

War

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By Lawrence Freedman

WAR

Which is more representative of modern war: The United States unleashing high-tech arsenals to defeat dubious Third World regimes swiftly or machete-wielding insurgents fighting brutal civil wars in Africa? The short answer: both. Yet neither of these scenarios conforms to the classic model of warfare as a titanic struggle between rival great powers. It's time to update the textbooks and reappraise the nature of war.

“War Is the Continuation of Politics by Other Means”

Yes. After more than 170 years, the thesis of Prussian military theorist Karl von Clausewitz still applies. War is violence with a purpose. What has changed is whose purposes are being served and their nature. Clausewitz was most interested in great powers struggling for dominance, drawing upon the whole resources of their states, and throwing vast armies against each other. Today, with the United States as the dominant superpower, the also-rans in the international hierarchy know there is little point in trying to gain ascendancy through arms races and alliance formation. And in a postcolonial world characterized by economic interde-

pendence, there are fewer reasons to pursue the old mercantilist agenda of conquering and occupying productive territory, protecting trade routes, and gaining influence by planting the national flag on foreign shores.

Traditional power struggles still prevail in some regions of the world, such as Africa, where rival factions vie for dominance, countries remain marginalized from the global economy, and violence is endemic. By and large, these regions produce civil wars—the most common type of modern warfare. Although there is no novelty in conflicts caused by groups seeking secession or insurrection, global communications have internationalized civil wars by drawing attention to humanitarian distress. As such, when major states intervene abroad, they normally claim to do so in the name of universal values rather than selfish national interests.

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“Wars Are Never Formally Declared Anymore”

Right. Back in the days when interstate conflicts were the norm, governments used formal declarations to endow themselves with extraordinary wartime powers, such as rooting out “enemy aliens” residing on their soil, controlling economic activity, or suppressing domestic dissent. Formal declarations also provided a basis for regulating and containing war: Combatants acquired a distinct legal status, as did noncombatants, who were classified as neutrals.

However, since the Second World War, governments have avoided formal declarations. Citizens now view extra wartime powers as superfluous and alarming. And neutral countries would be reluctant to undertake any actions—not least those potentially helpful to the government declaring war—that might compromise their impartiality. What’s

more, adequate legal basis for war can normally be found in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, which acknowledges the “inherent right of individual or collective self-defense.” Even preemptive wars can be justified as self-defense, if a state can show that an attack is imminent.

The main consequence of the contemporary reluctance to declare war has been a search for euphemisms, such as “enforcement actions” and “use of force,” on the grounds that as soon as a conflict is officially called a war, then all the most inconvenient legal consequences kick in. Just ask the unfortunate inmates of Camp X-Ray on the U.S. Naval Base Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, some of whom the United States has denied formal legal protections under the Geneva Convention by labeling them “unlawful combatants.”

“Democracies Do Not Go To War With Each Other”

Irrelevant. The dichotomy between belligerent authoritarian states and peace-loving democratic states (until roused by the former’s aggression) does not do justice to the complexity of modern international affairs. In colonial times, countries that now make up the majority of the international system were part of nondemocratic empires, largely run by European democracies. Decolonization in the 20th century led to the creation of many new states, each with a distinctive political system, sometimes apparently democratic and often not at all. These systems have had to cope with tremendous economic and social problems, which is why conflict in the modern world takes on so many different forms. As could be seen in the Balkans, conflicts can erupt between countries that are notionally democratic, even if in a bowdlerized form.

Democracy comes wrapped in many packages, not always particularly liberal or stable. And stable, liberal democracies have shown themselves to be

quite warlike when convinced of a just cause. Sometimes, popular opinion compels a democratically elected government to go to war against its own better judgment—as when moral outrage over atrocities in Cuba prompted former U.S. President William McKinley reluctantly to ask Congress to declare war against Spain in 1898. Likewise, even authoritarian states periodically find it necessary to appeal to popular sentiment when making the case for war. Soviet premier Joseph Stalin did not encourage his people to fight the Nazis in the name of communism. Rather, he declared the struggle to be a Great Patriotic War to defend Mother Russia.

