that revisionist powers: “are creating a new approach to the pursuit of aggressive aims, a new standard form of conflict” by gradually undermining the foes on their periphery.

- Nothing new here.
- He is simply pointing out that countries are using subversion as they have always done, in conjunction with military means and methods.
- Example: Nazi Germany versus Austria and Czechoslovakia.
- Thucydides writes about this as well.
- *Countries can use subversion when they are at war. They can also use it when they are not.*

**To Mazarr’s credit:** he does correctly identify the problem of revisionist states and does so with some superb analysis.

## ***2. The Gray Zone is Bad (or Forgotten) History***

**We've been here before (sort of):**

**Thomas K. Finletter: “Gray Areas”**: “the countries outside of NATO which are in contact or nearly so with Russia and China, the long frontier between Freedom and Communism starting from Turkey on the west, and leading eastward through Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Burma, Thailand, Malaya, Indonesia, Formosa, Korea and Japan to the western limit of NATO in the Aleutian chain.” Thomas K. Finletter, *Power and Policy: US Foreign and Military Policy in the Hydrogen Age* (Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1954), 84-85

### **Other early Gray Area accounts:**

- Henry Kissinger, “Military Policy and the Defense of the ‘Grey Areas,’” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (April 1958), 416-28.
- Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1957), 161-62, 267-74, 295 fn. 26.
- E. Biörklund published an article in which he defined the “‘grey areas’ as being the region from Northern Europe to the Far East.” See E. Biörklund, “Can War Be Limited? (In General or Local Wars),” *Air Power*, Vol. 6 (Summer 1959), 290-91.



### ***3. The Gray Zone Destroys Our Understanding of the Difference Between Peace and War***

**Mazarr**: “A fundamental implication of gray zone campaigns is to blur the dividing line between peace and war, and between civilian and military endeavors. They are, in a sense, the use of civilian instruments to achieve objectives sometimes reserved for military capabilities.” (p. 62)

- The problem is not a blurring of the line between peace and war.
- *The problem is the failure of analysts and policymakers to understand the differences between war and peace and call things as they are.*
- War is organized violence for a political purpose. Whether it is a state or non-state actor doesn't matter. *But war does not preclude the use of subversion.*
- But just because states are not at war, this does not mean that they cannot or do not practice subversion against other states.
- *Resulting Problem: If you don't know you're at war, how do you win it? If you're not at war, what are you trying to win? If you are not at war, then you don't need to win.*

Emile Simpson: “What liberal powers do by blurring the conceptual boundaries between war and peace, is often to militarise in a polarised manner pre-established patterns of political activity, which might otherwise not be part of the wider conflict.”  
*War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics* (London: Hurst, 2012), 9.

# *And a Bonus Problem:*

## *Some Russian Analysts **Love** this Corruption!*

### Russian Political Scientist Dmitry Baluev:

- Works from space between peace and war definition (probably via Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin, 2005). American and Italian Marxist theorists/Foucault disciples influenced by the Iraqi insurgency). (Possibly SOCOM original source?)
- Baluev argues acceptance of “Gray Zone” concepts allows the Russians to introduce national security concepts “that differ from the traditional international system and depart from western [sic] dominated international relations theory.”
- “Standard rules of international law cannot be applied to regulate processes in Gray Zones. Existing international regimes as systems of standards, principles, and rules that are used to control political processes outside Gray Zones, can no longer be considered comprehensive and universal.”
- This, he says, is important because *it allows for attacks on democracy.*
- **Result: *Russian analysts see in confused Western analysis a means of delegitimizing democracy and undermining the international order.***
- Source: Dmitry Baluev, “The Concept of “Gray Zones” of World Politics,” International Conference on the Modern Development of Humanities and Social Sciences (MDHSS 2013) (**Atlantis Press, 2013**), 266-68.

## ***4. Result: The Creation of US Policy and Strategy Built on Flawed Ideas***

Earliest key appearance modern Gray Zone view: Probably the *Quadrennial Defense Review of 2010*.

- But 2015 usages raised it to prominence.
- Now nearly omnipresent in US national security strategy documents and publications.
- March 2017 Central Command Posture Statement.
- Common element in defense related Congressional briefings.
- Commonly mentioned in briefings and meetings in Washington, DC, and elsewhere today.
- Common discussion among US allies and partners as well.
- Key part of the declassified analysis of the 2018 *National Defense Strategy*.

# *What do we do about this?*

*Clausewitz says:*

“One can, after all, not condemn a method without being able to suggest a better alternative.” (Clausewitz, *On War*, 161)

*So, what is the alternative?*

*Return to basic principles of strategic analysis*

*Question any new term, theory, or claim*

# *The Key Question:*

## *Are we at peace or are we at war?*

- This matters because your ability to deal with the problem is different for each situation.
- This is particularly true in regard to the use of military force.

### *International Relationship Environment*

**Peace**

**War**

# *A Firm Basis: The Two Kinds of 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.



Sir Julian Corbett  
(courtesy of D.M. Schurman)



**The Political Objective**

**Grand Strategy**

**Strategy**

**Operations**

**Tactics**

*The  
Problem of  
the Level  
of Analysis*

*Building  
the  
Foundation  
for Analysis*

*In conclusion.....*

## *What do we do?*

*Again: Return to the basic principles of strategic analysis!*

- Are we at war or not?
- Or are we just seeing subversion?
- What are the political aims of each party involved?
- Are we discussing the political objective, grand strategy, strategy, operations, or tactics?

**Maskirovka (deception) only works if we fool ourselves.**