

Limited Wars

Thomas Rogers

Within the context of limited wars, the failure of the military leader to comprehend the political objective and the failure of the civilian leader to comprehend what actually can and cannot be achieved by force either has, or has the potential for catastrophic results. There are numerous examples of both in the case studies that follow. I will demonstrate that the civilian leader's failure has preeminent impact—and is the more harmful to the conduct of limited war. To mitigate these negative results, the military leader must require, and the political leader must comprehend what the military is capable of achieving vis-à-vis the political objectives for the war.

Carl von Clausewitz, the foremost political theorist on the dynamics of war, determined over a century ago, that politics must define the ultimate objectives of every war. Political objectives must also be adapted to the war, as the war can radically change—political objectives must stay within the parameters of what the military is capable of achieving. Clausewitz writes:

Politics ... is the womb in which war develops—where its outlines already exist in their hidden rudimentary form, like the characteristics of living creatures in their embryos, therefore, must define the ultimate objectives of war. That, however, does not imply that the political aim is a tyrant. It must adapt itself to its chosen means, a process which can radically change it War in general, and the commander in any specific instance, is entitled to require that the trend and designs of policy shall not be inconsistent with these means. That, of course, is no small demand; but however much it may affect political aims in a given case, it will never do more than modify them. The military leader has the right to require, and the political leader has the obligation

to comprehend what the military is capable of achieving vis-à-vis the political objective for the war.¹

Clausewitz believed that war was merely politics by a different means; and, that the use of these military means may be inappropriate for meeting certain political objectives.

Great Britain attempted to defeat the uprising in the American colonies, initially, as a police action against certain criminals in Boston. As the rebellion grew in intensity, the British Crown eventually reacted to a small conventional force of ‘regulars’ and various regional militias, under General George Washington’s command, with a force of approximately 10,000 British Red Coats and a supporting Royal Navy. As this limited British response to the colonial insurrection continued and expanded, a long war of attrition dragged on. It was a limited war for the British because their goal was to maintain hegemony over the thirteen colonies by maintaining the status quo. The British Crown failed to understand their army was inappropriate for fighting against a combination Fabian/conventional war strategy devised by the Americans. This lack of understanding of the American resolve and strategy, and Britain’s limited objectives and resolve to see the war through to its positive conclusion resulted in Britain’s ultimate defeat. Decisions made by civilian leaders representing the British Crown, failed to comprehend what actually could and could not be achieved by the use of force, resulting in their defeat. A political resolution to the conflict, short of war, might have been far more beneficial to Britain (i.e., working out a Canada-like political agreement with them).²

The solutions to both the United States and its allies efforts in Vietnam, 1960s and early 1970s, and Britain’s efforts in Ireland, during the Anglo-Irish War, 1919-1921, might also have been better served by not going to war. ‘Some of the ways in which force is

¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 149.

² Piers Mackesy, ‘British Strategy in the American War for Independence.’ *The Yale Review*, (published by Blackwell Publishers, June 1963), 539-57.

employed may generate counter-productive political effects.’³ Certainly, the United States could have seen the depth of the Viet Minh’s resolve to attain independence through their long war with France. Also apparent were the Communists/Nationalists ability to fight both a conventional and guerrilla war. The United States’ political leaders could have, with an accurate net assessment of what was necessary to win the war, either limited their involvement to an advisory role, or foregone the effort altogether. A limited involvement was especially important, because the major theatre during the Cold War (and throughout the period of the Vietnam War) was always Europe, and because the ultimate restrictions on fighting the war were so stringent—in order to avoid the entry into the war by third parties (i.e., China or the Soviet Union).⁴

President Johnson’s continued faith in the military to bring a satisfactory conclusion to the conflict—faith based on such incorrect criteria as—body count, illustrates his lack of understanding of what it would take to ‘win’ this war. The political leaderships’ inability to understand that their superior conventional force (a la Korean and Second World War forces) was not appropriate to fight a land war in Asia against such a resourceful and illusive enemy; this failure ultimately resulted in America’s defeat in this limited war.⁵

What do statesmen need to know about the military instrument? Only if statesmen look to certain military moves and actions to produce effects that are foreign to their nature do political situations influence operations for the worse. Efforts to win the war

³ B.A. Lee, Strategy and Policy Lecture: ‘*Retrospect and Prospect*,’ United States Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, 2002.