Such a great disparity of power now exists between democratic countries and the rest of the world that Western governments feel they can risk fighting wars that would have had little domestic support in the past. The promise of swift, decisive victory against a weaker foe sometimes mitigates concerns over high casualties or military quagmire.

“A Just War Is Backed by the United Nations”

No. The United Nations was founded to prevent wars, not authorize them. Although Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter contains a mechanism to enforce the views of the Security Council if “international peace and security” are at risk, the United Nations has rarely granted permission to go to war. The U.N.-authorized “police action” to defend South Korea following the North’s invasion in June 1950 was made possible by the Soviet Union’s boycott of the Security Council. The Security Council endorsed war against Iraq in 1990 when the Cold War was effectively over and relations between the West and the Soviet Union were remarkably good. In between, the U.N. Security Council debated many wars, often with “concern” or even “regret,” but East-West antagonism, coupled with rival veto powers, precluded a shared view among U.N. members on what constituted a legitimate war.

And while the Security Council is responsible for preserving international peace and security, this objec-

tive is not necessarily the same as justice. Threats to the rights of states may stir the United Nations to action, but threats against civilian populations and minority groups are more problematic. Russia and China, mindful of their own secessionist movements, vigorously dislike any interference in the internal affairs of states. Hence, they opposed U.N. military action to defend the Kosovar Albanians against the Serbs in 1999. Similarly, even though Iraq had violated U.N. resolutions and brutally repressed its own people, the United Nations was reluctant to sanction a war to overthrow a member state.

For Western governments, the international legitimacy that comes with the United Nations’ good-housekeeping seal of approval can make it easier to acquire the greater prize of domestic legitimacy. In times of war, however, votes in the U.S. Congress or British Parliament still count more than votes in the Security Council.

“The War on Terrorism Is Not a War”

Generally true. However, al Qaeda is a unique case. Wars do not have to involve states. Even before the destruction of the World Trade Center, the United States and al Qaeda had engaged in a low-level war of attrition. Al Qaeda’s 1998 attacks against U.S. embassies in East Africa prompted the United States to respond with cruise missile strikes against suspected terrorist targets in Sudan and Afghanistan. The sheer scale of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, provoked a more drastic response, with President George W. Bush standing before Congress to declare a war on terrorism that would begin with al Qaeda but “not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated.”

Proclaiming a war against terrorism might be justified, but this characterization exaggerates the importance of the military dimension. Terrorist groups wish their struggles to be perceived as war, since that focuses attention on their political

demands. Most governments prefer to describe terrorists as criminals, since that description focuses attention on their brutal tactics and delegitimizes their political agenda. But the U.S. campaign against Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan was not a typical counterterrorist operation. Despite all the talk about al Qaeda being a stateless group, the terrorist organization’s close association with the Taliban regime led to a conflict that soon took on the characteristics of a regular interstate war.

Still, more often than not, the foot soldiers in the “war” against terrorism are law enforcement officials and intelligence operatives. In the end, terrorism is best defeated through isolating militants from their claimed constituency, demonstrating the shameful and counterproductive nature of their methods, and, if possible, addressing the grievances upon which they feed. Terrorist campaigns will peter out if they are prevented from gaining funds or are continually thwarted in their efforts to mount attacks.

“Information Technology Has Cleared the Fog of War”

Wrong. The U.S. military benefited just as much as the U.S. economy from the revolution in information technology during the 1990s. Information can flow instantaneously across all dimensions of the battle space (the three-dimensional version of the old battlefield, encompassing land, oceans, air, and space), picked up from numerous, intrusive sensors and disseminated amongst all forces. Because such high-quality information flows make an enormous difference in contemporary conflicts, there are new incentives to disrupt or confuse these flows—including those supporting critical infrastructure, such as energy, transportation, and banking.

Another more serious problem is that with so much information around, on the Internet and through the media, assessing its reliability and judg-

ing the appropriate response is difficult. Political and military leaders must still decide how to prioritize the many messages they receive, how to interpret raw data picked up from numerous sources, and how to put that data into context. Critical information, including plans hatched by the enemy, may still not be available. In the battles for hearts and minds, great damage can be done by rumors and calous images that may circulate rapidly without any checks on their validity.

