

Characteristics of War

“Everything in war is very simple, but the simplest thing is difficult.”¹ Clausewitz made this statement within the context of his discussion of friction in war. However, in a larger context, it applies to war in general and highlights the difficulty of understanding war. The very act of defining war is fraught with such complexities as to defy consensus.² If war is viewed as the violent interaction of opposing wills, the complexity of the subject is highlighted even further since the full range of human emotional and intellectual diversity comes into play to give war its own unique logic.³

The influence of this emotional and intellectual diversity can be seen in the names used to identify particular wars.⁴ Wars have been named based on the nature of the war (American Revolutionary War), on the date (War of 1812), on the adversaries (Spanish-American War), on the scope (World War II), and on the location (Korean War). Moreover, a war can have different names depending upon one’s sympathies.⁵ This variety of names demonstrates the difficulty we have in dealing with the subject as well as the multitude of perceptions, attitudes, and depths of understanding of those who study it.

War can be viewed from a strategic, operational, or tactical perspective. It can also be viewed from a philosophical, psychological, political, social, cultural, ethical, technological, or interpersonal perspective. Given so many different perspectives, military analysts have often felt compelled to analyze war in terms of a *spectrum* or *continuum*.

For their aim—and the aim is a recent one, since strategic theory in its pure form was unknown before the eighteenth century—is to reduce the chaotic phenomena of warfare to a system of essentials sufficiently few for an ordered mind to bend to its purpose.⁶

However, such analytical methods can lead to oversimplification and can be misleading. The warrior must understand that war can be characterized in many different ways and strive to understand all of them.

Level of Objective Intent

“War is not an end in itself; it is a means to an end.”⁷ But, the reasons men and nations fight are not necessarily the same as what they fight for. The proximate causes of war should not be confused with its ends (objective intent). Sometimes, wars have begun unintentionally as in the case of the War of Jenkins’s Ear (1739) in which a chronic state of friction between England and Spain developed into war “against the wishes of the responsible statesmen of both countries.”⁸ However, in all cases, wars are fought to achieve one or more political objectives. These objectives, which can change during the course of a war,⁹ may range from totally annihilating or subjugating the enemy, to adjusting borders, to inflicting punishment.

The concept of unlimited versus limited war is partially based on a decision on the part of the belligerents to fight for limited political objectives.¹⁰ In some cases, one of the belligerents may fight for limited objectives while the other fights for unlimited objectives.¹¹ Three periods of modern Western history are generally identified as periods of limited warfare: the years between the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and the French Revolution (1792), between the Congress of Vienna (1815) and World War I (1914), and since World War II. Although there were exceptions (e.g., the American Civil War), for the most part objectives remained limited during these periods.¹²

The political objective of war may be broad and ambiguous (contain communism) or it may be very specific (expel the Iraqis from Kuwait). In contemporary American experience, there are three criteria for a “good” political objective, one that the American public will support. The first criterion is that the objective must be easily understood by everyone (Remember the *Maine*). The second is that the objective can be turned into a crusade that appeals to our moral sense (Make the World Safe for Democracy). The third is that the objective must represent a self-interest perceived to be worth the cost of war (Manifest Destiny). Unless an objective is considered vital, Americans are reluctant to commit lives and resources on a large scale or for a long term to attain it.¹³

Level of Effort

The level of effort (means) of war is closely related to the objective intent (ends). The means are also dictated by the degree of societal development and the level of technological progress.¹⁴ Until the French Revolution, universal conscription was generally unknown and even then was not practical because of the limited ability to communicate with and transport extremely large numbers of men.¹⁵ The advent of the telegraph and the railroad ushered in a new era of mobilization. “They first permitted entire countries—and, later continents—to be knit together and mobilized for war-fighting purposes.”¹⁶

The existence of the ability to mobilize entire societies does not mean that the ability will be exercised. “To discover how much of our resources must be mobilized for war, we must first examine our own political aim and that of the enemy.”¹⁷ In other words, we must relate ends to means. If the enemy’s objective is conquest and our objective is unconditional surrender, the passions aroused will likely result in both sides employing a maximum effort involving national mobilization. If the political objectives of either opponent are limited and do not incite popular passions, the level of effort expended by that side, at least, is also likely to be limited. At the same time, opponents pursuing limited objectives are more likely to respond to compromise, the possibility of which will tend to keep the level of effort limited.

