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The American Approach to Limited War

Core Course Essay

Bob Warrington/Class of 94
Core Course 2
Seminar H
Bruce Harris/Bud Cole
Dan Gaske

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The American Approach to Limited War

Introduction

Limited war has been a prominent feature in United States (US) military history. Past applications of limited military power in war have dramatically furthered US national interests. Despite encouraging experiences with limited war from independence to the 20th century, its inherent equivocalities coupled with increasing apprehension over its costs and results have made this type of combat progressively less appealing to the American psyche. Moreover, the primary pillar which supported its advisability after World War II--the presence of an adversary in the international system capable of devastating the US with nuclear weapons--has been undermined by the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the cold war.

This paper will analyze the particular historical circumstances of the American experience with limited war from early conflicts through the post-World War II period. It will compare the US perspective with principles of limited war described by military strategists, especially Carl von Clausewitz. The paper will then examine how the evolution of American thinking about limited war has affected its usefulness as an instrument of US national policy. It will conclude by looking at the implications of the post-Cold War international environment for American political and military strategies to deal with limited uses of military power. Throughout this paper, examples of America's limited war experiences will be cited to illustrate judgments that are offered. The paper is not, however, about those wars. It is intended to analyze the US attitude toward limited war and how these beliefs affect the relationship between this form of warfare and the pursuit of American political objectives.

Early Experiences with Limited War

The concept of limited war escapes exact definition, but studies of the subject have traditionally focused on ends, means, and their relationship as the key factors in understanding this type of combat.

Most writers have argued that a limited war occurs when its participants fight with limited means for limited objectives. Within this overall framework, two principles have been identified by theorists as critical to keeping a war limited. First, that ends determine means. Limiting political objectives is key to limiting the military means employed for those objectives. Robert Osgood, in his seminal work on this subject, emphasizes this point when he writes, "The decisive limitation upon war is the limitation of the objectives of war."¹ Clausewitz also advocates this principle when he writes, "As policy becomes more ambitious and vigorous, so will war, and this may reach the point where war attains its absolute form."² The second principle is that the relationship between ends and means is proportional. This judgment can be traced to Clausewitz's original admonition that political goals will determine both the military objectives sought in a war and the amount of force they require. Consequently, according to Clausewitz, "The smaller the penalty you demand from your opponent, the less you can expect him to try and deny it to you; the smaller the effort he makes, the less you need to make yourself."³

Early US experiences with limited war, however, varied considerably from these principles and produced a uniquely American perspective on the subject. American wars of the 18th and 19th centuries with foreign opponents were able to accomplish ambitious political objectives that required only limited outlays of military power. The rule of proportionality between political ends and military means became skewed, and the imbalance clearly favored America in terms of the political gains realized through force of arms. US sacrifices were very slight and lacked proportionality--at least by a Clausewitzian standard--given the value of the political aims and the level of resistance such objectives would be expected to arouse in the enemy. Indeed, the wars fell outside Clausewitz's two kinds of limited war: offensive war with a limited aim and defensive war.⁴ To cite the most formative examples from that period:

- In the American Revolution, the US sought the extreme political goal of independence. However, the military strategy it employed, the armed forces it fielded, and the amount of destruction and casualties the country sustained in the conflict were far less than such political aspirations would typically require under the rule of proportionality. At the same time, the American effort was significantly aided by Britain's catastrophic mistakes in planning and conducting the war. London failed, for example, to identify the correct military objectives (i.e. the "centers of gravity") for attack, to deploy sufficient forces in support of the military strategy it did devise, and to appoint military commanders possessing the gift of "military genius" to carry out this difficult campaign.⁵
- American wars of territorial expansion in the 19th century required only modest outlays of force to achieve far-reaching political objectives. Prominent examples include the Mexican War, the Spanish-American War, and the Indian Wars.⁶ If we accept Clausewitz's definition of expenditure of effort in war--destruction of forces and loss of territory--the US suffered minimal amounts of the former and none of the latter in these wars. In each, limited military means were employed to compel the enemy to accept peace on the most objectionable of terms--extensive territorial concessions. This was not the type of limited war envisioned by Clausewitz as involving the seizure of some small piece of enemy territory, such as a province. These were wars of the extreme--conquest. Mexico lost over half of her lands, the Indians, all of theirs, and Spain, several major colonies. Based on established principles of proportionality, however, the anticipated correlation between ambitiousness of political aims and level of effort to achieve them simply did not operate in these cases.⁷
- A major exception to the above experiences occurred during the War of 1812. Initially, America set ambitious political goals in resorting to war including, most prominently, the seizure of Canada through force of arms and its political incorporation into the US. After a

