

Because strategy never stops...

# Infinity Journal



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# A Note From The Editor

Those who have ever followed my writing closely will know I am fond of saying, "War can never change. Warfare changes only slowly (and in no way we cannot comprehend), but Politics changes rapidly and in ways that are largely not predictable." With variations on that theme, this is pretty much where Clausewitz began, and this is where most informed people continue.

Thus, when on the morning of the November 9, 2016 you awoke to find that the United States had elected Donald Trump as President, all and everything you thought you understood about world affairs was probably as poor in predicting the future as it was twenty-five minutes before the first aircraft hit the World Trade Center in 2001.

However, regardless of detail, Donald Trump's election is really only relevant to policy. It has few, if any implications for strategy. Trump is still going to face the same problem inherent to the US Army and Government's core issues which lead to consistent strategic mediocrity, and that is that if the policy does not accept violence, then the policy is at fault. Violence, or means, like the weather, just is. Some skill is required, but policy is what gives violent means meaning or utility.

So when the President Elect says, he will "Pursue aggressive joint and coalition military operations to crush and destroy ISIS, international cooperation to cutoff their funding, expand intelligence sharing, and cyber warfare to disrupt and disable their propaganda and recruiting," then there had better be a policy in place that gives all that meaning. Let us be clear, the destruction of ISIS is a policy. It is simple and achievable. International cooperation and expanded intelligence sharing may be more problematic, because as policies themselves, they highlight Policy's paradoxical nature as the true fog of war, to give credit to Mark Safranski's truly insightful comment. Trump, like Obama and like Bush, will face all the same problems. This is not political opinion. It's the hard facts of a violent world. Mr. Trump's only ability to make a difference is to have very, very different policies, and those policies will still face the same major challenge of being acceptable to violent means, should the policy require their use.

**William F. Owen**

Editor, Infinity Journal

November 2016

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**Colin S. Gray**

Dr. Colin S. Gray is Professor Emeritus of Strategic Studies at the University of Reading, UK. He has served as an advisor to major political parties both in the USA and UK. Currently he is writing a book on *Theory of Strategy* for Oxford University Press.

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**Hugh Smith**

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**Nikolaos Lampas**

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# Strategic Sense – Missing from Action

Colin S. Gray

University of Reading

Strategic sense is a concept fundamental to the theory and practice of strategy. Above all else, this sense should direct focus upon the consequences that are the purpose of strategy. The familiar idea of strategic effect is all about consequences. This is why we adopt strategy. If strategic sense is lacking, as was the case in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, strategically beneficial results should not be expected, or deserved! These are quite familiar ideas and logic, but Western governments have proved that they do not really understand them.

As I recall clearly, *Infinity Journal* was launched with an excellent article by T. X. Hammes on the greatly neglected, but truly vital subject of the assumptions that always lie behind strategic choice.[i] From that first-rate conceptual launch of this journal I will move in part to the other end of the strategic story, and look critically at how well or poorly strategists have performed in practice. Importantly, in addition, I will consider briefly both how and why strategic performance often has been as disappointing to its authors and also to its executives in command, and to the political licensing authorities, if not always usefully in well-disciplined control.

## Key Concepts

This short article is all about the relationship between strategic theory and strategic practice. As many readers will know and understand all too well, the theory and practice of strategy are not exactly welded together in an ideal marriage. It is hardly surprising that the topic here has not attracted an abundance of conceptual and literary talent, given the enormous uncertainties, and inevitably controversial judgements that often are unavoidable in practice. To Hammes' excellent terse treatment of the critically significant role, for and in, strategy played by reigning assumptions, also I must add M. L. R. Smith's first-rate[ii] and much needed, reminder of the hugely significant role for strategy often played by what Clausewitz termed 'passion'—for due appreciation, as usual, of the Prussian Grand Master.[iii] In

this essay I strive to cast some small but I hope, significant amount of light upon two concepts: one all too well known to readers of this journal, *strategic effect* or consequences, the other familiar but, in my opinion, far too little employed, even among nominal strategists, *strategic sense*. [iv] Indeed, this second concept remains largely unknown, as any library search swiftly reveals. This is unfortunate, because the value of concepts and theory for the world of strategic practice should be, indeed needs to be, high. The historical record of undoubted strategic incompetence appears to show that intellectual and attempted pragmatic mastery of key strategic concepts has not played a leading role in the educational preparation of leaders in public office in many countries. This is unfortunate, albeit readily understandable, given the typically high priority that the holders of public office have little practical choice other than to give first place to temporally more pressing domestic political needs.

## Politics and Strategic Sense

Because the sole purpose of strategy can only be to influence the course of events in ways anticipated as positive by principal state actors, it needs to be fixed firmly in the minds both of military commanders and also of those they strive to serve. Given that the responsibilities of the chain of military high command must terminate with the political authority of usually civilian politicians, it should be quite obvious that the potent concept of *strategic effect* needs to be dominated by political calculations (and guesses). Indeed, in order to achieve strategic effect there first needs to be a political law of strategic sense. I write this despite my recognition that the potent concept of strategic effect remains undertheorized. It is logically compelling to attempt to insist that in order to maximize the prospect of achieving strategic success it is important to attempt to employ in high military command only those few, those very few, professional soldiers in whom there is well evidenced confidence of strategic sense. Because of the possibility of inconvenient decisions by an uncooperative enemy, the compelling logic that should link anticipated strategic effect to strategic sense as the primary cause cannot be trusted to be delivered strictly as necessary. In practice, there tends to be far too little upon which one can rely with respect to the connection between the two very high concepts that together comprise my subject here. The problem I seek to address is really off the Richter scale of challenge, but that rather discouraging realization cannot

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be permitted to close down enquiry.

I am not attempting to persuade readers of *Infinity Journal* that there may be feasible ways to defeat the laws of probability, reliable at the least as a guess resting on a high quality of suggestive evidence, but I do believe that some helpful foreknowledge probably is attainable. Furthermore, I am convinced that such an effort to understand whither most likely we are tending to go is both a morally prudent and an attainable political obligation on our part. The most plausible key to achievement of the necessary foreknowledge lies with the enabling concept and exercise of logical and strategic sense and what ought to be its practical corollary, strategic effect. This hardly astonishing suggestion amounts to a belief that through the exercise of strategic sense, strategic effect can be encouraged and possibly even secured, that would have some political consequences we believe desirable.

To summarize the argument:

- Strategists with strategic sense may know what ought to work well enough for the politically determined desired result for policy.
- Such appreciation with strategic sense should direct the attention of our leaders to the probable longer term consequences of actions taken in the near term.

### Strategy and Its Consequences

The leading problem is that the high concepts most favoured here are as potent in thoroughly unreliable promise as they are often opaque. That granted, we should understand that the only valid examination of strategy has to be in terms of its consequences, this is the true coin of relevant assessment. Of course, this is far easier to assert as desirable than it is to practice, given that it implies the claim for an unknowable understanding of the future.

#### Consequences

The principal subject of this essay has been well described, almost defined, by Robert Lyman, who writes from a background of twenty years in the British Army. Lyman advises as follows

But it is not enough simply to be a good leader under fire, and to be a model of valour. As Socrates identified, generals must also be able to plan, and they must be able to understand and contribute to the strategic as well as the battlefield aspect of warfare. Effective command requires *strategic sense*. Higher commanders need to understand the broader picture and wider context in which their own military questions take place, and thus to structure, plan and mount operations that meet the requirements of this wider strategy. They may not themselves be involved in the construction of grand strategy, but it is paramount that they understand why these decisions are made so they can make battlefield decisions intelligently.[v]

Lyman proceeds to explain that commanders must be able to plan, and then communicate these plans to their

subordinate commanders, who need to understand what the commander intends to achieve by his strategy; in other words, what the outcome is intended to be. This appears sufficiently clear in principle, but in practice a general may be captive to tactical and operational, not to mention political, concerns and, as a consequence have little if any time for thought that could be labelled strategic. Since strategy is all and only about the consequences of tactical and operational behaviour, this will prove a potentially disabling limitation or command.

### Timelines

American military historian, Williamson Murray, has argued persuasively that although tactical military error is unfortunate, particularly for the human victims of error, mistakes at the tactical level of combat engagement with the enemy are not usually fatal for a total military effort.[vi] The reason is because the timelines commonly are radically different among tactics, operations, and strategy. Tactical and even operational level error, when such clearly is revealed by the military course of events to be such, usually can be corrected in a matter of hours, possibly in days. Only rarely could even an operational level mistake have truly profound negative consequences. This is not to deny the possibility; however, the conduct of D-Day, 6 June 1944, springs to mind as a candidate in theory for a contrasting set of operational choices. General Dwight D. Eisenhower had ample grounds for such doubt.[vii] Even if his anxiety proved needless it is not difficult to comprehend why errors concerning the ruling operational assumptions for D-Day could hardly fail to promote Allied anxieties of the worst kind.

Following Murray's insightful lead, we note that the timelines for effective corrective action are radically different, as between the different levels of warfare. To change the operational course of conflict usually requires an operational planning horizon of months, whereas a change in strategy may have to entail a commitment to change numbered in years. Behind, though detectably influencing, indeed often directing, strategy should be the political decisions that provide sense and therefore justification for the entire belligerent enterprise. To complete the picture, behind the political decisions will lie the fundamental assumptions and attitudes contextual for the belligerency. Save only for the resolution of error that typically follows defeat unmistakably, the consequences of error will not always be plain to see. Indeed, the situation may be somewhat akin generically to conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan in the 2000s. In the situations of both those countries the true depth of Allied failure took years to reveal itself. What was scarcely less clear was the fact that in neither country was the multinational Allied effort led by any close approximation to strategic sense consistently applied over the necessary span of years. As subsequent events have clarified beyond room for plausible contention, and to make quite explicit what should be denied no longer, the Western interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were both abject failures. Furthermore, they attest to the ancient caution about the strong desirability of resisting the impulse to join an armed conflict when one lacks a powerful and compelling explanation as to how, and on what terms, you should be able subsequently to disengage.

## Strategic Sense

It is all very well to discuss particular consequences as being allegedly the principal product of strategy, but cause and effect often cannot reliably be identified so clearly. The entire Western literature on deterrence requires a quality of evidence that typically cannot be literally accessed. There is always a large measure of uncertainty about bold assertions on cause and effect, and further research might not yield definitive answers. Strategic sense in such cases is reduced to the level of guesswork or, in a rather unconvincingly Clausewitzian guise, as 'genius'. [viii] Notwithstanding the high but essentially futile aspirations of modern social science, it seems unlikely that the near-intuitive genius of which the Prussian wrote will be superseded by any pretensions to the reliable knowledge of science, hard or soft. The invention or fortuitous discovery of some phenomena that can be used to generate numbers issued to serve as data for proof or illustration, will not serve well as evidence. The highest concept that is my theme here, strategic sense, is not likely ever to be a matter appropriate for metric treatment. This is why Clausewitz's consideration of our subject under the umbrella-like rubric of 'genius' is thoroughly unhappily uncertain in respect of evidence. There can be no denying that the concept of strategic sense, which refers essentially to a quality requiring inclusive judgment, is a light year in analytical distance from the competing method known as Effects Based Operations (usually known more economically, simply as EBO, many aspects of which are extremely likely to be contestable). [ix]

## Acquiring Strategic Sense

The acquisition of strategic sense is second in relative importance only to the necessity for a public figure (or figures) to acquire political sense. The logic and practical force of this amplification is commanded by the logical and practical order of the theory of strategy. Even if the armed forces of a polity are organized, commanded, and led in battle by a general blessed in good measure with competent strategic sense that advantageous fact will prove of little value should the country's policy leadership not be capable of exercising political sense. Military historian Murray, cited earlier, makes the same point, which surely is valid. By and large and to the best of my knowledge, Western, especially American, forces typically fought well enough in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, but that combat proficiency could not be converted from tactical advantage into strategic effect, because in none of the three cases was the strategic context readily permissive of such conversion. Those three very modern conflicts attested in abundance to the wisdom in choosing 'so what?' as *the* most necessary of a strategist's questions. [x] It is all too easy to be misled by the excitement of tactics and even of operations—should tactical behaviour be so directed—into neglecting the superordinate 'so what' question that needs be most in command of events.

In this section of the essay I will look closely at just three sources of strategic sense, formal education; the informal education that experience may provide; and individual human nature.

First, in large part, I suspect, because the subject of strategic

genius sounds more than a little atavistic, notwithstanding its Clausewitzian authority, and in only slightly lesser measure undemocratic, these days the very notion of identifying apparently extraordinary strategic talent very early in a military career typically is resisted. Relatively high military flyers will be identified, probably entrusted and somewhat tested in professional positions that require a greater exercise of creative initiative than the norm. Always assuming the absence of any culturally deviant professional misbehaviour early in the career, the candidate military 'genius' in due course will be subject to some formal, if light, education in the making of strategy. Through a standard process of competitive selection, many countries around the world have staff colleges of varying degrees of scholarly rigor, each of which should produce a small annual class of men (and women also) schooled formally by an education in strategy. The military learn about EWM (Ends, Ways, and Means) and Assumptions, or close variants thereof in the local language. [xi] Such schooling should be a satisfactory way to begin a formal education in strategy, but its severe limitations should soon become apparent to the more perceptive military students. In particular, every conceptual category in the EWM—A formula will be contextually dependent for its exact meaning, while the practical feasibility in any real-world case must depend upon the political common sense both of the home side and of hostile foreign competitors. In other words, the formal structure for strategy-making is bereft of nearly everything of vital significance. There will be some educational utility in providing students with an authoritative, if truly bare, structure for thought, but that is near certain to be so lacking in specific context as to risk a charge of banality. Students can be encouraged, even challenged, by educational provision demanding choice, but upon which historical cases should reliance be placed? Students may well be as likely to mislearn as to learn from their historical forays. The sheer richness of variety in strategic history renders efforts to employ it perilously vulnerable, if not flawed fatally for the purpose of education.

