

## Naval War College Review

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Volume 52  
Number 1 *Winter*

Article 10

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1999

# Decisive Force: The New American Way of War

Russell F. Weigley

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### Recommended Citation

Weigley, Russell F. (1999) "Decisive Force: The New American Way of War," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 52 : No. 1 , Article 10.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol52/iss1/10>

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# BOOK REVIEWS

## “A New Way of War?”

Hoffman, F. G. *Decisive Force: The New American Way of War*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996. 150pp. \$52.95

**B**Y INSISTING THAT ANY U.S. MILITARY ACTION must employ decisive force, American military leaders have come to believe in the past two decades that they have established a new American way of war that precludes repetition of the frustrations of Vietnam. Yet it is the loud and clear message of F. G. Hoffman that any such conclusion is almost certainly wrong. The strategy of decisive force will usually prove inappropriate to the kinds of scenarios requiring military intervention that the United States will actually confront. An American military strategy for the post-Cold War world has yet to be formulated. The nation still has to rethink its strategy anew. Hoffman, who published the book while Historian, Studies and Analysis Division, Marine Corps Development Command, offers a sharp critique of where America is and has been in its strategic thought, and some valuable suggestions about where to go, and especially where not to go.

Hoffman's book skillfully blends history with rigorous strategic and policy analysis. He accepts the conventional view of the old American way of war, that through 1945 U.S. history has conditioned its citizens, especially the military, into believing that the natural object of war is the absolute defeat of the enemy and that the appropriate means whereby a power as rich and mighty as the United States should seek that object is decisive force. After World War II, however, and particularly in Vietnam, political constraints prevented applications of the concept, thwarting both the pursuit of absolute victory and the invocation of decisive force.

Reviewing in detail the Vietnam War, the intervention in Lebanon between 1981 and 1984, the invasion of Panama in 1989, and the Persian Gulf War of 1990–1991, Hoffman argues that the perceived failures of the two former events and the apparent successes of the latter two shaped the current accepted principles of decisive force. To prevent repetition of failures, we have concluded that American military actions must be guided by clearly defined objectives. To repeat recent successes, we must return, even when the defined objectives are limited, to employing force on a scale so overwhelming as to assure its decisiveness.

Hoffman's analysis of his four critical events, however, disputes the lessons commonly drawn from them, thus laying the foundation for his critique of the decisive force concept drawn from the generally accepted lessons. His book is so tightly reasoned that a summary is even less able than usual to do more than scratch the surface of the analysis. With that caveat, nevertheless, it can be stated that as for Vietnam, Hoffman does not accept that a failure to define objectives lay at the root of U.S. problems: the purpose of creating a viable non-communist Vietnamese state was a sufficiently clear military and political objective. Similarly, in the Lebanon fiasco the Ronald Reagan administration had an objective that was clearly enough defined: "A sovereign and peaceful Lebanon, secure within its own borders, without either civil war or foreign forces, was the objective." Conversely, in neither of the perceived successes was the objective so clearly defined as those who laud operations *JUST CAUSE* (Panama) and *DESERT STORM* allege. In Panama, bewilderment about how to complete the mission of creating a democracy was symbolized by blatantly installing a new government under U.S. auspices, with American colors and military personnel conspicuously on the scene—a sure recipe for Panamanian disaffection.

In the last hours of *DESERT STORM* the confusion about how to deal with the Republican Guard and with the stop-lines for the advance undercuts the notion that we had clearly decided what we intended to accomplish.

The real difference between Vietnam and Lebanon on the one hand and Panama and the Persian Gulf on the other, Hoffman contends, is not in clarity or objectives but in the civilian administration's having given military leaders a virtually free hand to conduct the latter two actions as they chose—that is the true reason for the military's satisfaction with *JUST CAUSE* and *DESERT STORM*. Hoffman's implication is that if we look instead to the clarity-of-purpose myth, we are unlikely to draw the appropriate conclusions; further, he finds the military insistence on a free hand unpromising for future problems.

Civil-military relations were outwardly correct during the four events on which he focuses, but Hoffman finds those relations nevertheless fundamentally unsound, because of the wide gap between civil and military perceptions that has existed since World War II. Both sides must share the blame, Hoffman believes, but when the military complained about the conduct of the Vietnam War, it refused to accept opportunities given it to try better options. In Lebanon there was military foot-dragging, ostensibly because of the unclear-objectives bogey but actually because the forcible measures employed were not what the military leadership wanted. Only the autonomy of Panama and the Gulf satisfied the military. The complex post-Cold War world is unlikely to present many scenarios in which such autonomy will be possible.

In all these circumstances Hoffman finds walking the ghost of the nineteenth-century military intellectual Emory Upton. Almost complete autonomy

## 132 Naval War College Review

from civilian control is what Upton insisted the military must always have, and the author believes that Upton's influence has been so lasting that there has been a certain illusory quality to the apparently harmonious civil-military relations of the post-World War II era.

It is indicative of Hoffman's strong historical sense that he links Upton's ideas, which emphasized military administration, with strategy and policy—a connection not often recognized. That same historical sense, combined with strategic insight, warns Hoffman that the supposedly new American way of war is too much like the old way, in its unsubtle vision of the application of force, to be likely to serve much better than the old version did after 1945. We cannot separate military force from civilian policy. We will rarely be able to apply overwhelming force in politically ambiguous scenarios. The invocation of military force almost never comes without risks, including those of prolonged involvement, unanticipated political consequences, and casualties. This cautionary book is indispensable reading for military professionals.

Russell F. Weigley  
Temple University

Khalilzad, Zalmay M., and David A. Ochmanek, eds. *Strategy and Defense Planning for the 21st Century: Strategic Appraisal 1997*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1997. 377pp. \$20

This is the second in what is intended to be an annual series of books published by RAND to provide current insights into broad national security and defense planning issues. It was intentionally produced prior to the final reports of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and the National Defense Panel (NDP), with the hope of informing participants in those efforts.

The volume is a collection of nine essays covering a broad range of defense planning issues, with a primary focus on the development of force planning criteria in the post-Cold War era. The common point of departure for the

collection is that the United States has entered a very challenging period that should call into question existing assumptions about long-term U.S. military sufficiency. At the very least, the declining force structure driven by defense budget reductions is seen to be incompatible with a U.S. national security strategy of forward engagement and global leadership. At worst, the book foresees the possible emergence of new types of threats that will require military capabilities very different from those that are now planned for the coming decades.

Both the QDR and NDP efforts sought to address these challenges, but the fact that their respective final reports came to diametrically opposed conclusions clearly indicates a continuing lack of consensus among senior