



Donald Stoker. *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and US Strategy from the Korean War to the Present.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 336 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-47959-2.



Reviewed by Joseph A. Ledford (University of California Berkeley)

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

The United States has engaged in numerous limited wars since the end of the Second World War. Scholars and practitioners commonly define these conflicts in contrast to world wars based on the levels of force involved. In *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and US Strategy from the Korean War to the Present*, Donald Stoker takes aim at a legion of policymakers, military officers, and scholars whom he charges with possessing a profound misunderstanding of limited war. Stoker contends their perennial misconceptions of limited war in particular affected how the United States waged war in general. It influenced how US leaders bungled wars in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, costing their country tremendous amounts of blood and treasure. Timely and stimulating, Stoker's book seeks to clarify limited war theory. He suggests the United States can transform its approach to war-making by adopting his definition of limited war. He argues that it will assist US political and military leaders in precisely identifying their political objective, crafting a suitable strategy, and committing sufficient forces to

achieve a decisive victory. US policymakers, he maintains, continually fail to perform these actions properly, suffering setbacks and defeats as a consequence.

Stoker, who taught as Professor of Strategy and Policy at the Naval Postgraduate School, has produced a distinguished body of work, including a praiseworthy biography of Carl von Clausewitz.[1] Stoker draws on the Prussian general and theorist for his understanding of limited war. Clausewitz's insights fill the pages, as do those of British maritime theorist Sir Julian Corbett. Across six sweeping chapters Stoker deftly combines history and theory to present the reader with an alternative way for thinking about limited war based upon Clausewitz, Corbett, and a plethora of historical examples. *Why America Loses Wars* is both a work of intellectual history and an invaluable guide for understanding war. It includes copious footnotes and a robust bibliography. Stoker organizes the text around the why and how of war. He begins with a precise definition of his limited war theory and a

rebuke of the modern version. He examines elements of limited war in subsequent chapters. What, then, are the problems with the modern definition of limited war and how should we actually think about it?

The United States, Stoker claims, has forgotten how to win wars. US leaders pursue political objectives with inadequate means due to confused thinking about limited war. Modern understandings of limited war are based on the level of means used rather than the political objectives sought. It leads policymakers and military officers astray in wartime by shifting their attention away from achieving their political objective with sufficient force. As a remedy, Stoker prescribes Clausewitz's formulation that the political objective defines the nature of war—why a combatant wages war matters more than the level of force they bring to bear on their opponent. Clausewitz also states that war is either waged for the objective of regime change or for lesser reasons such as territorial occupation. In addition to Clausewitz, Stoker relies on Corbett's typology of unlimited and limited war, which delineates between an unlimited political objective (regime change) and a limited political objective (something less than the enemy's total destruction). Stoker argues that the political objective offers the correct foundation for analyzing a war, "because it is from here that all else flows" (p. 5). It provides coherence and underpins the process for fighting a war.

As Stoker shows in chapter 2, modern limited war theory developed into a muddled concept grounded in the level of means. Postwar scholars concentrated on constraints imposed on combatants. The magnitude of the Second World War and the United States' participation in the Korean War weighed heavily on their reasoning. As Cold War strictures governed thinking about war, scholars understandably sought to prevent World War Three. A misunderstanding of fluctuating political objectives during the Korean War, however, resulted in

its branding as "America's first limited war," inaugurating a limited war typology encompassing all conflicts except those resembling the Second World War (p. 36). Stoker critiques the "limited war triumvirate" of Bernard Brodie, Robert Osgood, and Thomas Schelling, who bequeathed an intellectual legacy of defining wars for limited political objectives by their constraints (p. 33). He directs a healthy portion of his displeasure at Schelling, whose ideas of bargaining and signaling influenced bombing campaigns in the Vietnam War. Limitations of purpose, force, geography, and target overly concerned the triumvirate. They focused too heavily on constraints instead of the political objective. Yet all wars experience a variety of constraints whether self-imposed or not, ranging widely from political and material to geographical. US leaders must decide the best manner in which to apply force while contending with these multifarious constraints.

Stoker probes the political objective concept in detail before addressing constraints. Clausewitz referred to the political objective as "the original motive for the war" (p. 45). The objective determines the purpose of war and its direction. It defines the terms for victory and dictates the means required to win. In chapter 3, Stoker builds on Clausewitz's definition, establishing the significance of "the *why* of the war" (p. 80). Here, he demonstrates an ability to concretize abstract concepts, such as Clausewitz's "value of the object" (p. 53). He aptly uses US wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq as examples to demonstrate his point: US leaders must fully understand the objective they seek, particularly its value to the state, and ascertain if they can achieve it. Stoker's analysis suggests the United States would either win or accept defeat if following his theory, forgoing endless wars masquerading as risk management.

Next, Stoker turns to the dynamics of wars for limited political objectives. Chapter 4 covers structural and self-imposed constraints, including the

effects of time, politics, geography, military means, and an opponent's political objective. Stoker identifies the enemy's political objective and its subjective value as the most significant constraint, for it influences how every other constraint affects the war. Notably, his cursory examination of using nuclear weapons in this chapter reveals his view that they simply serve as means for achieving ends despite their apocalyptic results. His straightforward reasoning supports his central argument for war being defined by the political objective and not by the means used regardless of their power. But the use of nuclear weapons also raises a question of how much force should be used to win a limited war. Overwhelming force can achieve a limited objective, and nuclear-armed countries have engaged in limited wars without relying on their arsenals. The practical implication of Stoker's work is thus that US policymakers and military officers should, of course, exercise prudence in dealing with nuclear weapons but they should not regard them as the defining feature of war.

In chapter 5, Stoker concisely reviews limited war strategy. He describes a “good strategy” as one correctly aligning the relationship between ends, ways, and means to achieve a clear objective. It incorporates rational assessments and reassessments of circumstances and constraints (pp. 122-23). Crucially, a winning strategy requires a feasible plan for ending the war and securing a peace, an extremely challenging set of actions for the United States. The final chapter explores it further, wherein Stoker stresses the significance of victory and delves into the complexity of war termination. As wars for limited aims do not pursue regime change and primarily end via negotiation, the timing and parameters of negotiation are critical in a conflict's final phase. He includes simple but difficult questions for leaders to consider when seeking an end: what is the political objective, how much force is required, and who will enforce an accepted settlement? Some readers may find these sections bordering on elementary. These chapters,

however, strongly underpin his limited war theory, reminding readers that a return to the classics can help recalibrate the American way of war.

Stoker indeed supplies a welcome corrective to the established view of limited war. *Why America Loses Wars* will be of great interest to the general reader and those already acquainted with limited war theory and US foreign policy since 1945. The book deserves serious attention from scholars and policymakers alike. Optimistically, it will advance contemporary debates about how the United States wages war and generate new thinking about it within the national security community. Winning wars demands humility and flexibility from US leaders in conjunction with clear communication, careful planning, sufficient force, and risky political calculations—although for the United States, preventing politicians from taking the path of least political resistance while prosecuting a war may prove more difficult than ending wars.

Note

[1]. Donald Stoker, *Clausewitz: His Life and Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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