Historically, there has been no greater stimulus to unlimited war than the injection of highly charged ideological and emotional issues into hostilities, for these kinds of issues incite and sanction an exercise of force to the utmost physical limits for ends which cannot readily be compromised.¹⁸

Level of Intensity

“As every combat veteran knows, war is primarily sheer boredom punctuated by moments of stark terror.”¹⁹ The intensity of war is never constant and certainly depends on your perspective. From an individual perspective, when you are being shot at, the intensity is very high. From a wider viewpoint, the level of intensity largely

depends upon the means available and the objective intent. If either of these are limited, the overall level of violence will likely be limited. While wars that have been generally viewed as limited have included acts of extreme violence, these acts were limited in number, time, and location.

The concept of varying intensities of war is the basis for many of the spectrums of war mentioned at the beginning of this essay. The most common spectrum identifies three levels of intensity: high, mid, and low. High intensity is generally characterized by continuous engagement and exchange of lethal blows between nuclear or conventional forces. Low intensity is generally characterized by the use of subversion, terrorism, and guerrilla tactics often found in insurgent warfare. However, what may be low intensity for one belligerent may be an all out struggle for survival for the other.

Nature of Alliance or Coalition Relationships

Gen Maurice Sarrail remarked to French Premier Georges Clemenceau in 1918, “Since I have seen Alliances at work, I have lost something of my admiration for Napoleon.”²⁰ While perhaps not the ideal form of war, alliance or coalition warfare is almost as old as war itself. Indeed, Thucydides’ *History of the Peloponnesian War* describes the crucial role Athenian and Spartan alliances played in that war.²¹ Although alliances have not always found political favor in the United States,²² the secretary of defense’s 1991 *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* states, “Strong alliances are fundamental to U.S. national defense strategy.”²³ Tangible evidence of the importance of coalitions to US defense can be seen in the fact that the United States is currently a party to seven formal alliances (fig. 1) as well as a number of defense agreements and less formal arrangements with other countries.

Coalition warfare (also known as collective security, an imprecise term)²⁴ has been used to describe at least four different kinds of international relationships:

<p>North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Alliance</p> <p>Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) Alliance (US obligations to New Zealand are suspended as a result of New Zealand's decision to ban US nuclear-powered and nuclear-capable ships from its ports.)</p> <p>Treaty of Mutual Cooperation and Security between the United States and Japan</p> <p>Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and Korea</p> <p>Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of the Philippines</p> <p>Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (This treaty remains in effect on a bilateral basis with Thailand.)</p> <p>Inter-American Treaty of Reciprocal Assistance (also known as the Rio Treaty)</p>

Source: Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, January 1991), 8.

Figure 1. United States Alliances

- An ad hoc alliance to meet a particular crisis or to wage a particular war.
- A permanent guarantee to a particular state or territory in a strategic position, often as a buffer between two powerful states.
- A permanent regional bloc, coalition, confederation, or federation coordinating the foreign policy of several states.
- A general system of collective security.²⁵

Many believe events between the First and Second World Wars, as well as the functioning of the coalitions in the Second World War, demonstrate that “*only* peacetime coalitions provide the necessary apparatus either to deter war or to pursue it successfully [emphasis in original].”²⁶ Nevertheless, perhaps the two most successful coalitions

in history are the Second World War Allies and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). However, even these coalitions were not without their challenges.