Second, in addition to the benefit that might accrue from some formal education in the theory and historical practice of strategy, there is the enlightenment that should accrue from personal exposure to the real-world pressures, including the physical and moral risks, of actual experience of strategy-making and execution. But, is the candidate military commander more likely to learn useful positive lessons from the experience of high command, as opposed to the possible reinforcement of negative traits already revealed by military failure in the field. [xii] There are many potential reasons for command failure, some of which should not necessarily count heavily against the general in charge. However, generals new or fairly so to the elevated responsibility of generalship, are prone, prudently, not to anticipate that their chain of command will be forgiving of military misfortune. Apportioning blame deserved or otherwise, is a permanent global phenomenon in civil military relations. It cannot simply be assumed that military commanders will be capable of learning positive lessons from the experience of defeat: they might, but they might not. In many historical cases of military defeat, the reasons for that outcome will be eminently contestable. In theory, at least, one potential benefit of some formal education in the making and execution of strategy is that generals who acknowledge the intellectual authority of a formal structure of proper belief, should find such a body of ideas militarily helpful. Although the exercise of military power



is, and has to be, only about the political returns that may be secured as a result, military commanders successful in combat find that their civilian masters in policy can prove quite tolerant of some evidence of exuberance and even of some expression of personal political dissent. In fact, there can be practical political value in the public tolerance of an extreme sounding military view. This view can be officially disavowed, but still it may be useful to remind the adversary who has recently been defeated, that we may not always be dominated reliably by well-meaning people who adhere reliably only to reasonable and prudent policy and strategic ideas.

The third and arguably most reliable source of intelligence is the personal preferences and inclinations that confidently can be identified as the policy preferences and inclinations of live politicians. It may be useful to explain matters more bluntly in the following simple terms: a politician, any politician of any persuasion, brings to an international conflict the net yield from his or her personal experience. That experience may or may not be first-hand, but it is certain to be broadly cultural in what it reflects as well as in particular detail that has pressing meaning for the politician in question. Political, which become personal, slights will fester, burn, and could explode in policy *démarches* for years to come. As a classic example of major policy shift that proceeded almost until the present day without significant policy course correction, it would be hard to identify a clearer case than the recent American commitment to, and performances in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Rarely have the concepts of strategic effect and strategic sense been more revealed in their full consequential majesty than was clearly demonstrated inadvertently by the United States in Iraq and to some degree *ab extenso*, in Syria also. Given that strategy is always about consequences, pre-eminently including those with live and probably enduring political meaning, greater policy prudence should have been anticipated. The first requirement for a successful intervention in the internal affairs of a country in the Middle East is a politically tolerable local agent. He may not be loved universally, but neither should he be a constant source of embarrassment. As much to the relevant point, the agent has to be capable of winning on political terms broadly likely to be locally acceptable.

A leading American and British difficulty with their conduct of warfare in Iraq and Syria (US only) is that they are uncertain whom to support through their limited interventionary effort. If we should have learnt anything from our interventions in Third-World countries, it ought to have been concerning the necessity to achieving a locally tolerable level political leadership. With that particular prudent thought in the forefront of our countries' policy determination, there should be little difficulty, beyond domestic First-World embarrassments, about acceptance of the following by way of prudent policy guidance. Specifically, if we do not really know what we are doing, to whom, or why, we should not be doing it. There is much to be said in praise of providing timely military assistance to local regimes who find themselves in dire need of assistance that can only come from abroad. However, there is nothing praiseworthy about the support that may be offered and accepted with no predictable, let alone confidently anticipated, political consequences. In

political case after case the United States, and sometimes Britain also, have acted militarily even in the plain absence of compelling evidence that suggests a strong likelihood of consequential political success.

In South Vietnam the United States backed what proved to be a failing non-Communist cause, while in Iraq and Afghanistan variants of local failure only slightly less appealing politically with Third-World intervention have been played. There has been no great political and strategic mystery in any of these cases of failure. The United States lacked the necessary cultural, including political, grasp of what moved local Third-World affairs. To restate the adverse claim directly, the United States (largely) did not understand sufficiently what it needed to do, or how difficult it could be to attempt seriously to do it in Vietnam, and over twenty years later, in the 2000s in Afghanistan and Iraq.

It can be all too easy to forget that strategy rarely consists of a simple idea or answer, or even one cluster of such that can be created and subsequently revered as in all but sacred texts. It is helpful to think of strategy as being functionally somewhat analogous to a vehicle with a number of working parts, some of which are more critically important than others. Most important of all are the intentions of the driver. Where does he want to go? The rough parallel between a vehicle and strategy is helpful because it requires us to distinguish clearly between driver and the machine to be driven. Typically, the expert contributing authors, and many readers of, *Infinity Journal*, understand that strategy has several interacting parts, each with an important role to play. Strategic sense, the conceptual center of gravity of this essay, may require considerable intellectual self-discipline on the part of the policy makers in the greater powers, who can easily be misled by their state's relative facility of essentially tactical action, when strategic sense most likely is not on the menu. It can be a challenge to attempt to explain that strategic success requires some flexibility, much adaptability, and a secure understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of strategy. When looking for evidence of strategic sense: it is strictly necessary to examine political objectives; explore possible alternative methods to achieve (some of) them; and identify the military and extra-military means, when applied, that could possibly deliver significant advantage (with an acceptably close variant of victory among them). Foundational for those rather demanding requirements is a necessity for a sweep of assumptions, in order to capture any beliefs that are so widespread and indeed commonplace that they may well escape notice altogether or, of course, provision of evidence!

So demanding can the needs of strategy appear to be that one might wonder at the courage, or folly, of any political leadership, in employing it. Most wars in strategic history have not been waged in order to achieve an approximation to complete victory, but the terms and conditions of the post war context being strictly a matter only for the victor to decide at his discretion. Typically, wars do not conclude with the utter ruin, if not necessarily destruction, of the loser. It is commonplace for there to be a post war settlement that has to be negotiated to some degree, as contrasted with simply being dictated. It is unusual for a losing side to be unable to extract at least a minimum list of claimed necessities. In fact, even when there is a clear winner and a clear loser, the

victor may wish to conceal the extent of his victory in order not to antagonize the more belligerent of the loser's surviving soldiery unnecessarily. Twice in the twentieth century the security services of the British government defeated the IRA (1921 and 1998) and on both occasions attempted with reasonable success to conceal the scale of its victory. Similarly, the undoubted fact of French military victory against the Arab rebels in Algeria by 1962, enabled Paris to afford the former foe an appearance of respect it had not really earned on the battlefield. Strategy can require not only a population supportive of war, but also, not infrequently, that a domestic public's demand for peace be met.

Bearing in mind that strategy is all about consequences, it is scarcely surprising that strategic sense, or its opposite, is often not immediately self-evident following apparent military victory.

The most obvious absence from American and British policy towards the Middle East of recent years has been the concept that I have sought to highlight in this essay: strategic sense. How many times does a policy-making, political ideas

machine need to be told that when a country is sufficiently alien as to confound our political expectations in key respects, it would be better left to make its own way in world politics, rather than be shepherded towards another political tendency, including our own. It is a little embarrassing for us to admit this undoubted fact, but Western powers have taken military initiatives in the cases of the three countries named here that they (we!) did not understand. When you do not know what you are doing, because the consequences of your impending actions are seriously obscure, the path of wisdom should be one of inaction and only of minimal effort if such cannot prudently be avoided entirely.

It cannot be strategically sensible to seek very uncertain political effects consequential from strategic action, if the likely consequences of military action are deeply uncertain. The Gods of Strategy mandate inactivity as the prudent course for policy when politicians do not understand local conditions. Consideration of probable strategic effects should lead inexorably to a Western policy reluctance to risk further involvement in the wake of Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. How much failure should be judged necessary to warrant recognition that enough already is too much?

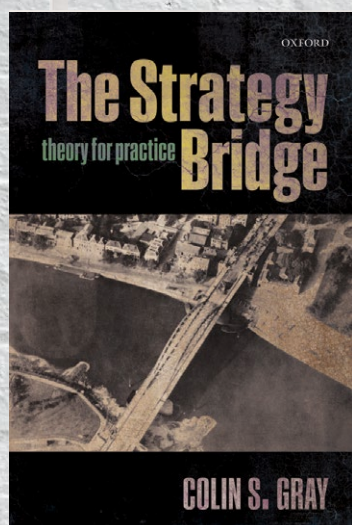
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- [i] See the important brief article by T. X. Hammes, 'Assumptions – A Fatal Oversight', *Infinity Journal*, 1 (Winter 2010), pp. 4–6.
- [ii] M. L. R. Smith, 'Politics and Passion: The Neglected Mainspring of War', *Infinity Journal*, Vol. 4, Issue 2 (Fall 2014), pp. 32–6.
- [iii] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, tr. Michael Howard and Peter Paret 1832–4; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976, p. 76.
- [iv] See my effort to make some sense of this vitally important, but ultimately frustratingly obscure concept in *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, ch. 5.
- [v] This critically significant concept is flagged helpfully in an excellent work of military history by Robert Lyman, *The Generals: From Defeat to Victory, Leadership in Asia, 1941–45*, London: Constable, 2008, p. 341. Lyman advises that '[e]ffective command requires strategic sense'. This concept is not well understood because it is not well enough appreciated as an essential quality required for competent generalship.
- [vi] Williamson Murray, *War, Strategy and Military Effectiveness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011, ch. 6 'History and Strategic Planning'. This is an extraordinarily insightful discussion of a subject that very many professional historians tend to ignore, the relationship between plans and strategy.
- [vii] See Jean Edward Smith in *Eisenhower in War and Peace*, New York: Random House, 2012, chs. 12–13.
- [viii] Clausewitz, *On War*, Book 1, ch. 3.
- [ix] EBO is fairly summarily shot in my book, *The Strategy Bridge*, ch. 5.
- [x] On the importance of general utility to a strategist of the 'so what' question see Colin S. Gray, *Tactical Operations for Strategic Effect: The Challenge of Currency Conversion*, Special Operations University, MacDill Air Force Base, Florida, 2015, p. 9.
- [xi] Henry R. Yarger, *Strategy and the National Security Professional: Strategic Thinking and Strategy Formulation in the 21st Century*, Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2008.
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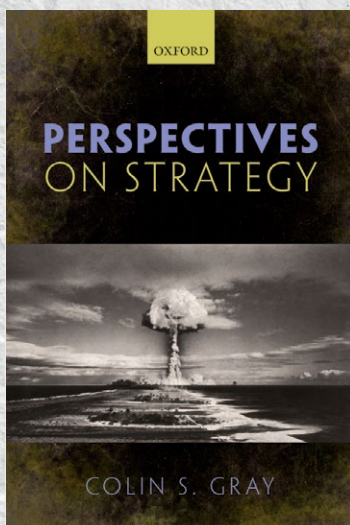


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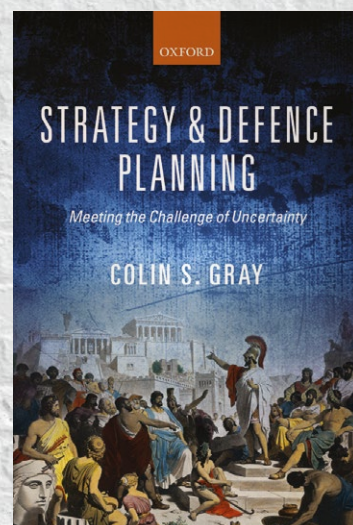


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# Clausewitz's Divisions: Analysis by Twos and Threes

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Most commentaries on Clausewitz's great study of war observe that he was not systematic in his analysis. He adopted no comprehensive methodological approach but used a variety of analytical devices, shifting from one to another as he saw fit. *On War* therefore does not offer the strategist any clear instructions on how to go about doing strategy.[i] It is nonetheless worthwhile surveying the motley collection of the methods he does use, first to understand that a sophisticated analysis of war does not require sophisticated or abstruse methodology, and second to grasp that the best method is the one that brings greatest clarity to the topic at hand.

Even from a cursory reading of *On War* it is evident that Clausewitz frequently bases his analysis on opposites, polarities and contradictions: offence and defence, means and ends, action and reaction (*Wechselwirkung*), war with limited aims and war fought for survival or total overthrow of the enemy, strategies of attrition and of all-out effort, physical and psychological (*moralisch* in Clausewitz's terminology) elements of warfare, theory and practice, art and science. These dualities are essentially polar opposites with pressures and tendencies, claims and counter-claims in both directions.

In other instances, however, his dualism is asymmetrical, notably in his contrasting of real war and absolute war (*absoluter Krieg*). Here the idea of absolute war represents an ideal or pure form of conflict towards which actual war may strive but in practice never achieves – rather like absolute zero in physics. The concept, however, allows him to explore and

to emphasise the factors – collectively dubbed 'friction' – that ensure absolute war can never be realised in the real world.

