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Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace
rev. and enlarged ed. by Edward N. Luttwak

/ Book Review

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In the 1980s scholars in the fields of history and political science rediscovered the work of Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian philosopher of war. This renewed interest sparked a brief revival of the study of war and strategy (the latter of which encompasses efforts to exploit war’s dialectic to achieve military and political victory). After relying for decades on operations research to minimize the likelihood of nuclear war by bolstering deterrence—an approach that largely eliminated the need for traditional strategy—scholars began to resurrect, apply, and sometimes misapply Clausewitz’s writings. Originally published in 1987, Edward Luttwak’s *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* was probably the best work of the Clausewitzian revival because it offered a clear summary of the great philosopher’s insights into war’s dialectic. In the process, Luttwak articulated a concise theory of war. Despite what Les Aspin had to say about the original edition of *Strategy* (“Luttwak presents a new universal theory of strategy”), there is little new in either the original or the revised version. Nevertheless, the book constitutes an outstanding achievement: Luttwak has written what amounts to a “Cliff Notes” for one of the most difficult and misunderstood volumes of all time, Clausewitz’s *On War*.

Luttwak’s careful analysis is important because observers and practitioners alike often do not think about war as a dialectic. They fail to base their plans and policies on the fact that outcomes in war cannot be determined unilaterally and are instead produced by the interaction of both (or all) parties to a conflict. They also fail to realize that in every conflict there is a culminating point of victory, to borrow a phrase from the Prussian philosopher, in which successful policies begin to lay the groundwork for failure or even disaster. For example, a victorious army that marches too far into the territory of a “defeated” enemy might soon find itself at the end of a precarious supply line, facing opponents now willing to fight tenaciously to defend their homeland. War’s dialectic also defeats linear strategies that produce “peacetime” efficiencies. It might seem cost-effective, for instance, to concentrate the U.S. fleet in only three major ports, but in wartime this efficiency would prove to be false because the enemy would need to attack only three bases to cripple the U.S. fleet. Similarly, although a direct route to one’s destination is best in peacetime, an indirect approach—across mountainous or swampy terrain rather than along a defended highway—might be preferable in wartime.
Luttwak describes how this dialectic shapes the influence of technology on war and on tactical, operational, and theater strategy, and he explains how these levels interact to govern the outcome of conflict. Applying Luttwak’s logic of war and peace can yield results that many will find disturbing. He stresses the need to separate the good intentions of actors from the results of their initiatives. In recent years humanitarian operations, peacekeeping, international intervention in ethnic conflicts, and long-term aid to refugees have been depicted as constructive ways to end needless bloodshed and destruction. Luttwak criticizes peacekeeping as misguided because it “prevents the transformation of war into peace” by eliminating incentives for the antagonists to negotiate a resolution to their dispute. Luttwak also applies this logic to refute warriors’ hopes and assumptions. Airpower enthusiasts will find unsettling his assertion that the bombing of Nazi Germany’s industry helped to stimulate German war production. Destroying homes and existing plants created large numbers of unemployed workers who were willing to accept work in war industries.

Although the logic advanced in Strategy is compelling, it is often so difficult to apply in practice that even Luttwak at times falters in his analysis. Whenever one posits a persistent status quo or projects current trends into the future, one ignores war’s dialectic. For instance, Luttwak seems to suggest that the West’s aversion to casualties will continue indefinitely to shape the conduct of war. But the U.S. response in Afghanistan after September 2001 suggests that Americans are indeed willing to suffer casualties, especially when a threat arises to the U.S. homeland itself. At other times Luttwak’s analysis is inconsistent, a weakness that is largely attributable to profound changes that have occurred since he wrote the original edition of his book. Airpower has come of age since 1987, even though Luttwak highlights the inability of aircraft to locate and destroy mobile Scud missiles during the 1991 Gulf War or to do much damage to well-camouflaged armored vehicles during the air war over Kosovo. Even so, movement on the battlefield in the face of U.S. airpower is suicidal, as evidenced by the fates of the Iraqi attack on Khafji during the 1991 Gulf War and the jihadi in the hills of Afghanistan in 2001. Luttwak goes astray by trying to support an old judgment about the effectiveness of airpower when in fact his main point is more important. Opponents eventually will find a way to counter the effectiveness of U.S. long-range precision-strike weapons.

Sadly there is far more need for Luttwak’s outstanding work today than when it first appeared in 1987. The spread of fundamentalism, terrorism, ethnic conflict, weapons of mass destruction, and long-range ballistic missiles poses multiple challenges for U.S. officials. After a decade of neglect, strategic thinking and Clausewitzian strategists are rare in the Department of Defense. The time has arrived for a return to strategy.

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116