variety of military blunders and reverses on the battlefield--the causes of which were disturbingly reminiscent of British errors in the Revolutionary War--the US failed to achieve military objectives established in pursuit of political goals. With the expenditure of effort exceeding the value of the political objectives, the probability of victory increasingly less likely, and discontent over the war escalating to widespread violence, America abandoned its original political objective and accepted returning to the status quo ante as a more modest outcome. Although this experience would have considerable relevance for US encounters with limited war in the next century, the War of 1812 was largely forgotten and remained America's most unpopular foreign war until Korea and Vietnam.⁸

It is important to understand why these conflicts are considered limited wars from America's perspective. Some writers have judged them to be total, but they have only focused on ends and ways in their studies.⁹ America did seek far-reaching goals and did target the destruction of the enemy forces as the "center of gravity" to be attacked. The means employed by the US, however, were limited when measured against the principles of limited war enunciated by various theorists, the potential military might that could have been brought to bear, the costs incurred, and the force outlays required in America's total war experiences.¹⁰ By ignoring means, these writers have failed to grasp the uniqueness of America's limited war perspective and have overlooked the key dynamic that would alter that perspective in the 20th century.

Lessons Learned and Overlooked

As America entered the 20th century, the lessons derived from limited war against foreign opponents could scarcely have been more heartening. In each of the wars, save one, political objectives had been achieved in a way that did not exact excessive or intolerable costs from the armed forces. The military victories could offer American political and military leaders considerable gratification because their costs were far less than expected based on the political gains that had been

realized. Despite warnings from Clausewitz and others that in war the result is never final, moreover, America's limited wars had proven to be decisive in terms of the outcome.¹¹ The success of American political and military strategies in limited war-fighting had transcended the rule of proportionality and offered the prospect that far-reaching political goals could be obtained at relatively modest costs. Furthermore, there was no reason to believe that this paradigm would not endure in the new century, especially given the fact that the US was entering it as a budding world power.

Unrecognized at the time, however, the American limited war experience was tenuous in terms of its duration and transferability. The very magnitude of US successes carried with it the seeds of disenchantment that would afflict this form of warfare in the 20th century. Before examining the latter, however, it is important to understand key features of the American experience that help explain how the changing nature of war engendered the approaching disillusionment.

- Because of America's success in its limited wars, there was very little modification of political goals based on the expenditure of effort, and the political aim was almost the sole determinant of the policies established to conduct and end the war. This experience followed closely the dictum offered by Clausewitz, "The less involved the population and the less serious the strains within states and between them, the more political requirements in themselves will dominate and tend to be decisive."¹² These same successes, however, insulated the US from one of the dynamics of war that Clausewitz also identified; that is, ". . . the original political objects can greatly alter during the course of the war and may finally change entirely since they are influenced by events and their probable consequences."¹³ Both attitudes would contribute significantly to American frustration in grappling with the ambiguities and restraints of post-World War II limited war.
- The wars were fought between opponents of markedly unequal strength. America possessed the qualities for defeating an enemy that Clausewitz presupposed: great physical and moral

superiority.¹⁴ With this advantage, defeating the enemy was the essential aim of US military activity. America was not compelled to consider a problem that Clausewitz would acknowledge as more vexing: what to do if circumstances rule that out.

- America was also aided by the poor selection of strategy of its opponents. Drawn often by choice and occasionally by circumstance into engagements as the form of fighting, the preponderant strength of American forces almost invariably led to the destruction of the enemy's forces. Had a different method been chosen, for example, fighting what Clausewitz would call a defensive war that exploits the fatigue of the stronger opponent to bring about peace, the results may not have been so severe for the vanquished.¹⁵ This is not to claim that such a strategy would have worked or, in some cases, was even practical. It is reasonable to suggest, nevertheless, that given the impossibility of destroying America's armed forces and the likelihood the one's own forces would be destroyed instead, a defensive war focused on wearing down the US will to continue held a better prospect for its opponents in seeking a less onerous peace.
- Finally, each of America's limited wars followed two of Clausewitz's key dictums. They sprang from a well defined political purpose, and the kind of war on which the US was embarking was well established.¹⁶ The use of war to achieve political goals, and the conformity of military operations to those goals were also generally accepted by the American people as correct. In Clausewitz's terms, intentions were clear at the start of the war regarding what was to be achieved and how the war was to be conducted. A lack of consensus on these issues during the War of 1812, conversely, quickened the process of US physical and moral exhaustion once the war started going badly.

