

# 1 ARE WE AT WAR? WHAT DO WE WANT? AND DO WE WANT TO WIN?

There is no such thing as a *little war* for a great Nation.  
Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington (1838)

## **Are We at War?**

On June 29, 1950, President Harry S. Truman held an afternoon press conference where he took questions about the recently erupted war in Korea. Four days before, Kim Il-Sung's Communist North Korean regime had launched a surprise offensive designed to conquer American-supported South Korea. Within forty-eight hours Truman had decided to commit US forces to the fight. General Douglas MacArthur, the commander of US forces in the Far East, received orders to "throw the North Koreans out of South Korea." Republican Senator Robert Taft agreed with Truman's decision, but not the president's refusal to seek Congressional approval for taking the US to war. "If the incident is permitted to go by without protest," Taft wrote, "we would have finally terminated for all time the right of Congress to declare war, which is granted to Congress alone by the Constitution of the United States." Others echoed Taft's views. Truman ignored them all and began pulling together a United Nations-sponsored coalition to counter what many Western observers saw as the first move in a possible Soviet offensive aimed at the West. A reporter at the press conference prodded Truman: "Everybody is asking in this

country, are we or are we not at war?” Truman replied, “We are not at war,” and told those assembled that “the members of the United Nations are going to the relief of the Korean Republic to suppress a bandit raid.” Another journalist asked: “Mr. President, would it be correct, against your explanation, to call this a police action under the United Nations?” “Yes,” Truman replied. “That is what it amounts to.”<sup>1</sup> The US was now at war, but its president disagreed. This initial confusion – or perhaps intellectual dishonesty – was only the beginning of the troubles the Truman administration faced in regard to what mistakenly has been called America’s first limited war. The first step to solving any problem is to admit you have it.

In late-November 2015 testimony before Congress on the new Iraq War, President Barack Obama’s Secretary of Defense, Ash Carter, said: “We’re at war.” But during the questioning he went on to say: “It’s not war in the technical sense, but this is serious business. It feels that way to our people.” Secretary of Defense Carter added: “We will win. We are going to win.” Why is this relevant if the US is not actually at war? Additionally, President Obama repeatedly insisted that there would be no American “boots on the ground” in the war against Islamic State (IS). At the time of Carter’s testimony, there were 3,500 US military personnel in Iraq.<sup>2</sup> In the eyes of some analysts, war now seems an exercise in risk management for too many political leaders.<sup>3</sup>

What was seen as an anomaly in 1950 has become the norm. US presidents do not ask for declarations of war. The practice of instead going to Congress for approval has been institutionalized in a bipartisan manner and is thus very unlikely to change. The 2001 Authorization of Military Force (AUMF) that President George W. Bush secured in the wake of the 9/11 attacks was particularly strong, and even though it did not officially declare war, it “bound the bureaucracy to frame the conflict as a ‘war’ rather than a law enforcement problem.” Unfortunately, as political scientist Audrey Kurth Cronin observed, unlike the declarations of war upon Germany and Japan issued by Congress in 1941, which instructed President Roosevelt “to bring the conflict(s) to a successful termination,” the 2001 AUMF had no such provision.<sup>4</sup> President Obama used the parameters of this same document to take the US to war in Iraq in 2014.

## But What about Limited War?

But how does all of this relate to so-called “limited war,” and particularly modern American views of limited war? There are many weaknesses with the American approach to war since the end of the Second World War, but chief among them is a failure to deal successfully with the problems of so-called “limited war.” The Korean War was quickly branded America’s first “limited war,” but there is no consensus on what this meant. It came to mean any war, particularly any US war, as long as it didn’t look like the Second World War, or perhaps result in a nuclear exchange. Thinking on this subject quickly grew contradictory and confused, and the resulting misconceptions became underpinnings of the US failure to consistently, clearly, and decisively win its wars since the end of the Second World War. Why? The manner in which we write and think about limited war intertwines *all* US thinking about war, and this is so broken and illogical that it has poisoned the US ability to fight *any* war.

