



WHEN WAR IS NOT WORTH WINNING

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Winning a war requires the capacity to wage a war and an understanding of an end-state that equates to winning. These fundamental concepts, however, are not well defined. This essay draws from recent historical examples, contemporaneous strategy documents, and formal game theory to provide some additional degree of conceptual clarity that will enhance the debate about winning without war. In the past two decades, the U.S. has developed a demonstrated capacity to win with war. Victory in kinetic war fighting is nearly assured and can be accomplished with limited cost. Despite this, in the modern context, war has evolved to the point that war is not worth winning. It is far from the case that there are no wars to be fought, but the political and economic constraints of the international system have transformed the environment in which the U.S. operates militarily. Evidence of this is found in the strategic outlook of the U.S. military as documented in the revised U.S. naval strategy, especially when compared to earlier maritime strategy. To inform this discussion, game theoretic explanations of strategic interactions are helpful. The assumptions underlying recent U.S. naval strategy can be understood by applying the basic construct of a “game of strategic entry”. Applying this construct, one finds that war is not worth winning – a conclusion that has substantive consequences for designing, organizing, and employing naval forces.

A game of strategic entry – also conceptualized as an economic model of market entry, or a political model of challenging an incumbent – has a fairly simple structure. There are two players who move sequentially. The first player decides to attack or not attack. If the first player attacks, the second player chooses to retaliate or capitulate. There are thus three potential outcomes: the status quo (player one decides not to attack), capitulation (player one attacks and player two capitulates), or a war of uncertain outcome is fought (player one attacks and player two retaliates). In deciding what action to take, both players consider the costs of attack and retaliation as well as the chances of their winning the war. Strategies are developed based on expected rational choices of the other player. The theory of the game holds that player one will attack when there is a relatively high probability of winning and the cost of waging war is moderate-to-low. While simplistic, the game reveals the very basics of a strategic interaction and emphasizes the need for accurate information on the likelihood of victory and the costs of war.

The lessons of the past thirty years, however, do not align quite so nicely with the underlying assumptions of game theory. The United States has fought and won kinetic wars. In these wars winning is understood as battlefield victory and either changed behavior of a regime or regime change. The removal of Manuel Noriega in *Just Cause*, the defeat of Iraq’s army in *Desert Storm*, the withdrawal of Serbian forces from Kosovo in *Allied Force*, regime change in Afghanistan in *Enduring Freedom*, the toppling of the Hussein regime in *Iraqi Freedom*, and the Qaddafi regime in *Odyssey Dawn* all affirmatively bolster assessments of America’s ability to win in a kinetic war. Furthermore, the estimates of likely costs in terms of human lives have greatly declined. *Desert Storm* in 1991 was the last time that pundits cautioned that the likelihood of victory was uncertain and that casualties would be extremely high. At best, the estimates of between 4,000 and 30,000 U.S. military casualties were off by a factor of ten in their predictions of this aspect of conflict’s human cost.¹ Within the context of the strategic entry game, the U.S. would be expected to develop strategies that reflect these underlying expectations of a high probability of winning and low costs for fighting. War should be a preferred method of winning.

A predisposition to war, however, is clearly not the announced strategy of the U.S. government. The recently released Navy strategy document, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st*

¹Michael O’Hanlon, “Estimating Casualties in a War to Overthrow Saddam,” *Orbis* Winter 2003, p. 6.

Century Seapower: Forward, Engaged, Ready (henceforth referred to as *CS21R*), describes multiple types of military activities short of war that shape the environment in which the Navy operates and are intended to deter conflict. In this latest incarnation of the maritime strategy, the dominant theme is that modern strategy “raises the prevention of war to a level equal to the conduct of war.”² The focus is pro-active in shaping the strategic environment beyond traditional roles of presence and deterrence. Repeatedly, reference is made to the complexities of the geopolitical and military environment, suggesting that war may be ill-suited to redressing contemporary crises.³ The role of the world’s largest Navy is to shape the environment, deter a range of potential enemies, and only in limited circumstances “respond to crisis” or “deter aggression” using kinetic force. Only in a few instances is reference made to winning wars.⁴ Certainly winning war is only one component of the Navy’s mission set, but its relatively sparse mention in *CS21R* is noteworthy in illuminating a global context in which fighting wars is not the primary emphasis of the maritime strategy. It is also noteworthy that the cost of fielding fighting forces is specifically highlighted as fiscal constraint by the Secretary of the Navy – a constraint that affects decisions in organizing, equipping, and employing the fleet.⁵ Even though the immediate costs of war are relatively low and the chance of winning high, current maritime strategy does not favor war.

These observations are perhaps more salient when contrasted with *The Maritime Strategy* of 1986. That document, reflecting the markedly different global environment of the Cold War, outlined a strategy “to bring about war termination on favorable terms” and emphasized preparation for global conflict.⁶ The spectrum of conflict is outlined as a continuum from peacetime presence, to crisis response, to global conventional war.⁷ Winning a war was understood as achieving a decisive outcome. Conflicts were to be put out as if “brushfire[s]” and naval forces were to “suppress or contain international disturbances.”⁸ The Maritime Strategy, while acknowledging the threats posed by the full spectrum of conflict by state and non-state actors and their connections to the global economy, emphasized winning through war. The then-Secretary of the Navy pressed for sustained budget growth to fund the fleet necessary for this strategy and the costs of fighting, whether in human casualties or in dollars, were not identified as a limiting factor.⁹ U.S. maritime strategy in 1986 is therefore dramatically different from that of today.