Political rhetoric aside, alliances are not the same as friendships since they are entered into for reasons of self-interest that may change over time.²⁷ These self-interests present the coalition with a number of vulnerabilities, often dictate command relationships, and may influence employment strategies. The Second World War, the NATO experience, and, more recently, Operation Desert Storm all show that these challenges can be met successfully. Following World War II, General Eisenhower identified two keys to alliance success: readiness at the highest levels of government to adjust all nationalistic differences that affect the strategic employment of combined resources and designation of a single commander who is supported to the limit.²⁸

Weaponry Employed

In many ways, the history of war has also been the history of technology. In no area has this been more true than in the development of weapons. From the age of muscle (simple tools), to the age of gunpowder (machines), to the age of technological innovation (systems/automation), weapons have increased in lethality and dispersion.²⁹

However, the invention of a longer range or more powerful weapon in and of itself is only the first step in realizing the potential of that weapon. It must also be adopted for use by a military establishment and must be assimilated into tactics, doctrine, and organization.³⁰

In the past, the effects of the vast majority of weapons were limited mainly to the tactical level of war.³¹ The advent of the airplane and nuclear weapons changed all that. Weapons for the first time became determinants of strategy instead of merely the implements of strategists. This reversal occurred partly because strategic thinking had not reached a comparable level of development and sophistication.³² Indeed, the strategic debate concerning the use and nonuse of nuclear weapons has been wide-ranging and constant.

To some, nuclear weapons provided the instruments they needed to fulfill the glowing prophecies of the airpower pioneers. To others, such devices were much more than just new and very potent weapons. They believed that nuclear weapons had fundamentally changed the nature of war because their destructiveness put whole populations at risk. Chief among these theoreticians was Bernard Brodie, who postulated that in the age of nuclear weapons the purpose of armed forces is not to win wars but rather to prevent them.³³

In the annals of war, nuclear warfare is unique in that no instance of it has occurred when more than one opponent had nuclear weapons. As a result, while numerous theories exist, no one knows how even a “limited” nuclear war would turn out. At the same time, the exponential increase in destructive potential has made it clear that nuclear wars would be fundamentally different from the “conventional” world war models and would require different equipment, training, and employment techniques.³⁴

Forms and Characteristics

The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish . . . the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.³⁵

Understanding war requires an understanding of the nature and interrelationships of the characteristics of war. The violent interaction of opposing wills can take many forms, and these forms can change over time. They have certainly changed with the social, political, and technological progress of man. War is too complex a phenomenon to permit the unequivocal and mutually exclusive labeling of its many characteristics and forms.

Indeed, although the weapons employed are often used to label forms or types of wars, chemical and biological weapons, for instance, can be employed in any kind of war. Also, the classic Maoist mass-oriented insurgency entails a progression of phases from latent or incipient leadership and infrastructure building, to guerrilla warfare, to a conventional war of movement.³⁶ Finally, it is not

unlikely that a conventional war between nuclear-equipped belligerents may, at some point, involve the use of nuclear weapons. Perhaps the most sage advice concerning the study of war came from Marshal Ferdinand Foch: “The military mind always imagines that the next war will be on the same lines as the last. That has never been the case and never will be.”³⁷

Notes

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 119.

2. There are as many definitions of war as there are authors writing on the subject. The difficulty of obtaining a consensus definition is illustrated by the fact that as of the 23 March 1994 edition of Joint Pub 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, war was not defined by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Instead, the JCS identified 16 types of war and 17 types of warfare as follows:

<i>War</i>	<i>Warfare</i>
Accidental	Acoustic
All out	Antiair
Catalytic	Antisubmarine
Central	Biological
Cold	Chemical
Controlled	Counter-guerrilla
General	Economic
Limited denied	Electronic
Limited	Guerrilla
Local	Integrated
Peripheral	Land mine
Preemptive	Mine
Preventive	Nuclear
Spasm	Partisan
Unlimited	Political
Unpremeditated	Psychological
	Unconventional

Only four of these types of war (cold, general, limited, and preventive) are defined and recommended for joint use. Except for partisan, all of the types of warfare are defined and recommended for joint use. While an official definition of war had not been adopted, the 1 January 1995 Joint Pub 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, I-2, did contain the following definition of war:

When other instruments of national power (diplomatic, economic, and informational) are unable or inappropriate to achieve national

objectives or protect national interests, the US national leadership may decide to conduct large-scale, sustained combat operations to achieve national objectives or protect national interests, placing the United States in a wartime state. In such cases, the goal is to win as quickly and with as few casualties as possible, achieving national objectives and concluding hostilities on terms favorable to the United States and its multinational partners.