Franklin Roosevelt provided a past example of clearer thinking in his January 1942 State of the Union address, one delivered a month after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought the US into the Second World War. “Our own objectives are clear,” Roosevelt insisted, and then he gave them: “the objective of smashing the militarism imposed by war lords upon their enslaved peoples, the objective of liberating the subjugated Nations – the objective of establishing and securing freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear everywhere in the world.” This is not as clear and clean as “unconditional surrender,” which became the US and Allied political objective after the January 1943 Casablanca Conference, but it does provide some solid goals: smashing militarism (meaning Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan), and freeing “subjugated Nations.” These are political objectives to which military force can be rationally directed. Roosevelt then summoned the specter of failed post-First World War peacemaking and gave the US people a vision of what victory looked like – and meant: “We shall not stop short of these objectives – nor shall we be satisfied merely to gain them and then call it a day . . . this time we are determined not only to win the war, but also to maintain the security of the peace that will follow.”<sup>5</sup> Roosevelt is thinking clearly about war *and* peace. Modern political and military leaders, policymakers, and academics who write on these matters

consistently do not. The US failure to pursue victory, the US failure to understand the nature of the wars into which the country enters, the US failure to wage wars decisively: all of this is rooted in confused ideas about war in general and limited war in particular. Why do I say this? And how do I prove this point?

### Defining Limited War

It is imperative to begin our discussion by laying a firm, universally applicable groundwork for our approach. Simply put, we don't know what we mean when we use the term "limited war." Here are two examples from what are considered classic texts on the subject: 1) "Only conflicts which contain the potentiality for becoming total can be described as limited";<sup>6</sup> 2) "Limited war is a conflict short of general war to achieve specific political objectives, using limited forces and limited force."<sup>7</sup> Both of these definitions explain limited war in relation to other types of conflict that also lack clear, generally agreed-upon definitions, i.e. "total war" and "general war" (we will revisit these in the next chapter). The best-known theorist of limited war, political scientist Robert Osgood, in his 1957 work defined limited war in terms of the objective sought and (among other things) by the fact that the combatants "do not demand the utmost military effort of which the belligerents are capable."<sup>8</sup> This is nebulous at best and fails to offer a firm and usable explanation of "effort," or what some would term the means used. The definitions haven't improved with the passing decades. A 2010 book noted that "The term limited war implies regular military operations by one nation-state against the regular military force of another nation-state and excludes irregular operations by terrorist organisations against state or by other non-state actors like warlords against a state or against other warlords."<sup>9</sup> This is another variation of a definition based upon means with the addition of the opponent's doctrinal warfighting methods. All of this demonstrates the potentially fatal problem: if we cannot even clearly define limited war, how can we understand its nature? And if we don't understand what limited war means, *we don't understand what we mean when we describe any war.*

Unfortunately, this type of conceptual muddle is typical in the theoretical and historical literature, as the given definitions of limited war generally imply that the level of means used by the combatants determines whether or not a conflict is a limited war. The problem here

is this: defining a war by the means used – which is generally what current limited war theory does – fails to provide a clear, universally applicable foundation for analysis. Wars, as Carl von Clausewitz wrote in *On War* and in *Strategie*, should be defined by the political objective sought, not the means or level of violence employed, nor the amount of destruction inflicted upon the enemy. Clausewitz wrote: “War can be of two kinds, in the sense that either the objective is to *overthrow the enemy* – to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please; or *merely to occupy some of his frontier-districts* so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the peace negotiations.” Wars are fought for regime change or something less than this. Building upon Clausewitz’s foundation, British maritime theorist Sir Julian Corbett, in his *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, gave us the terms “unlimited war,” to describe a conflict waged to overthrow the enemy government (an unlimited political objective), and “limited war,” for a war fought for something less (a limited political objective).<sup>10</sup> This typology provides an ironclad foundation for substantive analysis, because dissecting a war by beginning with the political objective or objectives sought provides a constant upon which to base any discussion or analysis, as well as a foundation for building a coherent theory in regard to wars fought for limited political aims. The means used certainly help determine the nature of the war being fought; indeed, this is one of the key factors (others are addressed in Chapter 4). But defining a war based upon the means used (or not) lacks universality, because it is not concrete. Moreover, it helps determine *how* the war is fought, but it is *not* what the war is about – the political aim – *and this is what matters most because it is from here that all else flows*. This clearly demonstrates part of the problem regarding how the US and other modern liberal democracies think about waging war: they too often fail to clearly define what they’re fighting for.