What interested Clausewitz most was the complex and disputed no-man's land between two simple concepts, the ways in which two differing elements might combine and recombine over time, and the potential for transition from one to the other. Clausewitz's dualist approach was intended both to identify the critical components of war in a clear fashion and to bring out its complexity. It is no surprise that much of *On War* is, as Alan Beyerchen puts it, a 'forest of caveats and qualifications'.[ii]

Thus, Clausewitz argued that an offensive campaign was liable to reach a culminating point where it could no longer be sustained and defence must take over, an idea that goes back at least to Machiavelli. After all, defence – especially strategic defence, properly conducted – is for Clausewitz the stronger form of warfare so that even a successful offensive campaign must at some point pay heed to its defence. Napoleon's fruitless occupation of Moscow finally brought this point home to the Emperor. Likewise, Clausewitz applauded the idea that defence ends with a transition to the counter-attack.

Judging when to shift from attack to defence or to launch a counter-attack is part of the stuff of strategy – and strategy for Clausewitz is 'strictly speaking neither an art nor science'. Strategy, in practice, partakes of both but, if a choice must be made, Clausewitz prefers the term 'art of war' to 'science of war' because of the crucial element of human judgement [89]. In tactics, by contrast, cause and effect are more closely linked and routine situations often arise so that rules can be applied more methodically. The attempt to disentangle science and art in the conduct of war is perhaps Clausewitz's greatest contribution to the understanding of strategy.

At the political level – where art rather than science is clearly predominant – what begins as a war for limited objectives can turn into an all-out struggle as tension increases and neither side is willing to abandon the losses they have incurred. While Clausewitz argues that no state should take the first step into war without considering the last, he is only too aware that this counsel is rarely followed. The two types of war might be easily distinguished analytically but there is no certainty they can be kept separate in practice.

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Dualism is also evident in a quite different field of analysis, namely Clausewitz's discussion of the psychology of military commanders. While conceding that he is no expert in the discipline, Clausewitz looks first at the degree of stability or steadfastness in a commander which can be high or low. A second quality is the level of emotion or personal involvement of a commander which can also be either high or low. The greatest potential for military genius, Clausewitz concludes, is to be found in commanders 'who are difficult to move but have strong feelings' [107] – a not too subtle allusion to his mentor Scharnhorst.

*On War* is pervaded with such dualistic analysis, albeit of a flexible and nuanced kind. But it is certainly not in any sense Hegelian though Clausewitz was familiar with the dialectical ideas of the philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, an acquaintance of his for a time in Berlin. There is no grand historical scheme in *On War*, no progression from thesis to antithesis followed by a synthesis. Clausewitz was too focused on the practical and pressing realities of war.

But it is for his threefold divisions rather than his dualism that Clausewitz is perhaps best known and sometimes most misunderstood. His celebrated trinity – the conception of war as a compound of passion, reason and chance – appears in chapter 1 of Book I of *On War* and, though not further examined as a trinity, runs through his entire work. For passion, reason and chance are in war what Clausewitz calls 'dominant tendencies' [89]. Every war contains a mix of the irrational and uncontrollable (passion), the rational and instrumental (reason), and the unpredictable and unknowable (chance). War partakes of this 'remarkable trinity' (*wunderliche Dreifaltigkeit*) because it is simply 'part of man's social existence' [89, 149]. In this respect making war resembles other important human activities such as making money and making love.

- Passion: this is the bedrock of war, providing its original motivation and shaping its objectives. Clausewitz uses the terms hatred [*Hass*] and enmity [*Feindlichkeit*] to indicate the sort of passion he has in mind in relation to war. Conflict between states or peoples arises in many ways – perhaps a matter of historic antagonism, clashing interests or popular hostility whipped up by governments. Mutual antagonism may or may not lead to war but where it runs high there can be 'such a mass of inflammable material, that the slightest quarrel can produce a wholly disproportionate effect – a real explosion' [81]. Once violence breaks out, moreover, hostile feelings are easily stirred up even if there is no great underlying tension between states at war. In short, the use of force cannot fail to involve the emotions [138, 76].

Making a further distinction between civilised and uncivilised peoples, Clausewitz observes that the latter are 'ruled by passion' and the former 'by the mind'. Yet even civilised peoples 'can be fired with a passionate hatred for each other' and consequently abandon reason. By the same token it is 'an obvious fallacy', Clausewitz insists, to conclude that civilised states could go to war purely as a rational act [76]. For passion is 'a blind natural force' [89], a necessary and dynamic element, feeding into war and feeding off it, civilisation or no civilisation.

- Reason: this is the factor that seeks to direct the violence of war effectively and efficiently towards a goal. It seeks to make war an instrument of policy and, ideally but unattainably, to make it 'subject to reason alone' [89]. Reason imposes a purpose and a structure on violence which is otherwise meaningless and unthinking. Thus strategy employs reason, selecting the most effective means to reach the desired goals of the campaign while taking into account the likely consequences of one's own actions and anticipating the actions of an opponent.

Whether reason can be applied effectively to foreign policy goals is an issue that Clausewitz does not settle.[iii] On the one hand, he believes that a nation's interests are objective and self-evident, namely defending its territory, upholding its honour (prestige or credibility in modern terms) and ensuring its sovereign independence. Reason plays a leading part in determining how these are best secured. On the other hand, Clausewitz accepts that a state has the right to set whatever goals it wishes, however risky or contrary to common sense they may seem. It was thus Napoleon's prerogative to seek to conquer Russia; if he is to be condemned, it is for choosing an inferior means to achieve his improbable ambition.

In reality, of course, reason never fully controls the passions or the unpredictability of war and politics. Clausewitz's position is that reason *should* seek to control such unruly forces as far as possible. Equally, reason can never be entirely eliminated from war. For even 'the most savage, almost instinctive, passion of hatred cannot be conceived as existing without hostile intent' [76] i.e. without some sort of goal in mind against an enemy and without some thought being given as to how to achieve it. Arguably, contemporary terrorism qualifies on this score even though its calculation of means and ends may be defective and unrealistic.

- Chance: this is the third element of the trinity and is 'the very last thing that war lacks'. 'No other human activity', Clausewitz maintains, 'is so continuously or universally bound up with chance' [85]. Chance is present because war is a complex and dynamic set of human interactions, all subject to a pervading friction – the difference between war on paper and war in reality [119]. There can never be sufficient information or reliable enough theories to predict the course of a war in any detail. Those who engage in war, moreover, must take decisions on inadequate and unreliable information in rapidly changing situations and in the face of physical danger, all against an enemy whose next move is probably unknown and perhaps unknowable. Guesswork and luck always play a part in war so that it must ultimately be regarded as 'a gamble' [85].

Yet chance cannot be given too great a place in war for that would be to deny the value of reason in the form of strategy and the role of passion embodied in commitment to a cause. No battle can be won entirely by chance, for material factors such as the size of armies and psychological factors such as morale and leadership play a part. Among both generals and ordinary soldiers, qualities of mind and temperament are of first importance and Clausewitz gives them much attention. For the general, chance in war means that 'the creative spirit is free to roam' [89] and his skill, experience and judgement in assessing probabilities can reduce the

role of chance. Chance is neither malevolent nor benign; it can be confronted, and to an extent managed, but never eliminated.

War thus contains elements of passion, reason and chance – in varying combinations. None can be eliminated though one or more might dominate in any given war or at any phase of a conflict. There is no fixed relationship between them. The balance between these three 'tendencies', Clausewitz argues, is 'like an object suspended between three magnets' [89]. It is inherently unstable, always liable to move unpredictably this way and that.

Clausewitz's second famous trinity – and the two are sometimes confused – is not abstract but institutional, namely that of government, army and people. While Clausewitz refers frequently to these institutions (or the 'estates' of rulers, warriors and commoners), he does not examine them at length in *On War* though some of his other writings go into greater detail.[iv] These institutions are central to his view of war, however, because they actually make war possible and shape its character. One side at least must have some sort of political leadership that sets goals and chooses means; it must possess more or less organised fighting forces; and contain a population that will fight in and pay for its army. Regular war is fought between two or more states with these characteristics though war can also occur when one side lacks a coherent government, defined fighting forces and united populations. The 'guerrilla' or 'little war' against Napoleon in Spain was an example familiar to Clausewitz.

The social and political relationship between government, army and people was crucial to Clausewitz's perception of war as a changeable phenomenon. He had seen how France mobilised its populace first to fight for the revolution, then to follow Napoleon on his military quest for glory. Prussia, Clausewitz concluded, had no option but to make greater use of the talents and enthusiasm of its people if it wanted to create a military force that could match that of France. Prussia needed reform not only in its army but also in the wider society – though not to the point of changing its form of government. Change society and war itself will change.

### Two or three trinities

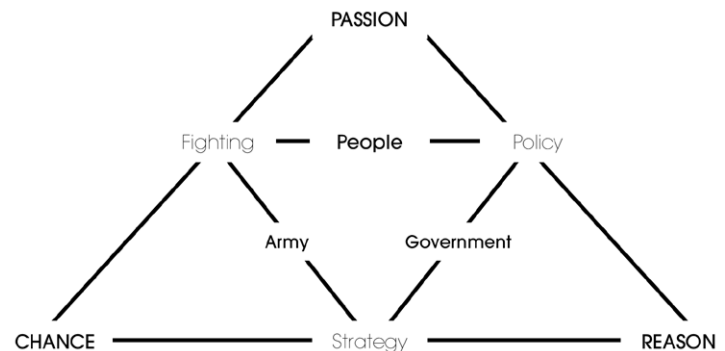
What Clausewitz did not much explore was the relationship between the two trinities: the underlying elements of war and the manifest institutions of war. He makes one passing reference when he says that passion 'mainly concerns' [89] the people; reason, the government; and chance, the military commander and his army. In other words, Clausewitz sees the passions necessary in war (hatred and enmity) as 'already ... inherent in the people' [89] while reason is of concern to government since it must determine the ends and means of war, and the play of chance and probability in fighting is the natural province of the army.

Yet Clausewitz's original wording on the relationship between each institution and the foundational elements of war in fact 'concerns more' (*mehr ... zugewendet*) which suggests that the links are by no means exclusive.[vi] Among the people, opinion and feelings may be fickle and subject to chance developments, while they may also show a certain common

sense (reason) in how they expect to be employed in war. (The growth of democracy, education and ideas of human rights have made this link much stronger than in Clausewitz's time.) The army must also manage the passions and feelings of its troops which may be patriotic but can also be truculent and troublesome, while at the same time it deals with government as the latter seeks to impose objectives on and shape strategy for its armed forces. Finally, a government seeks to bring reason to bear in war but must also come to terms with the passions of its people and the sheer unpredictability of events that influence the course of a war.

To better comprehend these linkages, a third trinity needs to be invoked – one that Clausewitz himself uses extensively, albeit not explicitly, in the context of the foundational trinity of passion, reason and chance. This is the functional trinity of fighting, strategy and policy which represent a hierarchy of means and ends in the conduct of war. The purpose of fighting is to win the battle, strategy is the employment of battle to achieve the goals of the campaign, and the purpose of the campaign is to achieve the political objectives of the war. We can now put the three trinities together in a way that accords with Clausewitz's thinking though it is not a schema that he himself spelled out.[vii]

### The Trinity of Trinities



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Figure 1: The Trinity of Trinities

The principal activities of war – fighting, strategy and policy – are located close to the two institutions primarily responsible for them and between two of the three fundamental forces of passion, reason and chance. Thus, fighting pertains to the people who provide the manpower and skills and to the army which organises its personnel and capabilities and takes them into harm's way. And in fighting, chance and passion – in the form of patriotism, unit loyalty and personal commitment – are most in evidence since reason has (it can be hoped) already played its part in shaping strategy and policy. Government by and large takes a back seat with regard to fighting.

Strategy is developed by the army's leaders and the government in combination, a military-political relationship that is sometimes collaborative, sometimes conflictual. Army focuses on leadership and direction of its forces in the campaign while government seeks to ensure that the campaign promotes its policy goals. Strategy also deals primarily with reason and chance. The selection of military

means and political ends represents an effort to impose rationality on an activity in which chance and probability loom large. The populace play little part, if any, in the formulation of strategy.

Policy, finally, combines passion and reason. Passion is necessary whether a state simply wishes to defend itself or to conquer a continent or anything in between. It is a driving force that can lead in many directions. Reason must be called upon to select the appropriate means to achieve the chosen objectives. This is the business of government and its people. Where autocracy rules, the people may play a minor role, though even then they must provide the army's manpower, skills and commitment to fight. Democratic polities are more likely to see an enhanced role for public opinion, the result of elections and the influence of media. The Army may have something to say on policy but this should relate primarily to what military force can or cannot achieve rather than setting policy goals. At all events, the relationship between passion and reason – expressed in terms of policy – is never settled.

Clausewitz did not adopt the idea of simple, direct links between the people and passion, between the army and chance, and between the government and reason. Nor

is anything simple or stable in the relationships between reason and passion, passion and chance, and chance and reason. In this trinity of trinities there is constant interplay both within each of the trinities and between all of the trinities. The 'object' Clausewitz saw as suspended between the three magnets of passion, reason and chance is in fact a complex and variable entity called war that is itself a compound of two further trinities: the institutions that conduct it and the activities that define and distinguish it. The combinations among these trinities will vary enormously from war to war.