Each of these additional lessons from America's early experience with limited war would play a factor in its later frustrations with this form of warfare. Each would also contribute to the increased wariness with which the limited war option is viewed in the post-cold war era.

Changing Fortunes

Limited war as the most prominent form of US wartime experience was temporarily eclipsed in the first half of the 20th century by America's participation in World Wars I and II. A late-comer to both of these conflicts, American military objectives were largely determined by the parameters of combat already being practiced by the wars' original participants, the geography of the theater of operations, and the strategic position of the allies in December 1941. Political goals were also heavily influenced by the military operations that had occurred through 7 December 1941 and the political aims of the Axis countries--either implied or expressed--in starting the war.

Both world wars bore a stronger resemblance to America's Civil War than to any of the earlier US wars with foreign opponents. In the former, the rule of proportionality had operated with savage effectiveness in directing the relationship between political goals and military means. In resorting to war in 1861, the US articulated--relative to the views of the opponent--the extreme goal of political ascendancy. This prompted fierce resistance on the part of a capable and intelligent opponent--the South--and the resulting military campaigns lived up to Clausewitz's vivid language about the inevitability of bloody slaughter in a successful battle and of bloody battles in a successful strategy. A proportionality existed in the sense that ambitious goals had engendered sizable costs for their attainment.

The Civil War, however, was an aberration in 19th century American military history, and its legacy of total war for subsequent international conflict was short-lived--1914-1945. The excessiveness of total war in these cases, moreover, led to denunciations of its practice in post-war military literature by theorists such as Basil Liddell-Hart, Robert Osgood, and Bernard Brodie.¹⁷

Criticisms were based on what they considered to be flawed strategies that had led to unnecessary devastation and, more importantly, the looming destructiveness of nuclear weapons in any future total war involving the great powers.

Although concerns about additional world wars proved to be unfounded, the existence of nuclear weapons and the omnipresent US-Soviet rivalry forced a serious reevaluation of the political use of military power, especially as applied in limited war situations. The parameters had changed:

- Limiting the ferocity of war now focused almost exclusively on preventing the introduction of nuclear weapons into any conflict. A major stimulus for addressing the question of nuclear use was the ill-conceived Eisenhower strategy of "massive retaliation." Attacked by civilian strategists such as William Kaufmann, Robert Osgood, and Henry Kissinger, massive retaliation was challenged on two counts.¹⁸ First, threatening to retaliate massively against limited provocations was simply not credible to an enemy. Second, by conceiving of victory in only total terms, the US left itself no options for pursuing lesser victories using lesser means. The obvious choice to restore a rational linkage between policy and power became limited war.
- The bipolar world, however, made virtually any military conflict in the international system representative of the more basic political struggle between the US and Soviet Union. This condition presented America with a more abstract linkage between political aim and military force. In the past, US military power had always been applied directly against the enemy from which it sought political gains. Now, the prospect existed that America would seek political advances against its primary adversary indirectly by using military power against the latter's client states. For the US, historically accustomed to a straightforward link between political goals and military means, such ambiguity would prove problematic.

Korea and Vietnam provided the opportunities for America to confront directly the realities of 20th century limited war. Almost immediately, the irrelevance of 19th century limited war experiences became apparent. Moreover, the superseding of these expectations by less satisfying political-military measures heavily influenced US strategy in both conflicts.

The US found itself allied with governments of politically divided Asian countries against communist enemies who used comparatively primitive methods of warfare and who were seeking to unite their countries under communist leadership. In political terms, however, both conflicts were perceived by the US within a context of the larger political struggle with the USSR. As Truman explained to the American people, "Our men are fighting . . . because they know, as we do, that the aggression in Korea is part of the attempt of the Russian communist dictatorship to take over the world step by step."¹⁹ Using similar terms, Johnson argued the US must assure the defense of South Vietnam lest a series of communist conquests make "the vast Pacific . . . a Red Sea."²⁰

In this sense, America, as in its past wars, initially established political goals that transcended the measure of military power that would be required to achieve them. Although this force would not be applied directly to the primary adversary because of the nuclear threat, the political payoff from blunting the Asian spearhead of a Moscow-based international communist conspiracy was expected to exceed considerably the limited military means required to aid Korea and Vietnam.²¹