Why does all of this matter for us? First, *all* of the wars in which the US has been involved since the Japanese surrender in 1945 have been branded limited wars. This is done regardless of whether or not the term accurately depicts US political aims or explains the nature of the war. The Korean War, the Vietnam War, the war in Afghanistan, and all three Iraq wars are consistently branded limited wars: a term that most writers and speakers on the subject fail to define, or that is a catchall for nearly every type of conflict.<sup>11</sup> For example, Seymour Deitchman, in his 1964 *Limited War and American Defense Policy*, provides a list of

thirty-two wars fought between 1945 and 1962 that include such different conflicts as the Chinese Civil War (1927–49), the Philippine Huk Rebellion (1946–54), and the 1962 Bay of Pigs Invasion of Cuba. All are classified as limited wars. He has another list of fifty-nine conflicts that occurred – or almost did (a particularly unique element in his approach) – during this same period, and breaks these struggles into three types: conventional wars, unconventional wars, and deterred wars. He does this while never clearly defining limited war.<sup>12</sup> Blindly throwing the “limited war” blanket over all of these examples is a flawed method of attempting to analyze, understand, and – more importantly – to fight these wars. This remains part of the conceptual problem Americans have in regard to *all* wars.<sup>13</sup>

Second, the problem of not understanding the nature of the war is directly related to how we currently define – or more accurately – fail to define limited war. In a 2014 article, a *Washington Post* journalist described what the US began doing in Iraq in June 2014 as a limited war. He gave no clear definition of limited war and seems to believe that the most recent war in Iraq was a limited war because the US was making a minor effort.<sup>14</sup> But this does not define the war – or its nature: it simply explains the means being used. It does not in any way describe what the US hoped to achieve, and the political objective being sought is the keystone for what is being done – or at least it should be.

This is also illustrative of another problem: the Third Iraq War was arguably being waged for an unlimited political objective, i.e. “to degrade and destroy Islamic State,” yet early discussions of the conflict branded it a limited war because of the low level of military means the US committed.<sup>15</sup>

This lack of clarity is not unusual and is far from new. Modern writing about limited war (which is rooted in Cold War works and concepts) is generally of value only as examples of how not to examine conflicts. The authors of these works – particularly the twenty-first-century examples – often fail to even define what they mean by limited war.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, when they do, the definition tends to mix ends and means, or ends, ways, and means, thus failing to provide a solid definition for critical analysis.<sup>17</sup>

Third, limited war writers, as well as the Cold War itself, helped teach many in modern liberal states not only that victory in the war should not be pursued, but that its achievement was actually bad. John Garnett, one of the founding fathers of modern strategic studies,

wrote: “In limited war ‘winning’ is an inappropriate and dangerous goal, and a state which finds itself close to it should immediately begin to practise restraint.”<sup>18</sup> Former US Secretary of State and retired general Colin Powell once noted that “As soon as they tell me it [war] is limited, it means that they do not care whether you achieve a result or not. As soon as they tell me, ‘surgical,’ I head for the bunker.”<sup>19</sup> A veteran of more than two decades in the US Foreign Service criticized examinations of US wars as being too “victory centric,” faulted them for using a “victory-tinted lens,” and insisted that searching for a reason for not winning a war “treats victory as the norm and military frustration as an aberration, an attitude that distorts our understanding of conflict and its unpredictable results.” Instead, the focus should be upon cutting one’s losses to avoid a protracted conflict.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the US should learn to lose more quickly at a lower cost. Such thinking sells short the seriousness of war and thus undermines the ability of the US and other Western powers to clearly identify the political objective or objectives for which they are fighting any war (the ends), create intelligent strategy for achieving this (the ways), and harness national power – especially military power (the means) – sufficient for achieving the desired end.

Fourth, bad limited war theory has helped rob the US and other Western nations of the awareness that wars should be waged decisively. If leaders cannot clearly define what they want, how can the military hope to deliver it? And if the means dedicated to getting the job done are insufficient merely because the war has been branded limited, how can one win? The result is that “victory” – both in battle and in war itself – has generally disappeared from statements of analysts and policy-makers. Many of these same figures view the term itself with suspicion.<sup>21</sup> One author writing in 2005 insisted, in a chapter titled “The End of Victory,” that “The first notion the military strategist must discard is victory, for strategy is not about winning.” He provides this elaboration: “Battles and wars may end, but interaction between individuals and states goes on,” and “one can no more achieve final victory than one can ‘win’ history.” Because of this, the strategist should not concern themselves with victory in the war itself; victory is only the concern of the tactician.<sup>22</sup> Among the many theoretical problems here is the false assumption that strategic analysis of potential future conflicts and events will stop if victory in a then current conflict is achieved and so named. It also ignores the distinction between war and peace, and

encourages drawing the false conclusion that strategic thinking will stop when the war ends.

