

1 ARE WE AT WAR? WHAT DO WE WANT? AND DO WE WANT TO WIN?

There is no such thing as a *little war* for a great Nation.
Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington (1838)

The Political Rules

The ethereal image has the green-yellow tint of a night vision scope. It was August 31, 2021, 11:59pm Kabul time. The commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, Major General Chris Donahue, the last American soldier in Afghanistan, approached the ramp of the last American transport aircraft departing Kabul. America's twenty-year war in Afghanistan was over. The United States was leaving in defeat.¹ Its NATO partners were already gone.

It was a long road to America's most recent loss in a war fought for limited political aims. The timing of the final act incontrovertibly demonstrated the dominance of the political in war. The US military had not suffered stunning reverses on the battlefield, and mass protests against the war in Afghanistan hadn't rocked American cities or universities. Most Americans hardly seemed to notice America's and NATO's long-running war in Afghanistan. But the president of the United States, Joseph Biden, had decided the war was not in the US interest – his prerogative as president – and on April 14, 2021 announced America's coming withdrawal.² Perhaps unaware of the implications, the administration made a political decision to choose defeat.

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American warfighting since the Second World War is rife with such judgments. America's leaders – and those who advise them – too often do not understand war. Critically, they don't understand how to *think* about war and even have difficulty distinguishing between war and peace while failing to grasp the dangers of their confusion. How did we come to this place?

Are We at War?

On June 29, 1950, President Harry S. Truman held an afternoon press conference where he took questions about the recently erupted war in Korea. Four days before, Kim Il-Sung's Communist North Korean regime had launched a surprise offensive designed to conquer American-supported South Korea. Within forty-eight hours Truman had decided to commit US forces to the fight. General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of US forces in the Far East, received orders to "throw the North Koreans out of South Korea." Republican Senator Robert Taft agreed with Truman's decision, but not the president's refusal to seek Congressional approval for taking the US to war. "If the incident is permitted to go by without protest," Taft wrote, "we would have finally terminated for all time the right of Congress to declare war, which is granted to Congress alone by the Constitution of the United States." Others echoed Taft's views. Truman ignored them all and began pulling together a United Nations-sponsored coalition to counter what many Western observers saw as the first move in a possible Soviet offensive aimed at the West. A reporter at the press conference prodded Truman: "Everybody is asking in this country, are we or are we not at war?" Truman replied, "We are not at war," and told those assembled that "the members of the United Nations are going to the relief of the Korean Republic to suppress a bandit raid." Another journalist asked: "Mr. President, would it be correct, against your explanation, to call this a police action under the United Nations?" "Yes," Truman replied. "That is what it amounts to."³ The US was now at war, but its president disagreed. This initial confusion – or perhaps intellectual dishonesty – was only the beginning of the troubles the Truman administration faced in regard to what mistakenly has been called America's first limited war. The first step to solving any problem is to admit you have it.

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In late-November 2015 testimony before Congress on the new Iraq War, President Barack Obama's Secretary of Defense, Ash Carter, said: "We're at war." But during the questioning he went on to say: "It's not war in the technical sense, but this is serious business. It feels that way to our people." Secretary of Defense Carter added: "We will win. We are going to win." Why is this relevant if the US is not actually at war? Additionally, President Obama repeatedly insisted there would be no American "boots on the ground" in the war against Islamic State (IS). At the time of Carter's testimony, there were 3,500 US military personnel in Iraq.⁴ In the eyes of some analysts, war now is an exercise in risk management for too many political leaders.⁵

What was seen as an anomaly in 1950 has become the norm. US presidents do not ask for declarations of war. The practice of instead going to Congress for approval has been institutionalized in a bipartisan manner and is thus very unlikely to change. The 2001 Authorization of Military Force (AUMF) that President George W. Bush secured in the wake of the 9/11 attacks was particularly strong, and even though it did not officially declare war, it "bound the bureaucracy to frame the conflict as a 'war' rather than a law enforcement problem." Unfortunately, as political scientist Audrey Kurth Cronin observed, unlike the declarations of war upon Germany and Japan issued by Congress in 1941, which instructed President Roosevelt "to bring the conflict(s) to a successful termination," the 2001 AUMF had no such provision.⁶ President Obama used the parameters of this same document to take the US to war in Iraq in 2014.

But What about So-called Limited War?

But how does all of this relate to so-called "limited war," and particularly modern American views of it? There are many weaknesses with the American approach to war since the end of the Second World War, but chief among them is a failure to deal successfully with the problems of so-called "limited war." The Korean War was quickly branded America's first "limited war," but there is no consensus on what this meant. It came to mean any war, particularly any US war, as long as it didn't look like the Second World War, or perhaps result in a nuclear exchange. Thinking on this subject quickly grew contradictory and confused, and the resulting misconceptions became underpinnings

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of the US failure to consistently, clearly, and decisively win its wars since the end of the Second World War. Why? The manner in which we write and think about limited war intertwines *all* US thinking about war, and this is so broken and illogical that it has poisoned the US ability to fight *any* war.