Those who seek a simple formula for success in strategy in *On War* will therefore be disappointed. Clausewitz does offer some general propositions about what makes for success in strategy – for example, have greater numbers than your enemy, or aim to destroy the 'centre of gravity' on which the opponent's power depends – but these propositions are not guarantees of victory and need to be qualified by the particular circumstances of a given war. Strategists may learn the importance of careful analysis from Clausewitz's methodological mix and gain a sense of the complexity of strategy but they will not learn what decisions to make. The first and perhaps only lesson to learn is the complexity of war itself. Strategy, as Clausewitz would be the first to insist, is not meant to be easy.

## References

- [i] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, Princeton University Press, 1976. Subsequent references to *On War* are in square brackets in the text.
- [ii] 'Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War', *International Security* vol. 17 no. 3 (Winter 1992-3), p. 89. Beyerchen sees this as representing the nature of actual warfare.
- [iii] Hugh Smith, *On Clausewitz: A Study of Military and Political Ideas*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005, pp. 220-22
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- [vii] For further discussion see Smith, *On Clausewitz*, pp. 120-3.

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# Problems of Strategy in Wars of Honor

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To connect strategy to the wider context surrounding it and to recognize that the political motives underpinning any war must necessarily influence their work, strategists rightly rely upon Clausewitz's dictum that war is political intercourse with an admixture of other means. "The political object—the original motive for war—will thus determine both the military objective to be reached and the amount of effort it requires." [i] Strategists often go one step further by endorsing Thucydides' ancient trinity, expressed by the Athenians to Sparta's ruling council on the eve of the Peloponnesian War, on the motives which impel polities to go to war—fear, honor, and interest.

Less often do strategists, however, seek to understand how the practice of their craft may actually be shaped by these motives for war. To a certain extent, fear and interest are self-explanatory. Fear incentivizes preemptive, if not preventive, war. Interest is often held up as the idealized standard of *realpolitik*, in which states go to war for limited and clearly definable objectives, achieve them in a straightforward manner, and easily persuade the adversary that violence serves no further purpose and that peace would henceforth be the reasonable policy option to pursue. Yet Thucydides' third motive, honor, has largely fallen by the wayside in strategic studies. Acknowledged in passing but rarely understood, honor is generally considered no longer to be a policy goal for which war should be—or even *could* be—fought, despite the importance that Thucydides ascribed to it. "Most modern students of the question assume that states want power to achieve tangible and practical goals such

as wealth, prosperity, security, and freedom from external interference. But the range of goals that move people to fight wars is broader and not always so practical." [ii]

Honor fits poorly into most approaches to considering and practicing strategy, for one obvious reason. As Clausewitz wrote to a colleague, who had asked for feedback on a war planning thought exercise,

[w]ar is not an independent phenomenon, but the continuation of politics by different means. Consequently, the main lines of every major strategic plan are *largely political in nature*, and their political character increases the more the plan encompasses the entire war and the entire state. The plan for the war results directly from the political conditions of the two belligerent states, as well as from their relationship to other powers. The plan of campaign results from the war plan, and frequently—if there is only one theater of operations—may even be identical with it. But the political element even extends to the separate components of a campaign; rarely will it be without influence on such major episodes of warfare as a battle, etc. According to this point of view, there can be no question of a *purely military* evaluation of a great strategic issue, nor of a purely military scheme to solve it. [iii]

How does a strategist go about translating honor into a guide for military operations? Clausewitz's metaphor of war as naught but a duel on a larger scale is potentially misleading to the uncritical. In the past, duels arose specifically out of an affront to personal honor and were governed by rules and bounded by societal expectations about both the duel's conduct and its conclusion. War, by contrast, enjoys no determinative rules governing the relationship between adversaries, or their management of their path from tactical action to political consequence. No law dictates when wars must end, despite the extensive legal work which has been devoted to moderating the conduct of war. This article will consider the problems waging wars of honor poses to the practice of strategy, for wars of honor have by no means been relegated to the dustbin of history. Honor remains a relevant motive for war even today and therefore must be thoughtfully reincorporated into strategic studies in general and into the consideration of potential practices of strategy in particular. Contemporary relevance is most apparent with regard to any potential NATO war in defense of the Baltic

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states against Russia, which would be a war of honor and an excellent case of the real affect which considerations of honor may have upon strategic practice.

### What is Honor?

Honor appears to be an old-fashioned concept whose relevance has long since vanished. Yet when synonyms replace the word honor, such as "deference, esteem, just due, regard, respect, or prestige", then it is apparent that "[p]ower and honor have a reciprocal relationship".[iv] Other alternatives may also fall under the broad rubric of honor. Colin Gray has suggested that culture may be a worthwhile reconceptualization of honor.[v] Cultural and political values have indeed played a large role in impelling western states to go to war in many recent liberal wars of the post-Cold War era. Other (OED) synonyms are "credit, reputation, good name", i.e. credibility—as an actor in international affairs. If a person or polity has no credibility, if it does not honor its commitments, it will become untrustworthy, lose its reputation and prestige, and merit no just due, or respect. (It might still be feared, however, but fear and honor are clearly not the same.) Credibility is the very foundation of honor. It derives from personal or political decision-making and subsequent implementation; therefore the honor or credibility of a nation largely devolves upon the policymakers of the moment. Any serious divide between policymakers and citizens has potential consequences in war. Credibility was a particularly important motive for the United States' involvement in the Korean and Vietnam wars. American policymakers believed that they must prove that the United States would fight communism on a global scale and that this resolve could be demonstrated by fighting in Korea and Vietnam.

Honor in all of these incarnations may be reduced to identity, in particular self-identity. The polity along with its domestic public sees itself as honorable, that it is due deference from other foreign polities, that affronts to its cultural or political values should be punished or remedied, that it is indeed a credible actor in international relations. The challenge for strategists is readily apparent. How can one's own self-identity or self-image be translated into a strategy aimed at defeating a second party adversary? One may simply suggest that honor and power have a reciprocal relationship, that honor is defended or restored upon victory because the relative power of adversaries has been ascertained. "Wars usually end when the fighting nations *agree* on their relative strength, and wars usually begin when fighting nations *disagree* on their relative strength." [vi]

Yet this does not actually help the strategist to define the victory he is to pursue. If the enemy does not capitulate, then by definition honor has not been defended. If political constraints prevent the strategist from seeking a decisive victory over the opposing polity, then it is impossible successfully to defend one's honor. These are real problems when waging wars of honor or any of their conceptual doppelgangers, yet they are not even the primary difficulties of waging such wars.

The single greatest problem is the impossibility of a strategist and his polity determining when honor, especially when defined as credibility, has been satisfied. Neither honor in

general, nor credibility in particular, can ever be judged by the belligerent polity itself. These are qualities conferred upon it by outside observers, potential allies as well as potential enemies. With but minor modifications Gray's words about deterrence may be applied to honor: "[d]eterrence is a relational variable that works at the discretion, though admittedly not wholly at the volition, of the candidate deterree." [vii] Does the observing polity, whether friend or foe, trust the observed polity to perform (or not) a particular act, to fulfill a specific commitment, to be credible and honorable in its actions?

### The Geopolitics of Credibility

Going to war to preserve the credibility, i.e. commitments, of a polity as a foreign policy actor poses a quandary for the strategist: it assumes a particular geopolitical appreciation by the observing polities who are meant to be the recipient audience of the signal. The common underlying assumption is that observers will believe that all geopolitical issues and theaters of potential operations are equally valuable. That is, simply because polity A intervened in region X, it has proven that it is also ready, willing, and able to intervene in region Y—a logical fallacy.

This was the thinking behind the United States' interventions in Korea in 1950 and in Vietnam after 1964. The Truman administration had implicitly designated South Korea as outside its security perimeter; subsequently and with Soviet backing the North Koreans invaded; then, having decided it was not in their interest to allow a communist conquest of the rest of the Korean peninsula, the United States retaliated. Despite General Omar Bradley's well-known description of the Korean War as the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time, American credibility concerning the containment of communism and defense of the free world appeared to be on the line. Similar considerations governed American motives to involve themselves directly in the war in Vietnam, and then to escalate their involvement.

Yet such oversimplification of geopolitical analysis is unlikely to comfort real or likely allies, because not all regions of the world are equal in value. Europeans were comforted neither by the Korean nor the Vietnam War, but rather were concerned that these wars to uphold the credibility of the United States would be counterproductive by pulling resources away from theaters, such as Europe, to which the United States had *also* made commitments. "Indeed, just prosecuting the war in Vietnam (which must count as something like two-thirds of a war, in the Pentagon lingo of the time) led the Defense Department to hollow out U.S. forces in NATO (especially noncommissioned officers, signal equipment, and other supporting infrastructure) and strip the central reserve of troop units in the continental United States." [viii]

Wars to uphold one's credibility may endanger other discrete commitments by starving them of necessary resources to meet new challenges fully. Allies and potential friends will notice this and worry. Enemies and potential adversaries may notice this and plan to take advantage. The effort required to signal that one's credibility really should not be doubted has therefore the real potential, despite declarations of great political will, to obscure the signal itself by actively leading

observers to distrust the polity's ability to fulfill its other commitments and to doubt its word of honor.

Strategists waging wars of honor consequently have difficulty managing the first relationship of strategy, that between military action and political result. The logic of the situation and probability of its further development are stacked against successful achievement of the desired beneficial political effect. The strategist's task is not only to produce a specific political effect, but one which is also of the *second-order*—a specific reaction on the part of an uninvolved polity.

### Adversaries in Wars of Honor

The relationship between military action and political consequence is but one of strategy's primary relationships, the other being that between adversaries. This second relationship is equally fraught with difficulty, which stems largely from the political context surrounding the question of credibility.

For modern liberal democracies, the political context of credibility is usually considered in relation to defensive alliances such as that which the United States had with South Vietnam or that which binds NATO together. The political goal of any war of honor in such an alliance-based situation is therefore negative, to prevent a particular outcome—as defensive alliances react to threats and seek to prevent the fulfillment of their aggressive geopolitical goals. Thus offensive operations against any target other than the enemy military force are often prohibited by policy-makers. The experience of MacArthur's push into North Korea and the consequent Chinese counterattack of 1950-51 scarred American strategists and resulted in a long-standing prohibition against pushing into North Vietnam a decade and a half later. Only later in the Vietnam War was the US Air Force finally allowed to bomb certain politically sensitive targets in North Vietnam, such as the capital Hanoi, the port city of Haiphong, and along the Vietnamese-Chinese border. In other words, wars of honor are strategically, and often operationally, defensive.

Such political restrictions increase the strategist's difficulties in defeating the enemy. Clausewitz argued that the philosophy of the defensive is embodied in the assumption that the passage of time will improve the situation. "The idea implies, moreover, that the situation can develop, that in itself it may improve, which is to say that if improvement cannot be effected from within—that is, by sheer resistance—it can only come from without; and an improvement from without implies a change in the political situation." Related to this is the defender's lack of ability to bring about an end to the threat his opponent poses. "We are left with the conclusion that if the attacker sustains his efforts while his opponent does nothing to ward them off, the latter can do nothing to neutralize the danger that sooner or later an offensive thrust will succeed." [ix] Recent strategic history bears out this danger. The Chinese may ultimately have settled willingly in 1953, having changed policy after Stalin's death, but the North Vietnamese did not waver in their determination to see through their policy of unification of Vietnam by force—and in the end they triumphed, their last offensive thrust being a success.

With no offensive pressure exerted by an honor-bound belligerent upon his foe, that adversary may make peace purely at his own pleasure. Defeat in battle may be unfortunate, but Clausewitz believed that the decisive phase of any battle was not the clash itself, but the ensuing pursuit of the defeated by the victorious. He considered battles which were bereft of a successful pursuit to be incomplete as engagements. Such partial battles would connect military means to political goals only sporadically, even in offensive campaigns—Borodino in 1812 was one of Clausewitz's examples of an incomplete battle. In defensive campaigns, neglect of pursuit results in abdication of any real control over the course of the war besides that of a purely negative, denying input.

In wars fought to maintain the credibility of a defensive alliance, that credibility is usually linked to an actual physical, geographical dimension, as the political goal is to protect the borders of a specific country. A corollary to this geographic component of honor is that operations beyond the designated borders may provoke domestic or even international disapproval. This echoes the experience of the Korean War, when a move beyond the borders of South Korea into the north eventually triggered a Chinese counterattack. Disapproval may ensue even if the borders were being routinely violated by the adversary without consequence. As Henry Kissinger noted of the Vietnam War, "Washington had convinced itself that the four Indochinese states were separate entities, even though the communists had been treating them as a single theater for two decades and were conducting a coordinated strategy with respect to all of them." [x] The American public was convinced that the attacks into Cambodia and Laos in 1970 and 1971 were an inexcusable escalation of the war by infringing upon sovereign state borders, even though the strategic significance of the borders had long since vanished due to their routine violation by the North Vietnamese.

Yet the consequence of this strategic restraint with respect to the honor of borders is that areas beyond the borders become *de facto* sanctuaries where the enemy can freely prepare for his next offensive, while the defenders simply cannot maintain incessant maximum operational readiness.