Why does all of this matter? If you aren't trying to win the war, you usually aren't seriously trying to end it. Refusing to pursue victory can produce an endless war. Swedish political scientist Caroline Holmqvist, writing in 2014 about the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, illustrates this problem by noting that "war is becoming perpetual or endless quite simply because the liberal world is *unable to imagine conclusive endings* to the wars it is currently fighting." She partially attributes this to the current practice of focusing on the present while detached from any reference to the past, accompanied by the inability to imagine a future different from the present trouble. This contributes to concentration on the immediate (and thus the tactical), and a focus on the means rather than the political end, the "how" rather than the "why" and "what for." The use of force becomes equated with the political aim, and the tactical mistakenly becomes the political, with the result that the point of the war becomes war itself.<sup>23</sup> Additionally, US and other Western leaders now forget this truth: *your enemy is trying to win*. General Rupert Smith observed that "unlike all other socially acceptable behaviour except some sports, wars and fights are not competitions: to be second is to lose."<sup>24</sup> Only Western liberal democracies in the post-Second World War era go to war without the expectation of victory. Fortunately, the political leaders who fought against the Nazis understood the necessity of victory. Winning (or losing) a war *matters*, particularly to the people who live directly with the results.

The refusal to value victory in warfare, or to define it, as well as the refusal to seek it when one is fighting a war, is a political problem that affects the ability of the military to fight the war effectively and deliver victory. American political leaders are ordering men and women into combat without having a clear idea of what they mean by victory, and sometimes with no desire to even achieve it. Since the time of the Korean War, US political leaders have too often sacrificed the lives of American men and women in wars these political leaders don't believe are important enough to actually win (the Korean and Third Iraq Wars spring instantly to mind). These political leaders don't often phrase it this way, but that is the reality of the result of their decisions. Waging war in this manner is either an expression of ignorance, or an example of incompetence on the part of political and military leaders. If it is not important enough to win, it is not important enough to go to war. One



of the jobs of America's leaders is to *win* the wars into which they lead the United States. Using force – decisively – is the most important tool for doing this.

### **What Do We Want? And Do We Want to Win?**

The event crystalizing American views of the Korean War was President Truman's April 1951 firing of General Douglas MacArthur on well-justified grounds of insubordination.<sup>25</sup> Memories of this unfortunate clash cloud a key issue that contributed to the problem: the policy confusion at the top of the Truman administration in regard to what political objective MacArthur was supposed to achieve in Korea. MacArthur's victorious United Nations forces had been sent into North Korea after liberating the South, but the Chinese Army that intervened in Korea on October 25, 1950 threw the US and UN forces out of North Korea and below the pre-war 38th-parallel border. By February 1951, the UN coalition forces had recovered and started pushing back the Chinese and North Koreans. This same month the US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) complained that the US State Department would not give them political objectives in Korea until its officials knew the military's capabilities. Both MacArthur and the Joint Chiefs protested – correctly – that the political decision needed to come first so that the military could then determine the courses of action that would allow it to fulfill the wishes of its masters.<sup>26</sup> The previous month, the National Security Council (NSC) had begun reexamining US war aims in Korea amidst the depth of the Chinese offensive. This political limbo dragged on – unresolved – until Truman signed NSC Directive 48/5 on May 17, 1951. The US political objective became the reestablishment of peace based on the pre-war frontiers.<sup>27</sup>

What does this mean? It means that from October 1950 until May 1951 the official political aim of the US forces fighting in Korea was the unification of Korea under UN supervision. This had been decided in NSC 81/1 by policymakers in Washington on September 9, 1950, *before* the US and UN forces under MacArthur landed at Inchon on September 15, and *before* they were ordered to invade North Korea on September 26 (this was a shift from the initial political objective of restoration of the antebellum border at the 38th parallel).<sup>28</sup> After MacArthur's relief, his successor, Matthew B. Ridgway, operated under the same orders: seek the unification of

Korea. But this is something for which he was not given the means, and his instructions from the Joint Chiefs tied his hands in so many ways that he could not possibly achieve his government's official political objective. Here is the manifestation of the problem we have just discussed: the Truman administration struggled to define the political objective – to define victory.