3. See Edward N. Luttwak's *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987). On page xii, Luttwak postulates that

the logic of strategy seemed to unfold in two dimensions: the "horizontal" contentions of adversaries who seek to oppose, deflect, or reverse each other's actions, in peace and war—and this is what makes strategy paradoxical; and the "vertical" interplay of the different levels of conflict, technical, tactical, operational, and higher—among which there is no natural harmony.

4. One of the most complete sources for information about the various wars throughout history is R. Ernest and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History from 3500 B.C. to the Present*, 2d ed. rev. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1986).

5. For example, the American Civil War has been called by at least 75 names, including the War for Southern Rights. Burke Davis, *The Civil War: Strange and Fascinating Facts* (New York: Fairfax Press, 1982), 79–81.

6. John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 2.

7. Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 9.

8. J. O. Lindsey, ed., *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 7, *The Old Regime 1713–1763* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 206. For a penetrating insight into the causes of war, see Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 3d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1988). Also see Bernard Brodie, *War & Politics* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973); Quincy Wright, *A Study of War*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965); and Michael E. Howard, *The Causes of Wars and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983).

9. The most obvious example is the Korean War. The initial United Nations (UN) political objective was to repel the invaders and return control of the Republic of Korea to the South Koreans. With the success of the Inchon landings and the breakout from the Pusan perimeter, the UN political objective changed to unification of the country. After the Chinese intervened and pushed United Nations forces south of Seoul, the UN political goal changed back to the original objective.

For an in-depth treatment of the Korean War, see T. R. Fehrenbach's *This Kind of War: A Study in Unpreparedness* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1963).

10. War may be limited in a number of different ways. It may be limited in location, duration, weaponry used, intensity of fighting, and in the impact on the society of the combatants. See J. F. C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War 1789–1961* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1961), and Clausewitz, bk. 8, “War Plans.”

11. The most obvious example is the Vietnam War. The United States' political objective was to ensure the South Vietnamese political system was not overthrown by force. The North Vietnamese political objective was the unification of Vietnam under its rule, by force if necessary. As a result, the North Vietnamese fought using the complete resources of their nation while the United States did not. See Col Dennis M. Drew and Dr. Donald M. Snow, *The Eagle's Talons: The American Experience at War* (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, December 1988), 278–85. There are a number of good books on the Vietnam War. One of the best is George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 2d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).

12. Osgood, 62 and 123. Also see Arthur E. Brown Jr., “The Strategy of Limited War” in *Military Strategy: Theory and Application*, ed. Arthur F. Lykke Jr., (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, 1989).

13. See Drew and Snow for a readable and insightful discussion of political objectives in the American war experience. The subject of vital interests is also explored in chap. 8, “Vital Interests: What Are They and Who Says So?,” in Brodie.

14. See Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991). Also see Paul Seabury and Angelo Codevilla, *War: Ends and Means* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1989), and Clausewitz, bk. 8, chap. 3B, “Scale of the Military Objective and of the Effort To Be Made.”

15. While the Conscription Act of 1798 stated, “Every Frenchman is a soldier and owes himself to the defense of the Fatherland,” no more than half of the eligible men ever fought. See Theodore Ropp, *War in the Modern World*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1962), 115–17.

16. van Creveld, *Transformation of War*, 101.

17. Clausewitz, 585–86.

18. Osgood, 67.

19. Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, April 1981), 99.

20. Keith Neilson and Roy A. Prete, eds., *Coalition Warfare: An Uneasy Accord* (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1983), vii. This insightful book provides a useful overview of coalition warfare and examines in detail five different coalitions. Additional insights can be found in chap. 8, “The Perils and

Pleasures of Coalition,” in Colin S. Gray, *War, Peace and Victory: Strategy and Statecraft for the Next Century* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

21. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, Inc., 1972).