[I]t turns out to be *impossible* to maximize readiness *in general*, to reach and keep one level of it indefinitely, because readiness is not all of a piece; the components move at different rates and in different directions. If readiness is to be conceived broadly enough to be a basis for strategic, budgetary, and organizational choices, it must be seen as a *complex system* composed of numerous variables, some operating in linear and cumulative fashion, and some in a *nonlinear*, self-negating, and cyclical way. [xi]

In contrast to the variable level of a defender's military readiness, particularly over longer periods of time, the attacker's readiness concerns are effectively linear. The enemy can prepare to be maximally operationally ready by a specific date and so begin a new offensive campaign with an advantage in operational military capability. In strategic terms, this translates into JC Wylie's observation that the aggressor would not "have dared start" war if he was not confident in establishing some degree of control, and that



"the [operational] pattern set by the aggressor" would be a relatively strong one, as otherwise "he would not have selected that pattern to start with." [xii]

The issue of borders reinforces resistance against offensive operations by denoting a specific line on the map which must be respected—not infringed by the enemy, but arguably by implication also not by oneself. The policy governing war appears inconsistent and hypocritical when it defends the honor of a certain state's borders on one hand but contravenes the neighbor's borders on the other hand. Policy may thus twice-over require that the strategy to defend one's honorable alliance commitment be a purely defensive one, as long as one's own military forces actually sit upon the borders of the defended state. Yet this is also twice-over a mistake in pure strategic logic as it offers the initiative without challenge to the enemy while placing no military pressure on him to bring about a peace.

Despite this strategic vulnerability, in other ways the geographic component of credibility actually enables strategy's first relationship—between military means and political ends—to be fulfilled even while the second relationship—between adversaries—remains tenuous. Even if war continues and the defensive waiting posture is occasionally broken by enemy attack, as long as the border remains inviolate then the primary desired political goal has been achieved—despite the potential need for indefinite border maintenance in the face of an obstinate foe.

Ceaseless border vigilance in a contentious context is an exhausting and difficult task. Moreover, limitations placed on the opportunities available to the practicing strategist by considerations of honor open up significant strategic possibilities to the enemy, such as exhausting his honor-bound foe and achieving success through long, arduous conflict. The Vietnam War was characterized by such honorable limitations on one side, and the de facto adoption of a strategy of exhaustion by the other. The honor-bound defenders lost the war, as politicians and strategists could find no answer to exhaustion, without violating policy, save exhaustion.

The difficulty of the honor-restrained strategic task is also exacerbated because the specifics of honor concern policymakers, not necessarily those who actually fight. The soldiers' reality is that apparently poor policy or strategy is dominating the war, and that politicians or generals are not taking the measures necessary to defeat the enemy and thereby are wasting soldiers' lives for no clear purpose. This became a defining aspect of American soldiers' experience during the Vietnam War. Although it did not derail American strategy, it did exacerbate the difficulty of executing it. Because the relationship between adversaries does not seem to be working to one's own benefit to result in a win, the general integrity of the strategy as practiced may be called, rightly or wrongly, into question and may lead to ultimate defeat.

### Contemporary Relevance

Wars of honor, especially concerning alliance credibility, have again become salient due to recent aggressive

Russian actions in the Caucasus and Ukraine. Any war over vulnerable NATO members such as the Baltic states would be a war of honor, of alliance credibility, because most western publics and national political decision-makers tend to see the region as marginal with comparatively little geopolitical significance. While fighting to prove a single alliance commitment may be counterproductive, often this is because the polity in question is waging war to prove its credibility to fulfill all commitments in general. This includes signaling its resolve to alliances which are wholly unrelated to the war or region involved in the present theater of operations—the Korean and Vietnam Wars are examples. A NATO war of honor for the Baltic would, on the other hand, be action by an alliance for its own credibility to its own constituents. In such a case, honor could not be more relevant, as it is honor alone which binds the whole of NATO together into a single alliance despite its various countries with various interests and various threats.

Although there are many legitimate questions concerning Russia's political intentions and whether or not Russia would ever actually attack the Baltic states, hoping or doubting a threat away is not an element of prudent defense planning. As Bernard Brodie argued during the Cold War about waging nuclear war, "[s]o long as there is a finite chance of war, we have to be interested in outcomes; and although practically all outcomes would be bad, some would be much worse than others." [xiii] In this vein, and more than a decade after NATO's collective defense clause was actually extended to the Baltic, US and NATO defense planning for the Baltic states has finally kicked into gear.

As defense planners grapple with the quandaries of Baltic defense—even assuming that defense would be resourced as heavily as RAND analysts assess to be necessary—questions of strategy inevitably come to the fore. [xiv] Once NATO forces are in theater, how can they, should they, must they be employed to achieve the desired results should fighting occur? The peculiarities and pitfalls of wars of honor, which a war in the name of Baltic defense necessarily would be, may trip up the unwary strategist.

Neither US nor NATO strategists and defense planners appear currently to have answers to the problems highlighted above. In July 2015, American strategist Richard Hooker, Director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, published an article which, highly unusually, was identified as written on behalf of the US government, therefore representing an official US perspective. It was a fictional future history of a war for Estonia—and one of the revelations of the paper was that there was a war, despite some alliance hesitation, unwillingness, and foot dragging. The article was clearly intended to send a message of deterrence from Washington DC to Moscow, via the pages of *RUSI Journal*. Yet how did the imagined future war end? NATO forces successfully defended Estonia and Latvia from Russian-led, but allegedly local, separatist forces. It deterred the Russians from attacking Daugavpils and recaptured Narva from the 'separatists'. Diplomacy was then called upon to resolve the conflict.

Statesmen on all sides agreed, privately if not publicly, that an overt Russian defeat, whether military or political, would not in the long run serve anyone's interests. There must be



compromise – each side must make painful concessions. The NATO offer, made discreetly through intermediaries, was simple and direct. All Russian military and subversive activities on the soil of NATO member states must cease. NATO would make a public declaration announcing that Ukraine should not join NATO, but would be free to choose its political and economic future for itself. Resolution of the Crimea issue would be deferred until a future date under UN auspices. Economic sanctions would be lifted and NATO forces would return to their home garrisons, with a promise not to be permanently stationed on the territory of any state formerly a member of the Warsaw Pact. A reinvigorated Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) would monitor the disengagement of all parties and the stationing of their forces. The NATO-Russia Council would be reactivated to take a lead role in addressing the concerns of ethnic Russian minorities in the Baltic republics.[xv]

What is notable is that NATO made the diplomatic approach as if it were a supplicant to the victor rather than the winner of a brief strategically defensive campaign to restore Estonian territory. The article's "painful concessions", which each side had to make, stemmed disproportionately from NATO and hardly at all from Russia, which in any case could hardly be expected actually to adhere to its treaty commitments—their support of supposed separatists was ambiguous and 'deniable' in the first place, and would be so again. These features reflect the poor strategic situation in which even a successful defender politically bound by credibility is likely to find himself.

In Hooker's scenario, there is no pressure for Russia to make peace (especially since it is not officially at war!), therefore the peace agreement must be sweet indeed for Russia to consider it. If peace is not swiftly forthcoming after military action, the political decision-makers of NATO's constituent states may become fractious as the immediate threat has died down and their honor and credibility have been, at

least in their eyes, satisfied. However, the divide between policymakers and soldiers in understanding honor and the consequent vulnerability to exhaustion may not be as fatal as in previous wars, such as the Vietnam War, if only for the simple reason that in the face of NATO's military power Russia itself probably could not maintain a long and exhausting ambiguous intervention without escalation to more conventional interactions.

The implicit choice in Hooker's imaginary future scenario is between continuation of a tense stand-off—as Russia did not actually escalate to overt military force in response to NATO's restoration of Estonian territory—or a disproportionately unfavorable deal through which NATO could well lose the peace despite winning the war.

## Conclusion

Strategy is demanding as it is. Public attempts such as this *RUSI Journal* article to think about how to wage wars of honor indicate just how difficult it is to practice strategy in a political environment constrained by questions of honor and credibility. Wars of honor may often become unsatisfactory wars, and may often create unsatisfactory peaces, due to the restraints imposed by honor-related motives upon strategy. Europe now faces challenges along its southern, southeastern, and eastern frontiers. The immediate national interests and fears of many NATO states are beginning to point in diverging directions. In this context, honor may be one of the few political motivations which will continue to bind Western countries together even should the outcome be war. Honor is clearly a significant component of contemporary policy. As such, it is incumbent upon strategists to recognize that honor remains an important motive for war and to understand and plan for the particular complications it brings to the practice of strategy, not just in potential near-term defense of the Baltic states but generically within strategic thought as well.

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# What's in a Name II: "Total War" and Other Terms that Mean Nothing

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The historian Peter Paret pointed out in 1960 that "any discussion of war is bedeviled by a confusion of terms... the definitions have undergone repeated modification—and in different countries not always to the same effect." [i] "Total war" perfectly illustrates this problem. The term is commonly used in discussions of warfare, but usually as an undefined catchall that fails to provide a firm foundation for discussion and analysis. Modern writing on warfare too often lacks this needed basis. Much of it uses theoretical approaches to the study of war, but these have generally failed to help generate policies and strategies that lead to victory. Poorly reasoned, poorly constructed theory—which includes poorly defined terms and concepts—can detrimentally influence how wars are fought, as well as whether or not one wins them.

Carl von Clausewitz told us why good theory is necessary: "The primary purpose of any theory is to clarify concepts and ideas that have become...confused and entangled." [ii] Theory, as Sir Julian Corbett tells us, can help "a capable man to acquire a broad outlook." Theory should teach us to think, to analyze, to bring a critical but informed eye to the problem at hand and consider both its depth and breadth. It also serves to ground us by defining our terms and providing us a firm foundation for analysis while teaching us to distinguish between what is important and what isn't.

[iii] Theory, Clausewitz reminds us—particularly any theory addressing warfare—"is meant to educate the mind of the future commander." [iv]

Clausewitz and Corbett also gave us the intellectual basis for building a solid theoretical approach to war: defining wars based upon the political objective sought. Clausewitz made clear his intention to rewrite his unfinished opus based upon his epiphany that all wars are fought for regime change or something less, but did not live to do so. [v] Corbett built upon Clausewitz's work to construct a theory of maritime warfare and gave us the terms "unlimited war" to describe a conflict waged to overthrow the enemy government (an unlimited political objective), and "limited war" for a war fought for something less (a limited political objective). [vi] Rational discussion and analysis of all wars fits within this framework by beginning with the starting point of both Clausewitz and Corbett: all wars are fought either for the political objective of regime change or something less than this.

Critically, there is no room in this clear, simple, ironclad typology for so-called "total war". The most significant problem with the term "total war" is that it is used to mean everything and thus it means nothing. Historian Brian Bond goes so far as to call "total war" a "myth." [vii] Historian Eugenia Kiesling compares discussions of "total war" to medieval "ruminations about angels cavorting on pinheads." [viii] Even when "total war" is defined (and often it is not), the definitions are valueless. For example, one author writing in 1957 defines a "total war" as one where "the survival of the U.S. or U.S.S.R. as sovereign nations is the issue of the war." He goes on to insist that there was no satisfactory definition of limited war and that no one could explain when a conflict stopped being this and moved to being "total." [ix] He makes his point by comparing one badly defined thing ("total war") with something else that is equally badly defined ("limited war") by almost every author who writes on the subject. [x]

Generally, "total war" is used to mean a "big" war, particularly the twentieth century world wars. Explications of "total war" also usually include wars fought for the overthrow or complete conquest of the enemy regime. Discussions of potential nuclear wars are often described as "total wars," particularly in limited war theory, and sometimes include other elements such as genocide or the extermination of an enemy. Some similar terms that are often used interchangeably can be

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thrown in the same bowl: general war, major war, big war, national war, all-out-war, central war, and any others in this vein. These provide further examples of the definitional catastrophe that is too much of today's military and political theorizing and writing. A related (though valueless) definition commonly accepted in certain academic circles is: "Major war means an operation where the United States deployed over fifty thousand troops and there were at least one thousand battle deaths." [xi]

Critically, all of these definitions are dependent upon a variable that is consistently fluid: the means used to wage the war. So, do we define a war as "total" because it involves extensive mobilization, the overthrow of the enemy, the harnessing of society, and even genocide? Rationally, we cannot because this does not provide a firm foundation for critical analysis. These definitions are subject to debate and thus lack explanatory clarity.

The modern use of the term "total war" can be dated to the French push in the last year of the First World War for *guerre totale*, which meant renewing the nation's ideological and political dedication to the struggle. German Field Marshal Erich Ludendorff used the term in his 1918-19 memoirs and his 1935 book *Totale Krieg*. In these examples whether or not a war is "total" generally boils down to an issue of means. [xii] Discussions of "total war" very often pick World War I as its first example, though sometimes the French Revolutionary Wars and the US Civil War are branded the first "total wars." These efforts focus generally—if not exclusively—on the means utilized or mobilized for the struggle in their efforts to define it, and are often tied to discussions of escalation based upon nations increasing the means they dedicate to the war. [xiii]

Political scientist Robert Osgood offers us one of the better definitions of "total war", but it also characterizes the analytical and critical failure exhibited by use of this term as part of a coherent theoretical approach: "that distinct twentieth-century species of unlimited war in which all the human and material resources of the belligerents are mobilized and employed against the total national life of the enemy." [xiv] This definition has several problems. First, it is limited to the twentieth century, and thus not consistently applicable as an analytical tool. Second, it insists upon the mobilization of all of a state's "human and material resources." This is impossible. A state cannot harness "all" of its resources for war or anything else. During the Second World War the Soviet Union's leaders mobilized more of their nation's human and physical resources than any state in history, but even Stalinism could not mobilize "all" of the nation's means. During the US Civil War, nearly 80 percent of the Confederacy's white male population aged 15-40 served in uniform. [xv] But even this extreme number is not "all." Nation states have a difficult time putting more than 10 percent of their people in the military. Going beyond this often begins to cause the economy to breakdown.