The mistakes and confusion resulting from an age of information surplus are different from those in an age of scarcity, but they can still cause problems. It is always important to remember that information is not the same as intelligence, which in turn is not the same as wisdom.

“All Future Warfare Will Be Asymmetric”

True. Lt. Col. Bryan McCoy, commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment in Iraq, was reported to have complained: “The enemy has gone asymmetric on us. There’s treachery. There are ambushes. It’s not straight-up conventional fighting.” Though they would not swap places with their enemies, Western military planners worry over the variety of ways a weaker opponent might use unconventional tactics to offset their high-tech advantage.

In one sense, all wars are asymmetric, as no two countries ever have the same force structures and capabilities, let alone geography, political systems, and strategic cultures. In the past, these differences evened out as both sides sought to turn a conflict to their comparative advantage. Often, in the end, the key asymmetry lay in resources: the ability of the economic and political systems to cope with the attritional costs of war and to replenish their armed forces. By the nuclear age, the ultimate symmetry was reached—as two superpowers developed the capacity to annihilate each other completely—and this threat of mutual assured destruction made war appear the ultimate folly.

With the end of the Cold War, the military superiority of the United States and its allies allows them to win any conventional war fought between regular forces on an open battle space. The extent of this dominance did not become apparent until the 1991 Gulf War, when Iraqi forces were overwhelmed first by U.S. airpower and then by the United States’ highly mobile and lethal ground forces. For any prospective enemies of the United States, the take-away lesson from this war was that they were bound to lose if they fought on U.S. terms.

Opponents of the West might try to remedy this imbalance through weapons of mass destruction or superterrorism, to be directed against a nation’s homeland. Likewise, drawing Western forces into apparently unwinnable wars and deploying guerrilla tactics of ambush and harassment, until casualties accumulate to an intolerable level, worked well for the North Vietnamese. Such tactics were far less successful for former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Critical to such conflicts is what strategic theorist Alex George describes as asymmetrical motivation: For one side, the stakes may be so high that losing a war is unthinkable; for the other, the stakes may be

limited, leading to impatience with conflicts that drag out and cause cumulative casualties. The recent war in Iraq provided a test of the proposition that the attacks of September 11, 2001, made Americans more resolute and less risk-averse, by turning what

might otherwise have been a war of choice into a war of necessity. The risks, however, turned out not to be that great, so it remains uncertain how much asymmetrical motivation can compensate for a drastic asymmetry in capabilities.

“Airpower Is Decisive in Modern War”

Only up to a point. The 1991 Gulf War demonstrated what air superiority could achieve. Iraqi aircraft had no chance in dogfights and were caught in their bunkers by precision-guided weapons. Air defenses were soon degraded to the point where allied aircraft could operate relatively freely. The war did not, however, fully resolve the long-standing dispute between what used to be called the strategic and tactical use of airpower.

The theory that strategic airpower alone could be decisive in war by destroying the very will of a government and its people to fight was popular before the Second World War. Yet the terrible air raids during that war reinforced social solidarity, if anything. The greatest value of airpower lay in destroying the infrastructure of war, from production to supply lines, and supporting troops on the ground in a tactical role.

These days, bombings directed at a civilian population and its infrastructure are deemed unaccept-

able, but some military planners believe precision targeting of enemy leadership can provide a strategic substitute. The evidence of both the 1991 and 2003 wars in Iraq suggests that short of a direct, “decapitating” hit, spectacular demolitions of largely empty buildings with some symbolic political significance bring few benefits. Stray weapons invariably hit marketplaces and residential buildings, thereby undermining the claim of sparing civilians.

Where airpower really makes the difference is in its classic “tactical” role—battering unprotected regular forces, destroying their equipment, and providing lethal firepower during engagements. There are limits to what can be done against guerrilla tactics from the air, especially when targets are integrated within the civilian population. However, with modern unmanned aerial vehicles, such as the U.S. Predator drone, excellent intelligence can now be obtained on quite small groups.