That initial expectations in both conflicts have to be altered once combat had begun is not uncommon in the history of warfare. As noted, Clausewitz warned that political aims in a war may change, perhaps entirely, based on events and their consequences.²² Such an experience, however, was extraordinary for the US. In all of its past limited wars, save one, the political aim was the sole determinant of the policies established to conduct and end the war. Altering political objectives in response to unfavorable developments in a war simply had not been confronted. The great asymmetry between political goals and military means in these wars, and the slight combat costs incurred in

comparison to the objectives achieved, had insulated America from this quandary. A rule articulated by Clausewitz--that the value of the political object will determine the magnitude and duration of the sacrifices made--had come into play.²³

Ironically, both Korea and Vietnam conformed to the most pressing limitation of that era--preventing nuclear escalation. Beyond this criterion, however, dissatisfaction with the course of both wars began to gradually erode the will of the people to carry on the fight:

- In each war, the expenditure of effort--measured for the US in the destruction of its forces--began to exceed the perceived value of the original political objective. With both wars dragging on and the probability of victory growing increasingly remote, the enemy adopted methods of attrition warfare to wear down the US. Following Clausewitz's dictum, North Korea and North Vietnam adopted defensive strategies intended to exploit the fatigue of the stronger opponent to bring about a peace. Unaccustomed to confronting such circumstances in limited war, the US greatly altered its political objectives in reacting to the course of both wars. In Korea, the political goal of uniting the peninsula through military force was abandoned. In Vietnam, a flimsy peace was negotiated that avoided defeat, permitted the US a graceful escape, and doomed the south to conquest once American forces had withdrawn.

Studies of the growing unpopularity of both wars have tended to focus on the excessive costs to America's armed forces and the lack of progress toward political goals as the motivating forces in compelling America to alter its political objectives.²⁴ In this sense, the rule of proportionality affected American strategy by forcing a revision downwards of the political goals given the inordinate costs incurred in attempting to reach them, and the foreboding prospects of even greater costs should the goals remain unaltered. While the course of events in each war greatly influenced their political resolution, developments beyond the Vietnam battlefield introduced a new variable that would undermine even more the validity of limited war's political goals:

- What had rendered the war in Korea critical for the US was not the expansionism of North Korea but the containment of the global force of international communism allegedly centered in Moscow and Beijing. Acceptance of a draw in Korea, although not the preferred political outcome, was regarded as at least consistent with this larger goal. Communist expansion had been stopped. The Vietnam War, however, broke the agreement on this policy. The Sino-Soviet split, US-Soviet detente, US-Chinese rapprochement, and the belief that both communist giants either were or could be enticed to become status quo powers eliminated the significance of Vietnam as a danger to world security.²⁵ Consequently, a key pillar of the Cold War consensus that limited wars against communist proxy states were an appropriate instrument of policy in the larger struggle with international communism had been seriously weakened. Future events would overtake it completely.

Limited War in the Post-Cold War World

The traditional American view of limited war was fundamentally transformed by the experiences of Korea and Vietnam. Historically conditioned to believe that limited outlays of military power could reap far-reaching political rewards, America was forced by these latter conflicts to recognize the inconsistency of this approach with the equivocalities of purpose and results that limited war more commonly entails. Faced with stalemate and even failure as the alternatives to its past successful initiatives, America came to regard limited war as a less satisfying, and therefore less desirable, form of warfare.

An equally grievous blow to limited war as a preferred policy option was the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War. As noted, after America's relatively brief flirtation with total war in the first half of this century, limited war returned in vogue as an intermediate policy between total war and total peace with the USSR. The demise of the Soviet Union removed the justification for seeking limited victories against local expansion of the communist periphery as an

acceptable method of combatting the spread of a hostile political ideology. This rationale, as noted, began to fray during the Vietnam War. Its irrelevance in the 1990s has resulted in an absence of principles for the US to use in devising and applying a strategy of limited war that can be an acceptable and productive instrument for American political purposes.

Many will hasten to point out that the Persian Gulf episode demonstrates the continuing usefulness of limited war to pursue US political aims. The war against Iraq, however, was an aberration. Political subjugation through outright international aggression and territorial conquest have not typified combat in the post-cold war world. Instead, conflicts involving civil war, ethnic hostilities, political fragmentation, and border skirmishes have dominated world affairs and exemplify future trends. Such conflicts cannot be easily or quickly solved by limited doses of US military power. Washington's embrace of United Nations peace operations as a method to handle these conflicts represents a recognition of the declining opportunities and necessity for America to wield its limited war stick.