Osgood's definition also mixes ends and means, which is also not unusual. Indeed, one could argue that the defining element of definitions of "total war" is the emphasis on means. Wars cannot be defined by the means used because this is a nebulous, subjective factor and thus does not pass the defining test of building a theory upon solid ground. The means nations dedicate to pursuing political objects are a

manifestation of the value they place upon that object. The means used to fight the war are also one of the contributing factors helping to create the nature of the struggle. But the means used do not and indeed cannot define the war itself. The political objective sought defines the war, not the means or methods used in pursuit of this.

The problem with having a poor analytical foundation for any discussion—or none at all—particularly one examining the development of an idea or concept is clearly demonstrated in Cambridge University Press's five volume study of "total war". [xvi] In a series drawing upon a staggering array of the era's best writers on military affairs, the editors missed the chance to create a supremely groundbreaking work because they failed from the outset to define "total war" and thereby provide a solid foundation for analysis. What makes this especially remarkable is that the editors identified the answer to their problem but then didn't grasp it. They linked the concept of limited war to the manner in which Max Weber used an "ideal type," as well as Clausewitz's discussion of "absolute war" and "total war" (terms he used interchangeably to denote an "ideal type"). [xvii] Simply put, when using the "ideal type" methodology the writer sets up a theoretical ideal that cannot be reached. Various factors intervene to produce a reality that is acted upon by these factors that keep the resulting creature from ascending to the ideal. This is the method of analysis used by Clausewitz in *On War*. To him "absolute war" and "total war" (again, terms he uses interchangeably) represent the unreachable "ideal type." War—if the state could utilize all of its resources and never stop moving toward its goal—would be "total" or "absolute", but reality intervenes. Politics, friction, the actions of the enemy, and other things unite to produce the reality of war. [xviii] By using "total war" as an ideal type in the manner of Weber and Clausewitz, combined with the insistence by both Clausewitz and Corbett of the tendency of wars to escalate and consume more of the state's resources in a climb toward the unreachable theoretical ideal, the editors could have placed their contributors on a firm and coherent path. The articles could have been strengthened further by the addition of Clausewitz's concept of whether or not the warring states were pursuing regime change or more limited political goals. This would then force a needed and clearer delineation between the political aim or aims sought and the means and methods used to try and achieve them—which again shows why wars can't be defined by the means used because the means derive from the value of the political objective sought. All of this goes to again prove that if the analytical foundation lacks clarity and strength the building falls.

Other discussions of "total war" center on the use of technology, particularly technology that intensifies the bloodshed and destruction delivered at the tactical level. But this is only an example of war's natural tendency to escalate and is merely the offering of yet another argument for defining "total war" by the means used. Technology and the increasing power of the modern centralized state simply feed war's inherent escalatory nature and allow more intense escalation. All wars—civil wars, guerrilla wars, limited wars, religious wars, and every other kind of war—fit within the Clausewitz/Corbett typology because *all* wars are fought for political objects, even if these are sometimes masked by religious terms or propaganda.



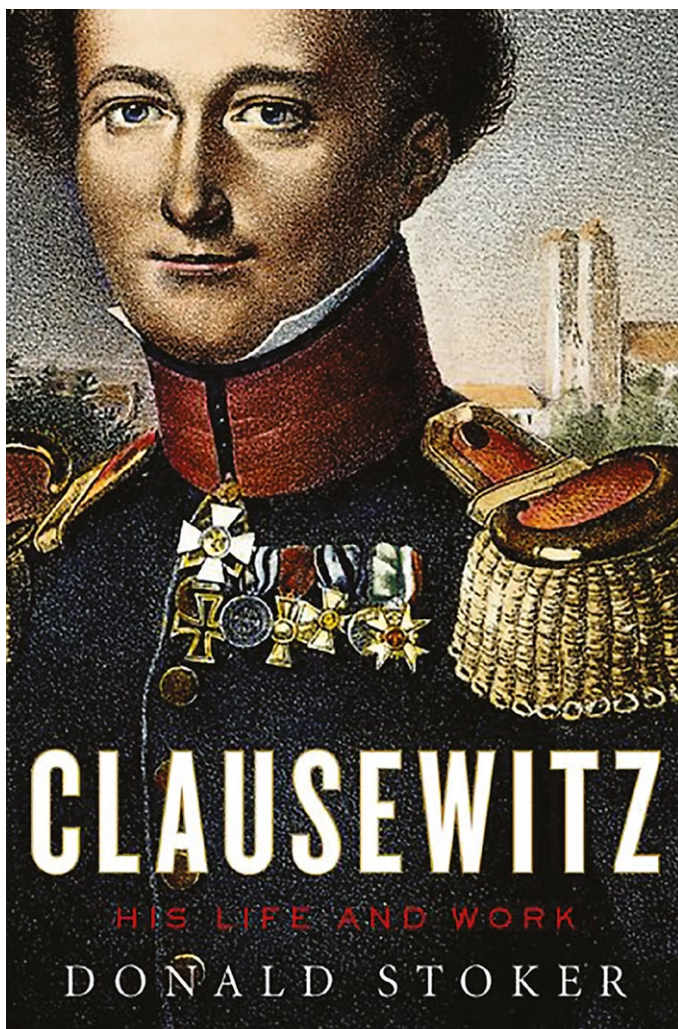
Interestingly, the editors of these volumes raise the question of whether the term "total war" should be killed because it creates more confusion than clarity—something about which they are completely correct—but then make the mistake of refusing to kill the enemy when the opportunity arrives. Instead, they argue for the term's retention and ask "that historians henceforth should attend more to its manifold hazards and limitations." [xix] Editing a five volume historical work should have decisively convinced the editors of the impossibility of this. Unfortunately, the current writer and his fellow historians are only part of the problem. Journalists, political scientists, pundits, students of international relations, and military officers are just as dangerous when they embark upon discussions of so-called "total war," possibly even more so because they often lack the historical knowledge necessary to provide solid analysis and critical nuance.

Why does all of this matter? One of the great failings of discussions and analysis of military affairs and strategic issues is the lack of definitional clarity. These fields are infested with buzzwords and jargon that cloud issues and thereby weaken our ability to understand and explain past—and more importantly—current conflicts. For example, much ink has been spilled of late over "Gray Zone Wars." But there is nothing new here. Authors in the 1950s were discussing "war in the gray zone"—and in relation to conflicts on the periphery of Russia (though it was still called the Soviet Union). [xx]

Unless someone is discussing war in a theoretical sense the term "total war" should never appear in historical or policy writing. Why? Because it has no analytical solidity, fails to clearly illuminate the nature of conflict, and adds needless linguistic opacity. It creates confusion instead of producing clarity, and it is clarity that we need.

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- [xi] Dominic Tierney, *The Right Way to Lose a War: America in an Age of Unwinnable Conflicts* (New York: Little Brown, 2015), 7. In footnote 12 on page 317, the author notes that the term "major war" is problematic because it could be major for one side and not the other. But the real reason is that "major war," like "total war," has no concrete meaning.
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- [xviii] Clausewitz, *On War*, 80-89 (especially 85), 579-581. The editors also bind Clausewitz's teachings—incorrectly—to his experience in the Napoleonic era. This is a misreading of the text because Clausewitz's larger ideas are not limited by the Napoleonic era. They do note his passage on "absolute war" where he says that it was reached under Napoleon, but they miss the contradiction in Clausewitz's discussion of "absolute war" because they do not examine the fullness of the text on this point.
- [xix] Boemke, et al, eds., *Anticipating Total War*, 16.
- [xx] See Thomas K. Finletter, *Power and Policy: US Foreign and Military Policy in the Hydrogen Age* (Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1954), 81-192, especially 84-85; Osgood, *Limited War*, 267-274, 307; Henry Kissinger, "Military Policy and the Defense of the 'Grey Areas,'" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Apr. 1958), 416-428; E. Biöklund, "Can War Be Limited? (In General or Local Wars)," *Air Power*, Vol. 6 (Summer 1959), 287-293. Finletter seems to have been first to print with the concept.



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# The Inutility of Force

**Robert Mihara**

US Army

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*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.*

*[L]egitimacy has to be understood in its own terms, that is, in terms of the ideas people hold about God, justice, man, society, wealth, virtue, and the like.[i]*

Francis Fukuyama

Since the end of the Cold War, security pundits in the US have been engaged in an active debate over the meaning of American military power. America's unipolar moment in the 1990s elicited heady conversations about *Pax Americana* and a new world order. After the attacks of 9/11, many of these voices became more strident, speaking openly of refashioning the world's troubled areas through the use of American armed might. Max Boot and others have claimed that fickle policymakers emasculate war as a moral and effective instrument of policy through their reluctance to use it. Boot warned against the great "danger of undercommitment," prodding American leaders to be "less apologetic, less hesitant, less humble." Such arguments fail to properly account for many things, but perhaps the greatest defect is their blindness to the contemporary political reality that determines the net consequence of wars. Specifically, their blithe prescriptions ignore the inherent and significant

complexity that globalized modernity has bequeathed to the nations of the world. The political awakening of societies has been progressing for centuries where individual identity is self-appropriated and legitimacy is granted rather than assumed. Yet, the concept of legitimacy has not received the kind of attention that it deserves despite its great consequence for the utility of military interventions.[ii]

## Clausewitzian View of Military Intervention

The agency of individuals limits the potential of intervention by subverting the influence of rationality (i.e., policy) on the direction and outcome of conflicts. Intervening military forces introduce themselves as armed competitors in the battle for influence and authority and thus they become arbiters in the open discourse on legitimacy regardless of their intentions. By their presence, foreign soldiers provoke a reflexive resistance from those who stand to lose from the policy of the interloping power. The defensive reflex sets in motion a social pendulum as the fortunes of the population swing between the demands of intervening forces and that of their opponents. In an age where every conflict is immediately international, the intervention, as a system, is never isolated from outside influences, meaning that the pendulum never finds stasis. The intervention continues to swing in measured arcs where the countervailing influences have rough parity, or it throws itself to pieces under the strain of accumulating injuries. This dynamic imposes a clear and knowable limit on what military interventions can plausibly accomplish in a subject society which is not already technically, politically, and socially predisposed to state building and where security is contested. A recent study on civil resistance found that even a two percent rate of active participation in a given campaign to undermine or influence a government correlated with the success of that campaign in more than four-fifths of the cases. With such a relatively low threshold for effectively contesting government authority, it is little wonder that contested spaces like Afghanistan and Iraq have frustrated American hopes.[iii]

Carl von Clausewitz's general theory of war provides a solid basis for understanding the interactions that frustrate such interventions because even the most pacific of foreign occupations is predicated on the threat of violence as a guarantor of the intervening power's policies. Clausewitz describes war as the complex interplay of three countervailing

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tendencies that can be succinctly listed as reason, emotion, and chance. For the purpose of analytical clarity, this article uses the taxonomy of rational, irrational (i.e., emotions operate in the same domain as reason but are not beholden to it), and non-rational (i.e., chance and probability are not subject to human reasoning).[iv]

The interactions between rational, irrational, and non-rational factors cannot be fixed to any set formula, but it is possible to generalize their relationship to one another in a given conflict and thereby gain useful strategic insights. Rational tendencies encompass the factors that determine an actor's calculation of cost-benefit or how it determines its interest. In premodern conflicts, wars could be reduced to simple contests between the calculated aims of individual rulers and their nobility. The scale and scope of warfare in that era did not demand more than compliance from the ruled and did not offer common individuals the means for achieving political mobilization. Conditions present in premodern wars thereby limited the consequence of emotion (i.e., primordial violence, hatred, and enmity) as a political force, largely leaving rational and non-rational tendencies to determine the course of violent conflicts. Beginning in the late-fifteenth century, however, the relationship between individuals and war changed as wars grew in scope and duration. By the late 1700s, intellectuals had translated these changes into the foundational ideas regarding individual rights and state legitimacy that would eventually carry France into the French Revolution and take the rest of Europe with it. Like the Thirty Years War, the Napoleonic Wars unleashed great destruction by tapping into the wellsprings of social identity and accessing the military potential of modern nations.[v]

### Origins and Consequence of Politicization

By stimulating the collective consciousness of society, the march of modernity narrowed the political space between the sentiments of the population and the policymaking seats in government, making wars more subject to the gravity of the irrational. This proximity between emotion and purpose made possible extended campaigns by great armies as it also opened the door to wars of revolution. In popular struggles as different as the Peninsular War and the French-Algerian War, primordial violence, hatred, and enmity manifested themselves through breathtaking cruelty. It is not as if war is not itself naturally cruel, but the manifestation of irrationality in wars amongst the people points to the particular dynamic that frustrates military interventions. Armed responses to the actions of insurgents are experienced as repression by a constituency in the subject society. Repression initiates a cycle where the irrational builds tension like a great spring accumulating potential energy until the system can no longer sustain its contradictions without transforming or collapsing. In such wars, the fears, demands of honor, and material interests of the population are too expansive to be effectively reconciled.[vi]

This reality of popular consciousness and individual agency limits the utility of intervention for achieving premeditated political purpose. Violence (or the threat thereof) is useful in politics only if it can reliably deliver positive results at an acceptable cost, and the peace that follows a war must be superior to the peace that preceded it. The dynamic between

popular emotion and repression frustrates the strategist's ambition for crafting an approach that is both plausible and profitable. The orderly transition from war hinges on accommodating multiple parties' demand for legitimacy which in this context means that all actors have accepted the *status quo post bellum*. In pre- and early modern wars, the threshold for achieving legitimate outcomes was plausibly achievable because the parties relevant to determining legitimacy were members of the political elite. Irrational forces were present but circumscribed by the material scale and scope of conflict as well as the relatively limited agency of peasantry in most societies. By the early modern era, this had begun to change with the growing influence of the professional class apart from the aristocracy.