Also, after the Chinese entry into the war the Truman administration failed to pursue victory wholeheartedly, even when opportunity stared at them. The following spring, during the last two weeks of May 1951, Lieutenant General James Van Fleet, Ridgway's relief as commander of the 8th Army in Korea when Ridgway replaced MacArthur, saw an opportunity to decisively defeat the Chinese and North Korean armies. The Communist forces were exhausted from their most recent failed offensives and suffering immense logistical difficulties. Breaking them would have given the US a solid chance to conclude peace with the enemy. Many other senior US generals and admirals shared Van Fleet's assessment of the military situation, and post-war information confirmed the shattered state of the Communist forces in Korea. Ridgway disagreed. He refused to give Van Fleet his leash because the necessary operations would have meant attacking north of a line drawn across the peninsula by the Pentagon. Additionally, rumors of a ceasefire were in the wind, and Ridgway considered the US forces exhausted. Instead of trying to land the decisive blow – instead of trying to achieve a military victory that would have a chance of forcing an end to the war and delivering political victory – the UN forces began slowly and methodically pushing back the Communist armies. The Communists then asked for armistice talks, and the US pressure subsided. The Chinese then dug in and reconstituted their forces.<sup>29</sup> The opportunity passed untaken; and the war went on for two more years.

Extended armistice talks ensued. Admiral Turner Joy led the US/UN team through much of this drama. One of the sticking points in the negotiations was the Truman administration's decision to not force the repatriation of prisoners held by the US and UN who didn't wish to return. The Communist powers demanded this, but neither side would bend. Admiral Joy (though he never disagreed publicly with the position of his political superiors) believed this decision put the security of enemy POWs over that of US/UN prisoners. "Since we were not allowed to achieve a victory," Joy explained, "I wanted the war halted."<sup>30</sup>

A second thing that is widely remembered about the Korean War is MacArthur's remark that "In war there is no substitute for victory." What is forgotten is the sentence he uttered before this: "War's very object is victory, not prolonged indecision."<sup>31</sup> MacArthur, for all his many faults, understood the importance of victory better than Truman. In the Korean War, not seeking victory meant the struggle devolved into a bloody stalemate. Most Americans supported US participation in the conflict, as long as their political leaders sought victory – meaning, to win.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, early in the contest the American public outran its political representatives in its desire to mobilize and do what was necessary to win the war.<sup>33</sup> But as it dragged on with seemingly no conclusion in sight, American support began eroding in a fashion foreshadowing the Vietnam War.

Moreover, at least in the context of the Korean War, MacArthur might also have understood the importance of victory – winning, or achieving the political objective – better than his former assistant and Truman's successor to the presidency, Dwight D. Eisenhower. Other senior US officers shared MacArthur's views on the importance of achieving victory. During his presidential campaign, Eisenhower promised that, if elected, he would visit Korea. He did so on December 5–8, 1952, and met with Ridgway's successor, General Mark W. Clark. General Clark asked "to be allowed 'to win in our first test of arms against communism.'" He had a plan to do so, but was not permitted to present it to Eisenhower. Clark remarked later that "The question of how much it would take to win the war was never raised." When an armistice finally brought the fighting to an end, Clark bitterly noted: "In carrying out the instructions of my government, I gained the unenviable distinction of being the first United States Army commander in history to sign an armistice without victory . . . I believe that the Armistice, by and large, was a fair one – considering that we lacked the determination to win the war."<sup>34</sup>

Why, then, did US leaders here fail to seek a military decision that would deliver a political victory? And was this decision correct? Something important to remember is the Cold War context. The US fought the Korean War under the umbrella of a Cold War against the Communist bloc. Thus, the US was seeking multiple political objectives. The objective of the initial strategy of containment authored by George F. Kennan was to force the collapse or mellowing of the Soviet Union, but the US had a political objective in Korea as well. This is the problem

with what is sometimes called a nested war, meaning a conflict waged in the midst of a larger political or military struggle. The contributing factor of the pursuit of additional aims can complicate the drive to achieve the political goal for which the limited war is being fought. In Korea, US leaders mistakenly deferred resolution of a very bloody problem to deal with a hypothetical, potential future conflict that never arrived. They took council of their fears, and this prevented them from solving the situation at hand, with ill effects for both the US and the world. Truman and his advisors feared escalation and a possible widening of the war – and they were right to do so – especially if they took the war into China. But the US had the capability of ending – and winning – the war in Korea without doing this. Indeed, as we have seen, General Van Fleet had wanted to try and had a plan for doing so: defeating a much-weakened Chinese army. Dutch political scientist Rob de Wijk insists that “to be successful, liberal democracies must use force decisively.”<sup>35</sup> This seems a statement of the obvious, but it is no longer so obvious to American political leaders, journalists, and academics.