“Modern War Means Fewer Casualties”

No. These days, Western countries seek to limit their casualties and play to their high-tech advantage by fighting capital-intensive rather than labor-intensive wars. Indeed, all their recent wars, including the war to overthrow Saddam Hussein in Iraq, have seen casualties in tens or hundreds (on the Western side), rather than thousands, which would have been considered extraordinarily low in the past. These days, friendly-fire incidents and other accidents are just as likely as combat to cause casualties.

This low death toll, however, is distorted by the West’s à la carte approach toward military intervention. During the 1990s, the United States and Europe often avoided getting too involved in messy civil wars that didn’t fit their idealized scenarios, with massive casualties (overwhelmingly civilian)

caused by low technology such as small arms and machetes. The millions of victims of the vicious African wars of the last decade—including in Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Somalia—would have good reason to question the proposition that contemporary war inflicts fewer casualties.

It didn’t take much violence to deter the United States, the champion of the revolution in military affairs, from testing its theories of modern war more widely. The United States withdrew from Somalia in 1993 after a nasty incident left 18 American soldiers and as many as 1,000 Somalis dead. After that experience, the United States was loath to intervene to prevent the Rwandan genocide, in which an estimated 800,000 people died.

“The United States Can Win a War at Any Time in Any Place”

No. The United States has the power to prevail in most conflicts, but whether it has the necessary determination in the face of its own casualties and those it inflicts on others is another matter. Americans cannot always assume conflicts will be sharp and quick—a dangerously beguiling vision, recently reinforced by toppling regimes in Afghanistan and Iraq, whose people were unwilling to fight. And the demands of fighting in many theaters of war can perilously overstretch resources, to the point where the economic strength upon which U.S. power is based may dissipate.

The war in Iraq demonstrated that the United States has pulled even further ahead of the crowd in terms of military capabilities since Operation Desert

Storm. But the war also confirmed that the political situations left behind may be more complex and unsatisfactory than those that followed the sharp, interstate wars of the past. Defeated countries require substantial amounts of U.S. economic assistance and political attention, as well as residual military commitments. The lesson of history is that it is easier to acquire empires (even benevolent ones) than to sustain them.

The unintended consequences of any war, for good as well as bad, tend to be as important as the intended. Sometimes wars are necessary and must be fought. But despite all the promise of the information age, airpower, and precision technology, war remains irredeemably violent and should always be approached with care. ■■

[Want to Know More?]

A good start for those interested in the range of writing on warfare is a collection of readings titled *War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), edited by Lawrence Freedman. *The Cassell History of Warfare* series (London: Cassell and Company, 1999–2002), edited by John Keegan, covers war from ancient times to the present era. See, in particular, Martin van Creveld’s volume, *The Art of War: War and Military Thought* (London: Cassell and Company, 2000). Keegan’s *A History of Warfare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) is lively and informative, but theoretically muddled and notorious for its misreading of Karl von Clausewitz. A useful recent guide to the great man’s writings is Beatrice Heuser’s *Reading Clausewitz* (London: Pimlico, 2002). Michael Doyle offers an insightful overview of the major schools of thought on war in *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997). The United States’ top former military officers sound off on fighting terrorism and building tomorrow’s military in the *FP* Interview “Reinventing War” (*FOREIGN POLICY*, November/December 2002).

Students of guerrilla warfare should consult Robert Asprey’s *War in the Shadows: The Guerilla in History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1994). Walter Lacquer’s *A History of Terrorism* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2002) is one of the best contemporary books on this topic. Paul Collier reveals how economic forces are the true cause of civil conflicts in “The Market for Civil War” (*FOREIGN POLICY*, May/June 2003). Benjamin S. Lambeth examines the changing role of airpower over the last two decades in *The Transformation of American Air Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000). A good overview of technological advancement and its role in combat can be found in Michael O’Hanlon’s “Can Technology Bring U.S. Troops Home?” (*FOREIGN POLICY*, Winter 1998–1999). Excellent material on contemporary wars can be found on the Web sites of the Project on Defense Alternatives and the Federation of American Scientists’ Military Analysis Network.

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