This presents a paradox. While the costs of waging war have decreased since 1986 and the likelihood of winning war has increased, today the U.S. employs a strategy that de-emphasizes winning within an environment of significant cost constraints. In part, this apparent contradiction is explained by a changed understanding of what it means to win and of what the long-term costs of war are.

²U.S. Navy, “Maritime Strategy Fact Sheet,” <http://www.navy.mil/maritime>, accessed 10 May 2015.

³US Navy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: Forward, Engaged, Ready (CS21R)*, March 2015, p. 3 “volatility, instability, complexity, and interdependence”, p. 4 “persistent instability and under-governed areas”, “regional instability threatens global economic stability in a hyper-connected world.”

⁴US Navy, *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: Forward, Engaged, Ready (CS21R)*, March 2015, p. 3 “volatility, instability, complexity, and interdependence”, p. 4 “persistent instability and under-governed areas”, “regional instability threatens global economic stability in a hyper-connected world.”

⁵*CS21R*, p. I “Our responsibility to the American people dictates an efficient use of our fiscal resources,” p. 33 “. . . conserve capacity of limited resources in the magazine in favor of more efficient and less costly means, where available. . .”

⁶James D. Watkins, “The Maritime Strategy,” *The Maritime Strategy*, Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, January 1986, p.3, 5.

⁷Watkins, figure 3, p. 8.

⁸P. X. Kelley, “The Amphibious Warfare Strategy,” *The Maritime Strategy*, Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, January 1986, p. 25.

⁹John F. Lehman, Jr., “The 600-Ship Navy,” *The Maritime Strategy*, Annapolis: US Naval Institute Press, January 1986, p. 38-40.

It is hardly surprising that a second look at the successes of kinetic military operations of the last thirty years reveals that while winning-as-regime-change was accomplished, the subsequent peace building and peace sustainment operations have consumed significant resources and fostered global instability. The success of *Odyssey Dawn* in enabling the overthrow of Qaddafi has left in its wake a bifurcated political and chaotic security landscape in what used to be Libya. A substantive debate has also followed operations in Iraq and Afghanistan about what it means to win. Similarly, while initial military victory has been at relatively low human costs, the long-term follow-on commitments have defied predictions and drawn out both the fiscal and human costs over many years. To again apply the game theoretic outlook on war, the calculus of waging war is changed when the military victory is not as decisive as expected and the costs of war are unclear. With so much uncertainty over outcome and ambiguity in costs, the preferred action becomes maintenance of the status quo. *A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower: Forward, Ready, Engaged* reflects this strategic environment in which primacy is not only given to winning without war, but more accurately a world in which winning is not worth war.

The changed strategic environment requires a reexamination of the role of the Navy. Generally, the purpose of a maritime strategy is to “reassess our approach to shifting relationships and global responsibilities” in order to “design, organize, and employ the Sea Services.”¹⁰ Fundamentally, if winning is not worth war, then one has to question the relevance of and need for, in this case, a Navy that has been built over several decades to effect kinetic operations. One could argue that this kinetic force has adapted well to its predominant employment in a range of non-combat roles. Moreover, agile networks, cyberspace operations, electromagnetic maneuver warfare, and integrated non-kinetic fires are considered to be worthy of investment in equipment, infrastructure, personnel, and tactics because the conflicts in which they will be used are considered to be worth winning.¹¹ In the second decade of the 21st century, the Navy has clearly adapted to the new strategic environment.

However, shifting the design principle of the Navy from fighting wars to providing maritime security, humanitarian assistance, and all-domain access, as outlined in *CS21R*, raises the question of whether this future U.S. Navy is capable of being employed in those rare instances when it is called upon to fight wars. One questions whether the Navy’s new mission areas are preparing the battlespace for a fleet at war, shaping the environment to avoid war, neither, or both. While doing both would appear to align with the strategy, this could have unknown costs to the Navy’s ability “to fight and win when required.”¹²

It is clear that today’s strategic environment, even with an emergent China and resurgent Russia, is substantially different from that of the mid-1980s. The acknowledgement of the complexity of what it means to win and a better understanding of the long term costs of waging war have altered calculations of the utility of war. It is encouraging to find that modern naval strategy appears to reflect this new reality. In considering this choice of strategies, however, it bears continued debate about the underlying assumptions of what it means to win with or without war in the modern era and the degree to which the remote possibility of war must be acknowledged in designing, organizing, and employing the Sea Services. Paradoxically, this leads to a reflection similar to that of the computer, Joshua, in the closing scene of a movie from that bygone era of the Cold War, where it observes that “the only winning move is not to play.”¹³

¹⁰CS21R, p. I, iii.

¹¹CS21R, p. 33.

¹²CS21R, p.i.

¹³*War Games*, directed by John Bradham (1983: Beverly Hills, CA: MGM, 2008), DVD.

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