Franklin Roosevelt provided a past example of clearer thinking in his January 1942 State of the Union address, one delivered a month after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the US into the Second World War. “Our own objectives are clear,” Roosevelt insisted, and then he gave them: “the objective of smashing the militarism imposed by war lords upon their enslaved peoples, the objective of liberating the subjugated Nations – the objective of establishing and securing freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear everywhere in the world.” This is not as clear and clean as “unconditional surrender,” which became the US and Allied political aim after the January 1943 Casablanca Conference, but does provide solid aims: smashing militarism (meaning Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan), and freeing “subjugated Nations.” These are political aims to which military force can be rationally directed. Roosevelt then summoned the specter of failed post-First World War peacemaking and gave the US people a vision of what victory looked like – and meant: “We shall not stop short of these objectives – nor shall we be satisfied merely to gain them and then call it a day . . . this time we are determined not only to win the war, but also to maintain the security of the peace that will follow.”⁷ Roosevelt was thinking clearly about war *and* peace. Modern political and military leaders, policymakers, and academics who write on these matters consistently do not. The US failure to pursue victory, the US failure to understand the nature of the wars into which the country enters, the US failure to wage wars decisively: all of this is rooted in confused ideas about war in general and wars for limited political aims in particular. Why do I say this? And how do I prove this point?

Defining “Limited War”

It is imperative to begin our discussion by laying a firm, universally applicable groundwork for our approach. Simply put, we don’t know what we mean when we use the term “limited war.” Here are two examples from what are considered classic texts on the subject: 1) “Only conflicts which contain the potentiality for becoming total can be

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described as limited”;⁸ 2) “Limited war is a conflict short of general war to achieve specific political aims, using limited forces and limited force.”⁹ Both of these definitions explain limited war in relation to other types of conflict that also lack clear, generally agreed-upon definitions, i.e. “total war” and “general war” (we will revisit these in the next chapter). The best-known theorist of limited war, political scientist Robert Osgood, in his 1957 work defined limited war in terms of the objective sought and (among other things) by the fact that the combatants “do not demand the utmost military effort of which the belligerents are capable.”¹⁰ This is nebulous at best and fails to offer a firm and usable explanation of “effort,” or what some would term the means used. The definitions haven’t improved with the passing decades. A 2010 book noted that “The term limited war implies regular military operations by one nation-state against the regular military force of another nation-state and excludes irregular operations by terrorist organisations against state or by other non-state actors like warlords against a state or against other warlords.”¹¹ This is another variation of a definition based upon means with the addition of the opponent’s doctrinal warfighting methods. All of this demonstrates the potentially fatal problem: if we cannot even clearly define limited war, how can we understand its nature? And if we don’t understand what “limited war” means, *we don’t understand what we mean when we describe any war.*

Unfortunately, this type of conceptual muddle is typical in the theoretical and historical literature, as the given definitions of limited war generally imply that the level of means used by the combatants determines whether or not a conflict is a limited war. The problem here is this: defining a war by the means used – which is generally what current limited war theory and most similar literature does – fails to provide a clear, universally applicable foundation for analysis. Wars, as Carl von Clausewitz wrote in *On War* and in *Strategie*, should be defined by the political aim sought, not the means or level of violence employed, nor the amount of destruction inflicted upon the enemy. Clausewitz wrote: “War can be of two kinds, in the sense that either the objective is to *overthrow the enemy* – to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please; or *merely to occupy some of his frontier-districts* so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations.” Wars are fought for regime change or something less than this. Building upon Clausewitz’s foundation, British maritime

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theorist Sir Julian Corbett, in his *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, gave us the terms “unlimited war,” to describe a conflict waged to overthrow the enemy government (an unlimited political aim), and “limited war,” for a war fought for something less (a limited political aim).¹² This typology provides an ironclad foundation for substantive analysis, because dissecting wars by beginning with the political aims sought provides a constant upon which to base any discussion or analysis, as well as a foundation for building a coherent theory in regard to wars fought for limited political aims. The means used certainly help determine the nature of the war being fought; indeed, this is one of the key factors (others are addressed in Chapter 4). But defining a war based upon the means used (or not) lacks universality, because it is not concrete. Moreover, it helps determine *how* the war is fought, but it is *not* what the war is about – the political aim – *and this is what matters most because it is from here that all else flows*. This clearly demonstrates part of the problem regarding how the US and other modern liberal democracies think about waging war: they too often fail to clearly define what they’re fighting for or fail to understand the effects of this on what they must do to win and the actions of other powers.