⁴ Harry G. Summers, Jr., ‘Defense Without Purpose,’ *Society*, November/December, 1983, 4-17.

⁵ George C. Herring, *University of Kentucky*, ‘Cold Blood,’ LBJ’s Conduct of Limited War in Vietnam, *The Harmon Memorial Lectures In Military History* (published by United States Air Force Academy, Colorado, 1990), 1-22.

by non-conventional means proved foreign to the United States Army's nature.⁶

Certainly, the solution to the Anglo-Irish War was to have resolved it before it began. The means by which Great Britain could have accomplished that was through home rule. In fact, this solution was contemplated and held in abeyance until after the First World War. Home rule provided for internal control of domestic politics, and British Parliamentary authority over foreign trade and foreign military and political relations. Because of the failure to implement home rule, as well as the violent response to the Dublin Uprising, the force necessary to defeat the Irish uprising increased over time. Once British force against the rebellion became brutal (with the addition of the Black and Tans), and Republican violent activity increased, the Irish public became progressively more supportive of the insurrection. The British public became progressively more appalled by the violence, and ultimately called for a limited peace. The object became less valuable to them than was the cost for continuing the war. Clearly, this case could have been resolved politically. The British civilian leadership did not understand that the use of military force through limited war could not achieve what peaceful negotiation, at an earlier date, could. The failure of civilian leaders to comprehend what actually could and could not be achieved by force in this limited war cost Great Britain an important geographic region and several million subjects, not to mention the lives lost during the war.⁷

Another question that must be asked: 'Is the political objective understood or accepted by the military leader?' If not, 'strategy drives policy or the military conception of victory supersedes political conception.' If military strategy is not subordinated to political objectives, Clausewitz maintains: 'War cannot be divorced from political life; and whenever this occurs in our thinking about war, the many links that connect the two elements are destroyed and we are left with something pointless and devoid of sense.' 'No other

⁶ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 608.

⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 605 & 607.

possibility exists, then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political.⁸

There were a number of issues under dispute between President Truman and General MacArthur, during the Korean War, that directly relate to these ‘Clausewitzian’ precepts. As Theater Commander, during part of the Korean War, MacArthur, an unparalleled military strategist, disagreed with Truman’s political objectives for victory; maintaining South Korean independence by pushing back North Korean military forces above the 38th parallel, and the policy of ‘collective security’ within the United Nations were insufficient for victory. MacArthur demanded alternate courses of action.

Although Theater Commanders and Presidents have differed in the past, MacArthur went ‘public’ on what he determined Truman’s strategy for defeat, and his strategy for victory were. MacArthur’s strategy called for bombing Manchurian airfields, blockading the coast of China, and employing Chinese Nationalist troops in both Korea and South China. He advocated this alternate military strategy, ostensibly because it would achieve United Nation’s ‘limited objectives’ more quickly, with fewer casualties, and with a better chance of avoiding a Third World War with China and/or the Soviet Union.⁹

The Truman Administration believed these actions would have the opposite effect—that they would draw China directly into the conflict and possibly start a Third World War. It was MacArthur’s view that China would enter the war in any event. MacArthur was also willing to ‘go it alone,’ or without United Nation’s concurrence if necessary. The Truman Administration’s policy in Korea and throughout the world was not to destroy Communism, at least in the

⁸ Professor Hoyt, Strategy and Policy Lecture: ‘Strategies and Policies of Terrorism’, The Irish Question: 1916-1923, United States Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island. February 20, 2004.

⁹ Testimony of General Douglas MacArthur and of Secretary of Defense George Marshall in Allen Gottman, ed., ‘Korea: Cold War and Limited War,’ (published by D.C. Heath and Company, 1972), 26-52.

short term, but to contain it—to halt its expansion. With the onset of the Korean War, the Truman Doctrine, characterized by limited political objectives, was put to a long and bitter test. MacArthur publicly disagreed with these aims, and was relieved of his command as a result. In this instance, the failure of the military to comprehend the political objective may have prolonged the war, as American and other United Nations forces went beyond the 38th parallel which may have resulted in the Chinese entry into the war. However, Truman's policies did not result in a Third World War, and China may have entered the war regardless of his in-theater decisions. His efforts may have prolonged the settlement of this limited war, but they were not allowed to alter its ultimate outcome—because MacArthur was removed, and military strategy was not allowed to supersede the civilian conception of victory.¹⁰