### Bad Habits Die Hard

On November 16, 2015, US President Barack Obama held a press conference during a meeting of the G20 in Turkey. His reaction to hard questions from a usually sympathetic press was widely described as “peevish.” Islamic State terror attacks had occurred three days before in Paris, and media reports depicted America’s president as perceiving *himself* as under siege. His strategy for the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) – or Islamic State (IS) – certainly was being critiqued, and not just by his Republican opponents and habitually critical talk radio pundits. Even Democratic California Senator Diane Feinstein did not shy away from criticizing the administration’s failures in dealing with IS.<sup>36</sup> Worsening President Obama’s situation was his insistence the day before the Paris atrocity that IS was contained. This fueled administration critics and fed increasing concerns about its foreign policy competence, strategic acumen, and its general ability – and particularly willingness – to lead.<sup>37</sup>

The US president may have been “peevish” as his critics insisted, but what Obama said was vastly more important than journalistic

speculations on his temperament. His answers to press questions raised two issues about the administration's view of and approach to Islamic State: Did they understand the nature of the war? And did they want to win?

One should not get the impression that President Obama is the sole source of US foreign policy ills. His predecessors, from Harry S. Truman to George W. Bush, have all contributed to the too-often disastrous approaches the United States has followed in the prosecution of its wars since the end of the Second World War, particularly so-called "limited wars." He is merely the most recent US president to take the country to war without admitting (or perhaps even realizing) that this is what they have done, while simultaneously not understanding the nature of the struggle upon which they've embarked. This last point is illustrated in three ways: his description of Islamic State as "killers with fantasies of glory," his insistence that the US plays into the Islamic State "narrative" by acting as if IS was a state, and his refusal to describe IS as "Islamic."<sup>38</sup> Yes, Islamic State was violent. Yes, its members were thuggish killers. But their violence was conducted with a clear political purpose in mind: the reestablishment of the ancient caliphate. They see themselves as true Muslims waging a justified and necessary "Holy War" against infidel unbelievers – and not just the West. To state these truths does not make all Muslims IS supporters. Indeed, the adherents to the Shi'a branch of Islam are seen as apostates in the eyes of Islamic State, as are Yazidis, Christians, and Jews. But to not call them what they are is a failure to honestly face part of the nature of the opponent, and thus the nature of the war. Obama's refusal to admit that IS was a state is equally puzzling and perhaps more dangerous. No, Islamic State never had official, *de jure* recognition from any other government – to IS, other states were themselves illegitimate – but they possessed a state's trappings: a leader, a government, a bureaucracy, taxation, and an army in the field that could be attacked. IS was *de facto* a state in the very ways the US was a state from 1775 to December 1777 when it received official recognition from France. To say that IS was not a state is – at best – a failure to understand the opponent and the nature of the struggle. And when Western intellectuals begin describing events with terms such as "narrative" and "discourse," they are sometimes trying to delegitimize the opposition argument, not address its substance.

But why is not understanding the war's nature a problem? In *On War*, the famous Prussian military theorist Clausewitz wisely insisted that understanding the nature of the war (especially, what one hopes to achieve by it) is the first and most important analysis that both political leaders *and* military commanders entering into a conflict should do.<sup>39</sup> If one fails here, winning the war is increasingly costly and perhaps impossible. How do you win if you don't understand your enemy? How do you win if you don't understand the myriad conditions dictating *why* and *how* the war in which you are engaged will be fought? Most importantly: how do you achieve victory if you don't even know what you want from the struggle, or even know what victory means?

None of these complex issues seem to have been a problem in the view of President Obama, many of his predecessors, numerous intellectuals and pundits who write about war (particularly limited war), and scores of leaders in the West. Why? Because they have no interest in winning. In a November 19, 2015 press conference, President Obama attacked the idea of victory:

But what I'm not interested in doing is posing or pursuing some notion of American leadership or America winning, or whatever other slogans they come up with that has no relationship to what is actually going to work to protect the American people, and to protect people in the region who are getting killed, and to protect our allies and people like France [sic]. I'm too busy for that.<sup>40</sup>

This, of course, provoked criticism. One American commentator remarked: "I don't know that we've ever had a president who didn't really care about America winning – and who announced it to the public."<sup>41</sup>