In the Clausewitzian formulation, the ascendancy of irrationality as an influence on war will tend to unbound its conduct away from the deliberate use of violence for conscious purpose. In limited conflicts, the tendency to delimit the use of violence will tend toward reducing its relative utility because specified ends become less plausibly achieved at an acceptable risk and cost. This situation is a problem for strategists seeking to build a sturdy bridge between the ambitions of policy and available resources. Politicization has resulted in two shifts that have greatly increased the potential destructiveness of war at the same time that it has reduced its plausible utility in achieving desirable political outcomes.

The first such change is that communities, be they state or non-state, can mobilize significant resources for their cause by appropriating the political agency of individuals. Social media and other information platforms greatly empower such activity by lowering the barriers for collective action and eliminating the need to achieve critical mass at the local level. The success that the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has achieved in drawing fresh recruits and other resources from around the world are testament to the potential of such outreach. Second, the investment of individuals in politics also greatly complicates any effort to impose order on the conduct and conclusion of wars towards desired ends. Both derivatives of politicization stem from the unleashed passions of the people that vents individual fears into warfare above and beyond the promulgations of their leaders. In the twenty-first century, this has been further magnified by the vastly more interconnected world which makes nearly every conflict, regardless of scale, an international conflict involving corporate and other non-state entities. Many of those actors bring with them the means to catalyze localized conflicts into conflagrations out of proportion to the interests involved.

The liberalizing process that wrought these changes in the political order have disaggregated the necessary elements of legitimacy that determine the utility of violence. The unpacking of legitimacy does more than multiply the number of elements at play in politics. It also greatly adds to the complexity of interactions amongst social actors in war's conduct and in its resolution. In premodern and early modern times, legitimacy was predominantly a concern of the elites in large polities. To the degree it existed in tribal societies, legitimacy was a simple product of moral and material rules. Simple subordination was conferred so long as the leadership held fortune's favor, confirmed the solidity of the rules defining individual identity and social strata, and sufficiently fulfilled a given society's expectations for basic



material needs.

In our politicized and connected world, individuals no longer defer to elites as a matter of social station. Rather, deference to authority is a product of complex social bargaining amongst groups in society. Compliance can be compelled, but the demands of compelling are never-ending and ultimately corrupting. The fundamental alteration of the relationship between rulers and ruled, experts and lay observers, etc., alters the calculus of feasibility for strategy. In the historical experience of state building, working through the existing elite and professional classes has been essential to achieving a functional status quo. The assumption of political agency by individuals, however much circumscribed, reduces the utility of vanquished indigenous elites to the victor should he want to enlist them. [vii]

For the past decade, the subject of popular legitimacy in war has been subsumed within the ongoing debate over counterinsurgency theory, and the effort to accrue legitimacy has become something akin to managing cash flow with military practitioners focused on the art and science of creating a positive profit margin. This approach does great harm in enabling unattainable ambitions, chasing after the hope of what Gen. (Ret.) David Petraeus referred to as "getting the inputs right." Legitimacy is the product of a host of abstractions that define what it means to be just and a member of a given society. Like culture, it is an aggregation of independent variables. Getting the inputs right to secure legitimacy in an intervention is not theoretically impossible, but the state building projects are of such complexity that they often become Sisyphean endeavors with each moment of progress revealing a range of new challenges that must be overcome. It is in this process that great powers exhaust themselves over insoluble social problems. [viii]

## Conclusion

The path of political development in the world has progressively constrained the utility of violent conflict by elevating the influence of irrational forces on the conduct and conclusion of limited wars. In the absence of vital interests, continuous wars for influence involving the population become wasting conflicts because none of the belligerents have the will or means to compel a decisive end. In a politically conscious and connected world, decisive outcomes are often only possible through absolutist approaches. In other words, the complexity of popular legitimacy is only solved by doing away with the population. Whether it be by some form of coercive subjugation, ethnic cleansing, or outright genocide, the brutality required by such an approach inevitably provokes its own set of antibodies in the international community and is sufficiently corrupting to one's security institutions as to be ultimately self-defeating.

Military interventions begun under the premise of decisive outcomes ignore this complex reality. Decisiveness is, in part, a product of intersecting ideas of legitimacy that must be satisfied. These conceptions of legitimacy are held by different social groups many of whom are in conflict or competition

with one another, making reconciling them problematic if not impossible. As Niccolò Machiavelli observed, you "end up making enemies of all those you have offended during your conquest," including erstwhile allies "since you cannot satisfy them in the way they had envisioned." [ix]

None of this is to suggest that war no longer has a place in policy. It remains a viable tool for achieving positive aims (i.e., to effect) as well as negative aims (i.e., to prevent). The issue for strategists and policymakers is the need to understand how the complexity of the post-1798 world precludes us from directly achieving certain high ambitions. Such an understanding would prevent us from militarizing policy where patience and soft power should lead us. The US response to the attacks of 9/11 provide a case study in how ignorance of politicization in our time can lead to failing policies.

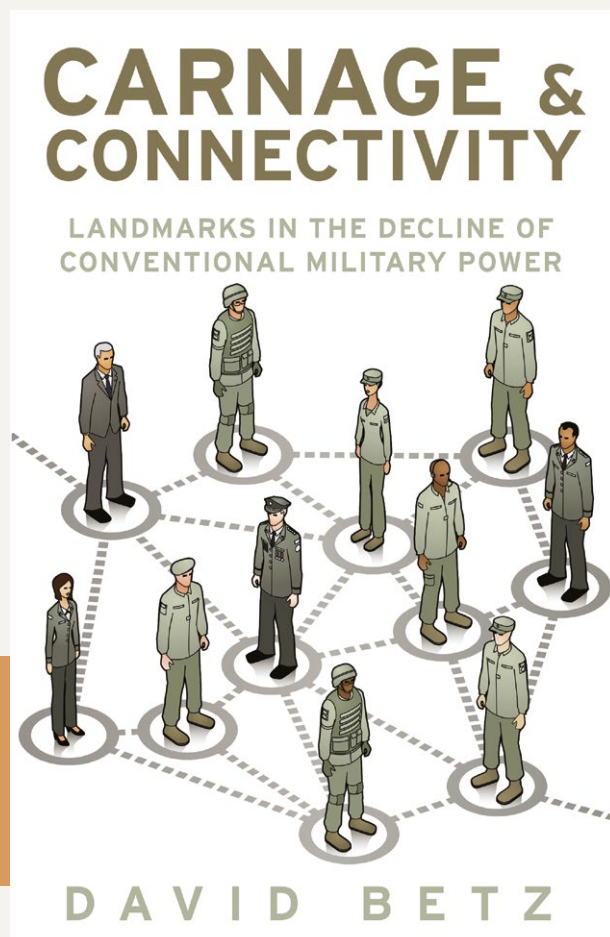
The preventive wars of President George W. Bush succumbed to the reality of a politically mobilized world in addition to his administration's gross under-appreciation of the material demands of those wars. The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq evinced no understanding of the state of political development in the world or the requisites for state-building in those two states. Instead, US policy and strategy embraced a crude belief in the power of force and of liberal democratic ideology to remake societies. Many Afghans and Iraqis were eager to take up the Bush Administration's vision, but their enthusiasm and American hubris glossed over a sea of rage and discontent. Large segments of the indigenous society wanted nothing to do with Western state-building dreams and stood to lose significantly from the imposition of American technocratic and liberal democratic norms. The dependence of US-led forces on deadly force to retain some semblance of control against wily insurgents further spoiled the social dynamics. Insurgents proved the case in reverse in episodes such as the so-called Sunni Awakening in Iraq's Anbar province where Sunni tribesmen rebelled against their Al-Qaeda guests after the latter abused their privileges. [x]

The counterinsurgency campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan produced such paltry returns, in part, because the politicization of stakeholder populations multiplied the complexity of such conflicts, begetting an interminable cycle of action-counteraction without the possibility of culmination through the achievement of positive aims. The same things that draw outside powers to intervene in the first place stand in the way of achieving plausible aims at an acceptable cost. Reconciling social wounds that predate an intervention as well as those suffered through the subsequent occupation represent high challenges that may well be insurmountable in most instances. Even in the absence of enemy sanctuaries, putting states together through military means has little to support any claims for its efficacy in recent history. The current state of affairs in Afghanistan and Iraq do nothing to change the historical ledger in that regard. [xi]

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.*

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# How the United States Policy-Makers View the Threat of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)?

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In the past two years a new terrorist threat appeared in the region of the wider Middle East. The inflammatory ideology and excessive brutality of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant served as a reminder to the United States that the terrorist threat was far from over. The Obama Administration quickly realized that due to the unstable situation in Iraq, ISIL had the potential to directly threaten vital American interests. A brief summary of statements from top level executives of the Obama Administration illustrate this point:

*"The so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) poses a threat to the people and stability of Iraq, Syria, and the broader Middle East, and to U.S. National Security. If left unchecked, ISIL will pose a threat beyond the Middle East, including to the United States homeland."* [i]

*"ISIL poses a grave threat to Europe, the United States and our friends and allies around the world because of its steady metastasis and its evil intentions."* [ii]

*"I could go on and on. ISIL is a destroyer and it is threatening to take actions against America, Canada, Mexico, against countries all around the world. So ISIL is a modern threat that we have to respond to."* [iii]

In addition to the views from top executives a recent poll by the

CNN showed that over 60 percent of Americans perceive ISIL as a very serious threat. According to the study "overall, 68% say ISIL is a very serious threat, compared with just 39% who say so about Iran, 32% about North Korea, 25% on Russia and 18% on China. Nearly 9 in 10 see ISIL as at least a moderately serious threat." [iv] In August 2014 the Obama Administration, in response to the threat of ISIL, launched an open-ended bombing campaign against militants of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) inside Iraq." [v] Moreover, in September the Obama Administration expanded the attacks to include ISIL targets in Syria. [vi] In a statement President Obama asserted; "I have made it clear that we will hunt down terrorists who threaten our country, wherever they are. That means I will not hesitate to take action against ISIL in Syria, as well as Iraq. This is a core principle of my presidency: if you threaten America, you will find no safe haven." [vii] The statements from the President and top level executives of the Obama Administration raise three critical questions on the perception of United States officials and policy-makers regarding the threat of ISIL, the policies that they implemented in order to counter this threat, and the goal they were trying to achieve. These are:

1. Is the threat of ISIL politically relevant for the Obama Administration?
2. Out of the announced official policies, which ones did policy-makers favour?
3. What was the goal of the United States when dealing with ISIL?

The first question aspires to assess the level of importance of the threat of ISIL for the Obama Administration. As it is evident from the statements, President Obama and members of the cabinet recognized the potential danger of ISIL. What we want to assess is how widespread both horizontally (top level executives), and vertically (throughout the executive branch) this perception was. More importantly, we want to assess how the views of the Administration regarding the threat of ISIL fluctuated over time. The second question relates to the salience that American policy-makers ascribed to the policies implemented by the Obama Administration. Lastly, we must assess the goal of the Administration, as it is important to highlight the drive behind the policies of the Administration.

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In order to assess empirically these questions a database was constructed of all documents mentioning the terms "ISIS", "ISIL", and "DAESH" from the Obama Administration from June 2014 to December 2015. The majority of the documents were press briefings, transcripts of speeches, and readouts and remarks from officials such as President Barack Obama, Vice President Joe Biden, Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter, Secretary of State John Kerry among others. I then analysed the database qualitatively and quantitatively to determine American foreign policy views in reference to ISIL. According to the findings of the analysis the threat of ISIL was politically relevant for the executive branch of the Obama Administration. The policies which American officials favoured were air strikes, enabling indigenous ground forces, impeding financing, disrupting the flow of foreign fighters and others which are listed below. Lastly, the goal of the Obama Administration was to "degrade and destroy ISIL." [viii]

### Methodology

To assess empirically the perception of Government Officials and policy-makers of the threat of ISIL a database of all uses of the term was generated, based on documents collected using the built-in search engine of the White House, Department of Defence, Department of State, and CIA web pages. A search utilising the terms "ISIL", "ISIS", and "DAESH" yielded 698 documents (339 from the White House, 152 from the Department of Defence, 203 from the Department of State, and 4 from the CIA) covering the period from October 2013 to December 2015. The collection represents all the publicly available documents from the four major foreign policy agencies of the Executive branch of the Obama Administration mentioning the terms ISIL, ISIS and DAESH.

The documents were then coded to fit the criteria of the questions set in the beginning of this article. Regarding the perception of the threat of ISIL out of the 698 documents, 413 were coded as "Missing Data" and removed from the database. Regarding the policies and goal of the United States; out of the 698 documents 348 were coded as "Missing Data" and removed from the database. Items were removed from the database for one of the following reasons:

1. The document was a duplicate of another document in the database.
2. The document did not mention explicitly the threat of ISIL
3. The terms of the search were used by someone not in the government. This occurred most commonly when a reporter used the terms as part of a question.

Each valid document was then content analysed for terms associated with the threat of ISIL, the policies favoured by United States officials when dealing with ISIL, and the goal of the United States.