In matching strategy and policy it is important to ask two very important questions before the onset of military operations; first: Is the policy one that can best be accomplished by military means? The second: Is the military's capability understood by the civilian leadership? In the case of Vietnam, the Johnson Administration did not understand the military capability vis-à-vis what it would take to win the war? In the Anglo-Irish War, the British Government did not understand that the best solution to the Irish question was through peaceful means. The British faced a similar question with regard to the American War for Independence. These were important examples of the failure of civilian leaders to comprehend what actually can and cannot be achieved by force; and, they proved to be fatal to the conduct of these limited wars. Believing that they would ultimately succeed, if more troops were mobilized, if additional ordnance was delivered to their targets, etc., they pressed on even though they did not understand that military force in these limited wars would not bring about victory.

During the great debate surrounding the invasion of Iraq in 2002, a set of assumptions were made that proved to be supremely flawed,

¹⁰ Robert Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 173-178.

and resulted in a policy-strategy mismatch. Months of planning focused on building a coalition for the commencement of the invasion, and focused almost exclusively on military operations necessary for the invasion and subsequent beheading of the Iraq Government. Little if any of the planning developed a vision of post-war Iraq—what roles the United Nations, non-government agencies (NGOs), and elements of the United States, State Department would have. The vast majority of planning time, in fact, focused on military operations and how soon those operations would be completed. By the time President Bush announced military operations were ending—as if that would be the final act in this drama, events within Iraq made it evident that the real challenges of the war were just beginning. The hard reality was that once military operations were complete (the invasion forces were in place), the business of ‘nation-building’ would begin.¹¹

In the prophetic words of the, then, Secretary of Defense, Richard Cheney, February 1992, specific issues would have to be addressed before any political goals could be met:

If we'd gone to Baghdad [during the First Gulf War], and got rid of Saddam Hussein—assuming we could have found him—we'd have had to put a lot of forces in and run him to ground some place. He would not have been easy to capture. Then you've got to put a new government in his place and then you're faced with the question of what kind of government are you going to establish in Iraq? Is it going to be a Kurdish government or a Shia government or a Sunni government? How many forces are you going to have to leave there to keep it propped up, how many casualties are you going to take through the course of this operation?¹²

¹¹ Professor Karl Friedrich Walling, Strategy and Policy Lecture: ‘A Thucydidean Perspective, Section II. Iraq and the Sicilian Expedition Compared,’ United States Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, Winter 2004, 8.

¹² Charles Pope, ‘Cheney changed his view on Iraq,’ (published by the Seattle Post – Intelligencer Washington Correspondent, 10:00 p.m., Tuesday, 28 September 2004).

Chaney understood the great challenge associated with any invasion of Iraq in 1992. For whatever reason, he put those concerns aside and supported the full blown military invasion despite his earlier apprehensions. In doing so he implicated himself in a serious strategy-policy mismatch--strategy equaling the overthrow of Saddam regime using conventional military means; and, policy equaling withdrawal of all forces once a democratic government was established that represented all members of the Iraq society—one that could defend itself and its people from continuous attack and perhaps full blown civil war. The military overthrow was feasible; but, the democratization (and avoidance of civil war) was not, at least without a huge cost in lives and resources. The miss-match, then, caused a drastic rethinking of the war strategy once the military invasion came to an end and the need for nation building became apparent—belatedly, as we realized no real planning had occurred regarding war termination. If we had completed our real homework, we perhaps would have made the decision not to invade Iraq in the first place.

Because in every case study, the ultimate decision was a political one, I must say that the failure of civilian leaders to comprehend what actually can and cannot be achieved by force is more harmful in the conduct of limited war. That is, even in the instance where MacArthur either did not understand (or disagreed) with the established political objectives, the civilian leadership's view won the day. In the Iraq War previous decisions were over ridden, a series of faulty assumptions won the day, and led the United States and its coalition of allies down 'primrose lane' and a series of ill-advised adjustments that cost us dearly in both lives and treasure. Having made my decision that civilian leadership is paramount to success in a limited war I cannot help but feel the ultimate harm is when both the civilian leadership fails to understand the limitations of military power, and the military's failure to understand their nation's political goals of the war. For me, both the Vietnam and Iraq Wars fit this dual failure—although Iraq has yet to fully play out its catastrophic destiny.

About the Author

Thomas Rogers has graduate degrees in Education (Boston University) and National Security and Strategic Studies (US Naval War College). His research interests are in International Politics (past and present), 18th and 19th Century politics.