Why does all of this matter for us? First, *all* of the wars in which the US has been involved since the Japanese surrender in 1945 have been branded limited wars. This is done regardless of whether or not the term accurately depicts US political aims or explains the nature of the war. The Korean War, the Vietnam War, the war in Afghanistan, and all three Iraq wars are consistently branded limited wars: a term that most writers and speakers on the subject fail to define, or that is a catchall for nearly every type of conflict.¹³ For example, Seymour Deitchman, in his 1964 *Limited War and American Defense Policy*, provides a list of thirty-two wars fought between 1945 and 1962 that include such different conflicts as the Chinese Civil War (1927–49), the Philippine Huk Rebellion (1946–54), and the 1962 Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba. All are classified as limited wars. He has another list of fifty-nine conflicts that occurred – or almost did (a particularly unique element in his approach) – during this same period and breaks these struggles into three types: conventional wars, unconventional wars, and deterred wars. He does this while never clearly defining limited war.¹⁴ Blindly throwing the “limited war” blanket over all of these examples is a flawed method of attempting to analyze and understand these wars, and – more importantly – to fight current and

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future ones. This remains part of the conceptual problem Americans have in regard to *all* wars.¹⁵

Second, the problem of not understanding the nature of the war is directly related to how we currently define – or more accurately – fail to define limited war. In a 2014 article, a *Washington Post* journalist described what the US began doing in Iraq in June 2014 as a limited war. He gave no clear definition of limited war and seems to believe that the most recent war in Iraq was a limited war because the US was making a minor effort.¹⁶ But this does not define the war – or its nature: it simply explains the means being used. It does not in any way describe what the US hoped to achieve, and the political aim being sought is the keystone for what is being done – or at least it should be.

This is also illustrative of another problem: the Third Iraq War was arguably being waged for an unlimited political aim, i.e. “to degrade and destroy Islamic State,” yet early discussions of the conflict branded it a limited war because of the low level of military means the US committed.¹⁷

This lack of clarity is not unusual and is far from new. Modern writing about limited war (which is rooted in Cold War works and concepts) is generally of value only as examples of how not to examine conflicts. The authors of these works – particularly the twenty-first-century examples – often fail to even define what they mean by limited war.¹⁸ Moreover, when they do, the definition tends to mix political ends and military means, or political ends, strategic and operational ways, and military means, thus failing to provide a solid definition for critical analysis.¹⁹

Third, limited war writers, as well as the Cold War itself, helped teach many in modern liberal states not only that victory in war should not be pursued, but that its achievement was actually bad. John Garnett, one of the founding fathers of modern strategic studies, wrote: “In limited war ‘winning’ is an inappropriate and dangerous goal, and a state which finds itself close to it should immediately begin to practise restraint.”²⁰ Former US Secretary of State and retired general Colin Powell once noted that “As soon as they tell me it [war] is limited, it means that they do not care whether you achieve a result or not. As soon as they tell me, ‘surgical,’ I head for the bunker.”²¹ A veteran of more than two decades in the US Foreign Service criticized examinations of US wars as being too “victory centric,” faulted them for using a “victory-tinted lens,” and insisted that searching for a reason for not

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winning a war “treats victory as the norm and military frustration as an aberration, an attitude that distorts our understanding of conflict and its unpredictable results.” Instead, the focus should be upon cutting one’s losses to avoid a protracted conflict.²² In other words, the US should learn to lose more quickly at a lower cost. Even the Taliban’s decisive August 2021 victory (there is no other word for it) over the United States, NATO, and Afghanistan’s elected, democratic government, failed to staunch such thinking as the featured article in October 2021’s Naval Institute *Proceedings* magazine argues the US military should not be in the victory business.²³ Such thinking sells short the seriousness of war and thus undermines the ability of the US and other Western powers to clearly identify the political aim or aims for which they are fighting any war (the ends), create intelligent strategy for achieving this (the ways), and harness national power – especially military power (the means) – *sufficient* for achieving the desired end.