Desert Storm did suggest that on an ad hoc basis America could resort to limited war to serve its political interests. On those occasions, US vital interests could be cited as a justification for a limited use of military power to achieve limited political goals. The episodic character of this rationale stands in clear contrast with past American perceptions of the advantages of limited war, however, and the difference helps explain the greatly diminished utility of this form of warfare for political purposes.

- America initially held a favorable view of limited war because of the ambitious objectives it could accomplish with minimal levels of force and cost. In the post-World War II era, limited war was trumpeted as an effective tool in contesting communist advances without the need for nuclear weapons. In both cases, the political context within which limited war was conducted provided a powerful and comprehensive justification for its use as an instrument of policy. Despite Desert Storm, it is the loss of this policy context that has greatly weakened the appeal of limited war when America seeks means to obtain its changing political objectives.

- Moreover, the frustrations and equivocalities of limited war have further decayed its attractiveness as an option. This has left America in a paradoxical situation. It possesses the capability to apply limited military power to a greater extent than at any time in its history; yet, it is constrained from doing so because of the lack of an enduring, comprehensive, and viable political context to justify its use.

Conclusions

The combination of domestic and international characteristics of the post-cold war world have decreased substantially the preferability of limited war as an instrument of US national policy. As a result, the limited war option will be rarely considered in the future as a militarily attractive way for the US to achieve its political ends. Until a military or civilian theorist can offer a new rationale to validate the purposes and means of limited war and renew its contribution to the pursuit of political goals, this form of warfare will not often be used as an instrument of US policy.

- ¹ Robert Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 4.
- ² Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed., Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 606.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 611-616.
- ⁵ A classic work on the American Revolution, and one that analyzes the reasons for the British failure is, Piers Mackesy, *The War for America 1775-1783* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964).
- ⁶ Inclusion of the Indian Wars in a category of US wars against foreign opponents is technically incorrect. Although by most measures of cultural homogeneousness the Indians were indeed foreign to American society, they were not geographically located in a foreign country. Nevertheless, their inclusion here is done for the sake of simplicity and because the wars against them were limited by the standards of definition used in this study.
- ⁷ Excellent works on America's 19th century wars are available. For the Mexican War, see, John S.D. Eisenhower, *So Far From God: The US War with Mexico 1846-1848* (New York: Random House, 1989). For the Indian Wars, see, Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1890* (New York: Macmillian Publishing Co., 1973). For the Spanish-American War, see, G.J.A. O'Toole, *The Spanish War: An American Epic 1898* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984).
- ⁸ For a thorough treatment of America's war aims against Canada and the military operations that were conducted in pursuit of those aims, see, Pierre Berton, *The Invasion of Canada, 1812-1813* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1980). For a more general study of the war, with emphasis on its unpopularity, see, Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).
- ⁹ See, for example, Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (New York: Macmillian Publishing Co., 1973), pp. 59-191.
- ¹⁰ There are numerous measures available to assess the amount of "means" used in a war. Two obvious measures: men under arms and casualties show that America's Civil War--the 19th century total war aberration--dwarfed America's other 19th century wars against these and other standards used to demonstrate extent of effort. For men under arms, see, for example, Marvin A. Kreidberg and Merton G. Henry, *History of Military Mobilization in the United States Army, 1775-1945*, No. 20-212 (Washington D.C.: Dept. of the Army, 1955).
- ¹¹ Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 80.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 601.

- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 613-616.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 579-581.
- ¹⁷ B.H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (New York: Meridian, 1991). Osgood, *Limited War*. Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1959).
- ¹⁸ William W. Kaufmann, "The Requirements of Deterrence," in William W. Kaufmann, ed., *Military Policy and National Security* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956). Osgood, *Limited War*. Henry A. Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).
- ¹⁹ *Department of State Bulletin*, vol. 24 (January 22, 1951), p. 123.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Neil Sheehan *et al.*, *The Pentagon Papers* (New York: Bantam Books), p. 463.
- ²¹ An excellent work that analyzes the decision-making processes by which the US became involved in Korea is, Glenn D. Paige, *The Korean Decision* (New York: Free Press, 1968).
- ²² Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 87.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- ²⁴ A good study on the relationship of public opinion to the conduct of the Korean and Vietnam Wars can be found in, John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985), pp. 23-65.
- ²⁵ Space constraints limit a more extensive discussion of the interaction between these complex relationships. For a fuller treatment of the issue, see, Norman A. Graebner, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: A Pragmatic View," in Don C. Piper and Ronald J. Terchek, eds., *Foreign Policy and Public Policy* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1983), pp. 11-34.