It's not surprising that Obama professed his disinterest in winning a foreign war. He is merely expressing the view of much of the present intellectual milieu. In defending Obama's Turkey comments, journalist Matthew Yglesias inadvertently revealed as much: "the hardest problem in US counterterrorism policy is in some ways as much a speechwriting challenge as anything else. The next time something goes wrong and an attack hits the United States, how do you sell the American people on the idea of not really doing anything about it?"<sup>42</sup> The problem with such an approach is that it ignores a critical point: the

enemy is using violence to try to kill you in pursuit of their political objective. This brings to mind Leon Trotsky's biting but realistic observation: "You may not be interested in war, but war is interested in you." French writer Bernard-Henri Lévy noted the larger problem with the president's remarks: "What is it about this war that the America of Barack Obama, at least for the moment, seems not to really want to win? I do not know the answer. But I know where the key lies. And I know the alternative to using the key: No boots on their ground means more blood on ours."<sup>43</sup>

This leads us to a larger point: what was the US political objective (or political end) sought in regard to Islamic State? When he explained his decision to embark upon the Third Iraq War in a September 10, 2014 speech on the subject, President Obama said that the US political objective was to "degrade and ultimately destroy" IS. His announced strategy for doing this: inserting US military advisors and working with coalition partners.<sup>44</sup> How long would this take? Three years, administration officials insisted, and the problem would be handed over to the next president. The new US war (and it is a war because combatants are using violence to achieve a political aim), *The New York Times* reported, was driven by the fears created by the murder of two American journalists and Islamic State's lightning advance across Syria and Iraq (unfortunately, not the cold, rational calculation with which President Obama was so often credited). "These American forces will not have a combat mission," President Obama promised, "we will not get dragged into another ground war in Iraq."<sup>45</sup> Yet, this is exactly what happened.

Part of how one demonstrates an understanding of the nature of a war is by possessing a clear political objective (the end), a clear, logical strategy for getting there (the ways), and allocating sufficient strength and resources for achieving the end (the means). What Obama presented in his September 2014 speech did not possess these basic strategic building blocks. The stated objectives are mutually exclusive (do you want to degrade – whatever that means – or destroy?), and the strategy depended upon coalition partners that had already failed because they did not field competent military forces. Moreover, the primary US ally on the ground – the Iraqi government – was dominated by sectarian politics and seen as illegitimate by much of the Iraqi populace. The president sent US troops into a combat zone without

giving them the means to achieve the objective that he declared important enough to require the potential sacrifice of their lives and much American treasure. The cynic could add that President Obama simply dusted off his 2009 West Point speech on US strategy in Afghanistan, rebranded it, trimmed it, and cut its personnel requirements.<sup>46</sup>

As we've seen, many modern governments, particularly democracies, sometimes refuse to acknowledge that they are indeed fighting wars when they have committed large numbers of people to a combat environment and some have been killed. The US has been particularly guilty of this since the Korean War. The Obama administration did this when it first came into office and its officials branded the US wars being fought as part of the so-called Global War on Terror "overseas contingency operations."<sup>47</sup> Obama launched US troops into the Third Iraq War in June 2014, but in September 2014 his Secretary of State John Kerry insisted that the US was not actually at war.<sup>48</sup> There are, of course, political reasons for doing this, as well as constitutional ones.<sup>49</sup> If one actually labels the conflict a war, the people and the military might demand decisive action. The US Congress might take up its duty prescribed by the Constitution to declare war when the United States embarks on a conflict that is not a result of a direct attack upon the nation.<sup>50</sup> All of this can be expensive – and politically risky domestically and internationally. But allowing cynicism and personal political interest to cloud the reality of sending US men and women to fight a war – without honestly addressing the truth of the matter – demonstrates a failure to lead and to take responsibility on the part of American officials, one repeated far too often over the last seven decades, and for which the US has paid enormous costs in blood and treasure. Secretary Kerry's statement is particularly incomprehensible because it comes from a man who is a combat veteran of the Vietnam War who knows far better than most policymakers and pundits *exactly* what war means to the men and women who have to fight it. Refusing to call a war a war is an effort to spin reality into what one wishes it to be rather than honestly facing what is going on there. The badly named Global War on Terror and the *war* against Islamic State are wars. The test is simple: can someone die there in combat? If the answer is yes, it's war. For a nation to be *at* war, and not admit that it is *in* a war, allows its leaders to see the conflict as something not particularly urgent. This gives them the option of not winning it, as well as to only support it



enough to keep from losing face with their allies while avoiding potential domestic criticism.