### The salience of the threat of Isil in American Foreign Policy.

Initially, the task is to determine whether or not the threat of ISIL is politically relevant for most American policy-makers. To examine this, I qualitatively analysed statements by policy-

makers of the Obama Administration which assessed the level of criticality of the threat. The following table shows the number of statements relating to the direct threat of ISIL for the United States by Speaker.

Speaker	No of Mentions (N=285)	As % of Total
Secretary of State John Kerry	79	28
Press Secretary Josh Earnest	60	21
President Obama	52	18
Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter	36	13
Other	33	12
Secretary of Press Jay Carney	8	3
Vice President Joe Biden	6	2
Pentagon Press Secretary Cook	4	1
National Security Advisor Susan Rice	3	1
CIA Director Brennan	2	1
Principal Deputy Secretary of Press Eric Schultz	2	1

Table 1 Frequency of the statement regarding the "threat of ISIL" by Speaker

In order to assess the level of criticality attached to the threat of ISIL, the documents were first coded with regard to who within the Obama Administration uttered the statement. Table 1 presents a list of speakers and the number of documents. As is evident from the table, the threat of ISIL has reached the highest levels of the Administration. The fact that principals of the foreign-policy community such as the President and the Secretaries of State and Defence account for a combined 59% of all references suggests the significance of the perceived threat of ISIL within the hierarchy of US policy-making. Having established that the threat of ISIL has been noted at the highest levels of American policy-making, it is relevant to ask how significant it was, and whether it warranted their attention. The following statements from President Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, and Secretary of Defence Asthon Carter exemplify their perception regarding the gravity of the threat of ISIL.

*"ISIL poses a threat to the people of Iraq and Syria, and the broader Middle East including American citizens, personnel and facilities. If left unchecked, these terrorists could pose a growing threat beyond that region, including the United States. While we have not yet detected specific plotting against our homeland ISIL leaders have threatened American and its allies."* [ix]

*"We all know that Daesh is a threat to America's security and interests. It poses an unacceptable danger to our personnel and facilities in Iraq and elsewhere. It seeks to destroy both the short and long-term stability of the broader Middle East. And it is exacerbating a refugee crisis that has placed extraordinary economic and political burden on our friends and allies in the region."* [x]

*"ISIL is an extremist, violent movement which threatens America and needs to be defeated. And we're working on accelerating its defeat."* [xi]

In addition to the criticality of the threat of ISIL in the perception of United States policy-makers, it is worthwhile to



assess how this threat evolved over time. To examine this, I performed a frequency count on the data, aggregating the number of statements per year. The results are summarized in Figure 1 below.

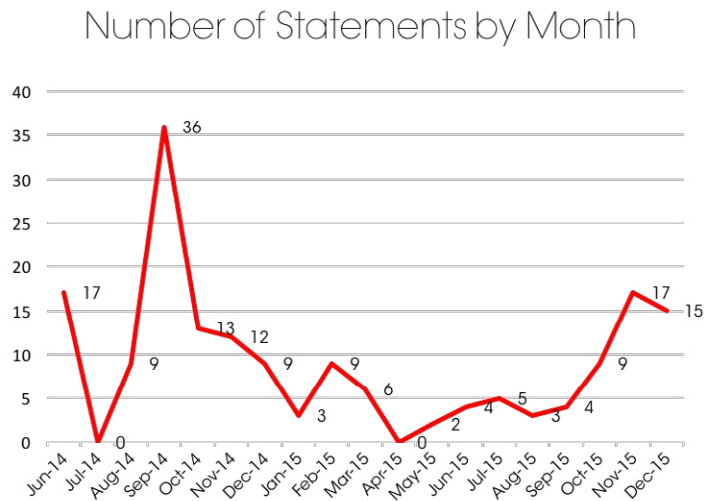


Figure 1 Number of Statements referring to "the threat of ISIL" by Year

Stemming from the table, the threat of ISIL appeared on the statements of American policy-makers in June 2014 as a result of the Northern Iraq Offensive which began on June 5 2014. A series of attacks from ISIL and aligned forces captured several cities and other territory, beginning with an attack on Samara on June 5 - followed by the seizure of Mosul and Tikrit on June 10 and 11 respectively.[xii] By late June, Iraq had lost control of its borders with Jordan and Syria.[xiii] This caused a major concern to the Obama Administration, as is evident in the sudden increase in the number of statements. The number of statements skyrocketed from August to September, mostly due to the administration announcing its decision to initiate an air campaign against ISIL; first in Iraq in August and secondly in Syria in September. The number of statements somewhat stabilized in October and November while the United States outlined its strategy to deal with the threat of ISIL. However, from December 2014 the number of statements gradually declined until the November 2015 attacks in Paris. These results support the contention of the importance of the threat of ISIL for the Obama Administration.

### Policies associated with the threat of ISIL

Having established the significance of the threat of ISIL for the United States, the next goal is to assess the salience that American policy-makers ascribed to the policies outlined by the Obama Administration in order to counter the threat of ISIL. On November 2014 President Obama unveiled the strategy of the United States against ISIL, which included nine lines of effort.[xiv] These are:

1. supporting effective governance in Iraq;

2. denying ISIL safe-haven;
3. building partner capacity;
4. enhancing intelligence collection;
5. disrupting ISIL finances;
6. exposing ISIL's true nature;
7. disrupting the flow of foreign fighters;
8. protecting the homeland; and
9. humanitarian support.

In order to assess the salience that American policy-makers ascribed to these policies, and assess whether they were the only policies they were considering, I performed a frequency count on the data - aggregating the number of times these policies were mentioned. As expected, the military strikes gathered the most attention from American policy-makers. Equally important policies were enabling indigenous ground forces in order to "bring the fight to ISIL", and disrupting the financing and flow of foreign fighters. In summary, the statements from American officials and policy-makers regarding air strikes revolved around their goal to "severely hamper ISIL's movement and systematically eliminate the groups leadership." [xv] Regarding the involvement of indigenous ground forces, statements from American officials highlighted the fact that it was the only long term solution for the threat of ISIL.[xvi] More importantly, it appears through the statements that the United States officials perceived that enabling ground forces would enable them to avoid the mistakes of Iraq and Afghanistan. According to Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter "our strategy, you recall, is that we've learned from our 14 years in Iraq and Afghanistan that in order to have a lasting defeat, the lasting defeat of ISIL, we need to think ahead to what comes after they're defeated and to make sure they stay defeated. That's the reason why we work with local forces, try to get them motivated, and try to get them capable." [xvii] Lastly, regarding the efforts of the United States to impede the flow of financing and to disrupt the flow of foreign fighters', statements from American officials asserted that in order to defeat ISIL it is imperative to damage their ability to finance their operations and fill their ranks with foreign fighters from all over the world. Secretary of Defence Ashton Carter encapsulated this argument by asserting that "we said from the outset of this campaign that to defeat ISIL, we're going to have to take away his ability to resource himself and we're going to have to curb the flow of foreign fighters coming into the theatre." [xviii] Through the analysis I identified one additional policy which was not included in the strategy outlined by the Obama Administration, but was frequently mentioned from policy-makers. That policy was the political transition in Syria, which means that the Obama Administration considered Assad as part of the problem with ISIL and asserted that his removal would benefit the cause. The results are presented in Table 2.

Policy Options	No of Mentions (N=350)	As % of Total
Air Strikes	68	19
Enable Indigenous Ground Forces	53	15
Impede Financing	39	11
Disrupt the flow of Foreign Fighters	37	11
Form a Coalition	32	9
Assist the Government of Iraq	30	9
Counter ISIL's Ideology	22	6
Deny ISIL Safe Haven	19	5
Political Transition in Syria	16	5
Assist Opposition Forces in Syria	11	3
Enhance Intelligence Collection on ISIL	10	3
Provide Humanitarian Assistance	8	2
Protect the Homeland	5	1

Table 2: Policies Associated with countering the threat of ISIL.

As it is evident from the table, the salience that American policy-makers ascribed to the strategy outlined by the Obama Administration to counter the threat of ISIL varied significantly. As expected, the military campaign against ISIL gathered the most attention from policy-makers. Equally important was, for the United States, to enable indigenous ground forces - mainly Iraqi security forces and Kurdish and Syrian opposition. Two separate motives guide this policy on behalf of the United States. The first was to "bring the fight to ISIL" and the second to avoid sending American troops. The Obama Administration vehemently opposed any operations, which included the deployment of American troops. Disrupting the flow of foreign fighters and the finance network of ISIL was another policy which the Obama Administration perceived as important. Another indicator of the limited exposure that the United States was trying to achieve when dealing with ISIL relates to the fact that they were adamant about creating a coalition in order to deal with the threat. Additionally, the Obama Administration understood that part of the solution was for Iraq to overcome its domestic political strife and form a cohesive government. The Obama Administration was committed to helping Iraq in this process. Another important policy was to counter ISIL's poisonous ideology wherever it manifested. In order to halt the advance of ISIL it was important to deny parts of Iraq or Syria from becoming safe havens. The next two policies might appear somewhat similar; however, they are qualitatively different. For American policy-makers, political transition in Syria warranted the removal of Assad as a potential solution to the problem. By contrast, assisting moderate opposition forces in Syria related to providing military and financial support. Due to the nature of ISIL, intelligence collection was a daunting task; hence the Obama Administration prioritized enhanced intelligence collection. Humanitarian assistance related to providing relief to victims of ISIL's brutality. Lastly, the final policy of the Obama Administration related to protecting the homeland in the event of an attack.

### The United States' Goal

The third and final part of this article relates to the goals of the policies of the United States in its fight against ISIL. According to the analysis, the primary goal of the Obama Administration was to "degrade and destroy" ISIL. In their statements

American policy-makers were adamant about their goal to eradicate the threat of ISIL. In order to systematically evaluate the perception of American policy-makers regarding their goal, I performed a frequency test on the data aggregating the number of times American policy-makers mentioned this goal. The results of the analysis corroborate the fact that the discussion regarding ISIL had reached the upper echelons of the Obama Administration. The only difference is that the statements are even more concentrated in the top executive branches of the Administration. The number of statements from the President, Secretary of Defense, and Secretary of State account for 65% of the total. It is important to clarify that this doesn't mean that the cabinet members, such as the Vice President or the National Security Advisor, had different goals because they mentioned the goal of the United States less often. It simply shows how frequently some members of the Obama Administration referred to the goal of the United States as opposed to others.

Speaker	No of Mentions (N=152)	As % of Total
Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter	43	28
President Obama	37	24
Press Secretary Josh Earnest	21	14
Secretary of State John Kerry	19	13
Other	11	7
Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook	10	7
Vice President Joe Biden	9	6
Principal Deputy Press Secretary Eric Schultz	1	1
National Security Advisor Susan Rice	1	1

Table 3: Frequency of Statements regarding United States Goal

### Conclusions

American policy-makers clearly consider ISIL as a threat to vital security interests both in the region of the Middle East and at home. According to the findings of this article, the perceived threat of ISIL has reached the top of the hierarchy within the Obama Administration. Furthermore, regarding the policies of the Administration, the findings suggest that the most salient policies for American policy-makers were the military air strikes, to enable indigenous ground forces in the region of the Middle East, to fight ISIL, and to disrupt the flow of foreign fighters and finance networks. However, it is clear through the statements that the United States was not willing to deploy any sizable forces. More importantly, an additional policy was identified, which was not included in the strategy adopted by the Obama Administration, but gathered significant attention from policy-makers. According to the findings, the Obama Administration perceived the political transition from the Assad regime in Syria as necessary in the fight against ISIL. Lastly, the overall strategy of the United States served one goal, which was to "degrade and destroy" ISIL. This is important to highlight, due to the fact that, as the analysis shows, it came directly from the top executives of the Obama Administration.

In conclusion, the analysis of public statements from key officials is frequently criticized on grounds that they don't always reflect the true intentions of the speaker or that they are not necessarily followed by actions. In order to respond

to this criticism, it is worthwhile to assess whether there is any relationship between the statements of the Obama Administration to the actions they undertook to counter the threat of ISIL. According to the analysis, during August and September 2014 the number of statements regarding the threat of ISIL reached its highest value. During this time the Obama Administration declared its "Anti-Islamic State strategy", and launched its first strikes in Syria against the Islamic State and the Khorasan Group. Moreover, Congress passed the Continuing Appropriations Resolution, which authorised the Department of Defence to appropriate 500 million US dollars in order to assist Syrian groups opposed to ISIL. Similarly, in November and December 2014 the Obama Administration authorized the deployment of 3000 additional troops in Iraq as part of its long-standing mission to train the Iraqi forces. These examples highlight the fact that there appears to be a positive correlation between the frequency of the statements on part of the Obama Administration and the actions they took. Of course, this could be merely

coincidental. Or perhaps there could be additional reasons which impacted on the threat perception of the Obama Administration, and expedited the need to take action against the threat of ISIL. However, the findings of this article corroborate two things. Firstly, that the threat of ISIL reached the upper echelons of the Obama Administration, and secondly that elite threat perception was at least one of the reasons which guided the actions of the Administration in its goal to counter the threat of ISIL. This opens up new directions for future research regarding the analysis of public statements concerning the formulation of foreign policy on behalf of the United States. The systematic analysis of public statements can have significant contribution in future research projects due to their availability. Whilst we must accept that they do not necessarily reflect the speakers' true intentions, we can be certain that they reveal at least a glimpse of their perception regarding the matter at hand. This is particularly useful in the case of the United States, due to the fact that an abundance of information is publicly available.

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