Fourth, bad limited war theory has helped rob the US and other Western nations of the awareness that wars should be waged decisively. If leaders cannot clearly define what they want, how can the military hope to deliver it? And if the means dedicated to getting the job done are insufficient merely because the war has been branded limited, how can one win? The result is that “victory” – both in battle and in war itself – has generally disappeared from statements of analysts and policymakers. Many of these same figures view the term itself with suspicion.²⁴ One author writing in 2005 insisted, in a chapter titled “The End of Victory,” that “The first notion the military strategist must discard is victory, for strategy is not about winning.” He provides this elaboration: “Battles and wars may end, but interaction between individuals and states goes on,” and “one can no more achieve final victory than one can ‘win’ history.” Because of this, the strategist should not concern themselves with victory in the war itself; victory is only the concern of the tactician.²⁵ Among the many theoretical problems here is the false assumption that strategic analysis of potential future conflicts and events will stop if victory in a then current conflict is achieved and so named (the North Vietnamese and Taliban certainly understood the reality of victory). It also ignores the distinction between war and peace, and encourages drawing the false conclusion that strategic thinking will stop when the war ends.

Why does all of this matter? *If you aren’t trying to win the war, you usually aren’t seriously trying to end it.* Refusing to pursue victory

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can produce an endless war. Swedish political scientist Caroline Holmqvist, writing in 2014 about the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, illustrates this problem by noting that “war is becoming perpetual or endless quite simply because the liberal world is *unable to imagine conclusive endings* to the wars it is currently fighting.” She partially attributes this to the current practice of focusing on the present while detached from any reference to the past, accompanied by the inability to imagine a future different from the present trouble. This contributes to concentration on the immediate (and thus the tactical), and a focus on the means rather than the political end, the “how” rather than the “why” and “what for.” The use of force becomes equated with the political aim, and the tactical mistakenly becomes the political, with the result that the point of the war becomes war itself.²⁶ Additionally, US and other Western leaders now forget this truth: *your enemy is trying to win*. General Rupert Smith observed that “unlike all other socially acceptable behaviour except some sports, wars and fights are not competitions: to be second is to lose.”²⁷ Only Western liberal democracies in the post-Second World War era go to war without the expectation of victory. Fortunately, the political leaders who fought against the Nazis understood the necessity of victory. Winning (or losing) a war *matters*, particularly to the people who live directly with the results.

The refusal to value victory in warfare, or to define it, as well as the refusal to seek it when one is fighting a war, is a political problem that affects the ability of the military to fight the war effectively and deliver victory. American political leaders are ordering men and women into combat without having a clear idea of what they mean by victory, and sometimes with no desire to even achieve it. Since the time of the Korean War, US political leaders have too often sacrificed the lives of American men and women in wars these political leaders don’t believe are important enough to actually win (the Korean and Third Iraq Wars spring instantly to mind). These political leaders don’t often phrase it this way, but that is the reality of the result of their decisions. Waging war in this manner is either an expression of ignorance, or an example of incompetence on the part of political and military leaders. If it is not important enough to win, it is not important enough to go to war. One of the jobs of America’s leaders is to *win* the wars into which they lead the United States. Using force – decisively – is the most important wartime tool for doing this.

What Do We Want? And Do We Want to Win?

The event crystalizing American views of the Korean War was President Truman's April 1951 firing of General Douglas MacArthur on well-justified grounds of insubordination.²⁸ Memories of this unfortunate clash cloud a key issue that contributed to the problem: confusion at the top of the Truman administration in regard to what political aim MacArthur was supposed to achieve in Korea. MacArthur's victorious United Nations forces had been sent into North Korea after liberating the South, but the Chinese Army that intervened in Korea on October 25, 1950 threw the US and UN forces out of North Korea and below the pre-war 38th-parallel border. By February 1951, the UN coalition forces had recovered and started pushing back the Chinese and North Koreans. This same month the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) complained that the US State Department would not give them political aims in Korea until its officials knew the military's capabilities. Both MacArthur and the Joint Chiefs protested – correctly – that the political decision needed to come first so that the military could then determine the courses of action that would allow it to fulfil the wishes of its masters.²⁹ The previous month, the National Security Council (NSC) had begun reexamining US war aims in Korea amidst the depth of the Chinese offensive. This political limbo dragged on – unresolved – until Truman signed NSC Directive 48/5 on May 17, 1951. The US political aim became the reestablishment of peace based on the pre-war frontiers.³⁰

What does this mean? It means that from October 1950 until May 1951 the official political aim of the US forces fighting in Korea was the unification of Korea under UN supervision. This had been decided in NSC 81/1 by political leaders in Washington on September 9, 1950, *before* the US and UN forces under MacArthur landed at Inchon on September 15, and *before* they were ordered to invade North Korea on September 26 (this was a shift from the initial political aim of restoration of the antebellum border at the 38th parallel).³¹ After MacArthur's relief, his successor, Matthew B. Ridgway, operated under the same orders to seek the unification of Korea. But this is something for which he was not given the means, and his instructions from the Joint Chiefs tied his hands in so many ways that he could not possibly achieve his government's official political aim. Here is the manifestation of the problem we have just discussed: the Truman administration struggled to define the political aim – to define victory.