22. In his farewell address on 7 September 1796, President George Washington stated, “Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances, with any portion of the foreign world . . . we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.” In his first inaugural address on 4 March 1801, President Thomas Jefferson said, “Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none.” Both quoted in Jay M. Shafritz, *Words on War: Military Quotations from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1990), 13. Indeed, the avoidance of “entangling alliances” was so strong in American political thought that, according to one author,

Until the Second World War, the United States simply avoided formal alliances to the point that its entry into the First World War in 1917 saw Washington proclaiming America’s status as an *associated* power free of the obligations and commitments that presumably tied the *allied* powers to one another [emphasis in original].

Alan Ned Sabrosky, ed., *Alliances in U.S. Foreign Policy: Issues in the Quest for Collective Defense* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1988), 4.

23. Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, January 1991), 8.

24. The Joint Chiefs of Staff have not formally defined either coalition warfare or collective security as of the 23 March 1994 Joint Pub 1-02. Roland N. Stromberg states in *Collective Security and American Foreign Policy: From the League of Nations to NATO* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1963), 230, that “Collective security has never been precisely defined, and it has meant several different things, some of them nearly opposites.” To illustrate this point, the Secretary of Defense’s 1991 *Annual Report to the President and the Congress* discusses NATO and other United States’ defense alliances under the heading of “collective security.” However, in their book *Collective Security* (San Francisco, Calif.: Chandler Publishing Co., 1966), 1, Marina S. and Lawrence S. Finkelstein, eds., state:

Collective security is a term which arouses deep emotions—both for and against—and which lends itself to easy sloganeering. To be more precise about it, however, it should be pointed out that a collective security system is not the same as a system of collective defense. Thus, for example, NATO is not an example of collective security, since it is directed against threats to a specified area from an outside source and is intended as a system of self-defense, not a system to keep the peace anywhere it happens to be threatened.

25. Wright, 773, provides an explanation and examples of each of these relationships. Additional insights into US alliances can be found in Sabrosky and chap. 4, "Alliances and Regional Security: Preserving American Interests Around the World," in John F. Reichart and Steven R. Sturm, eds., *American Defense Policy*, 5th ed. (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

26. Neilson and Prete, viii.

27. Paul Kennedy, "Military Coalitions and Coalition Warfare Over the Past Century," in Neilson and Prete, 3.

28. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Crusade in Europe* (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1948), 451.

29. Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Evolution of Weapons and Warfare* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1980), 288–89. This book examines the effects of weapons on war, particularly on tactics, and distills a number of interesting observations and recommendations. Another comprehensive history of weapons, which also examines the application of science to warfare and its effects on military strategy, is contained in Bernard and Fawn M. Brodie, *From Crossbow to H-Bomb: The Evolution of the Weapons and Tactics of Warfare*, 2d ed. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1973). An in-depth evaluation of the impact of technology on war is provided in Martin van Creveld, *Technology and War: From 2000 B.C. to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1989). Finally, weapons and their use in battle is the focus of John Laffin, *The Face of War: The Evolution of Weapons and Tactics and Their Use in Ten Famous Battles* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, Limited, 1963).

30. Dupuy, *The Evolution of Weapons and Warfare*, 301.

31. van Creveld, *Technology and War*, 312.

32. Dupuy and Dupuy, *Encyclopedia of Military History*, 1201.

33. Bernard Brodie, ed., *The Absolute Weapon: Atomic Power and World Order* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Institute of International Studies, 1946), 76.

34. For an insight into the unique requirements of nuclear warfare, see Paul Bracken, *The Command and Control of Nuclear Forces* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983).

35. Clausewitz, 88.

36. Field Manual (FM) 100-20/AFP 3-20, *Military Operations in Low Intensity Conflict*, 5 December 1990, D-1.

37. Quoted in Robert Debs Heinl Jr., *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations* (Annapolis, Md.: United States Naval Institute, 1966), 350.

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