Again, one should not get the idea that President Obama and members of his administration are the sole source of current US problems in these areas. One can also point a blunt finger at his immediate predecessor, George W. Bush. President Bush demonstrated solid signs of not understanding the nature of the war that he launched when his administration declared a “Global War on Terror.” Historian Hew Strachan makes a particularly cogent critique by labeling the Bush administration’s approach “astrategic” because it took as its aim the destruction of a particular fighting approach instead of establishing a clear political objective or goal. British comedian Terry Jones called it “war on an abstract noun.” Another observer argues that the Bush administration failed to ask the key question: “What do we have to do to earn the peace we want?”<sup>51</sup> This conceptual debacle was furthered by declaring the war “long.” What began in 2001 as a war against Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, and then became a war to democratize Iraq in 2003, was rebranded the “Long War” in February 2006. This is horribly inexact and unclear (as well as demoralizing), and can only be defined in relation to something just as undefinable – short. In 2007, the US Principal Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, when asked to define the “Long War,” replied: “things get fuzzy past the five-year point.” The official, when defending the term, said: “We in the defense department feel fairly confident that our forces will be called on to be engaged somewhere in the world in the next decade where they’re currently not engaged but we have no idea whatsoever where that might be, when that might be or in what circumstances that they might be engaged.” The Bush administration also failed to clearly define the enemy, adding explanatory weakness to its policy and strategy sins.<sup>52</sup>

The more significant mistake, though, was a failure to define victory in the “Long War.” One could argue that launching such a war is so intellectually and conceptually flawed that defining victory is impossible. Bush sought to destroy terror; Obama to destroy (or perhaps degrade) IS. These are objectives, of a sort (especially in Obama’s case). But they are not clear political objectives with solidly envisioned and obtainable end states with a clear vision of the post-war environment. Destroying terror is a nebulous and undefinable aim. Destroying Islamic State (or is it degrading?) is possible, but what will replace it? What, in both cases, is victory? It can be difficult to form a clear

objective and express it, but this is no excuse for failing to take this first, important step.

Traditionally, being victorious in war meant something. Clausewitz said that “there is only one result that counts: *final victory*. Until then nothing is decided, nothing won, and nothing lost.”<sup>53</sup> Sun Tzu wrote that “victory can be created.”<sup>54</sup> Victory once mattered to US political leaders; it mattered to the people of the nation called upon to make the sacrifices necessary to fight the wars. This has changed. Theorist Edward Luttwak wrote: “The West has become comfortably habituated to defeat. Victory is viewed with great suspicion, if not outright hostility. After all, if the right-thinking are to achieve their great aim of abolishing war they must first persuade us that victory is futile or, better still, actually harmful.”<sup>55</sup> As if to illustrate Luttwak’s point, one author insists in a 2015 book that “We live in an age of unwinnable wars, where decisive triumph has proved to be a pipe dream.”<sup>56</sup>

US Presidents Obama and Bush demonstrated that they either aren’t interested in victory (Obama) or failed to define it (Bush). There seems to be a bipartisan lack of understanding of the importance of victory, as well as what “victory” means. Here is a definition: the achievement of the political purpose for which the war is being fought. (This is distinct from victory in a specific battle, which one should remember.) Moreover, if the political leadership has done its job, their definition of victory includes a clear vision of what they want the post-war situation to look like. Ultimately, as Cicero tells us, war is about the restoration of peace; if it does not seek this, the war is not just.<sup>57</sup> Union General William Tecumseh Sherman insisted that “The legitimate object of war is a more perfect peace.”<sup>58</sup> War is fighting for the peace *we* want.<sup>59</sup>

## The Point of It All

What becomes clear in all of this is that the US and other Western democracies have a deep-seated problem: their political and military leaders too often do not understand how to *think* about waging wars, and thus don’t wage them effectively. This is rooted in an inability to determine rationally the nature of the war and pursue it to a victorious end. Gaining an understanding of wars fought for limited political objectives – what this means and how to wage them – will give

us an understanding of *all* wars. This is imperative, as post-1945 US conflicts have been generally misunderstood and bad theory has undermined US thinking in regard to war. Wars fought based upon shoddy thinking have a price, one the US and its allies have paid far too many times, and for which the country gains little or nothing.

All of this demonstrates a Western world intellectually at sea in a policy sense while facing conflicts for which current strategic thought does not provide proper analytical tools.<sup>60</sup> Consistently, Western leaders don't know how to set clear political goals, don't understand how to conceptualize the wars they launch in pursuit of often fuzzy political objectives, and don't value victory – or tell their people what this means. Waging war in this manner is either an expression of ignorance or an example of dishonesty – intentional or not – on the part of political leaders for short-term political purposes that have long-term effects on public opinion and the men and women who are being sent to fight wars their leaders don't call wars and have no interest in winning. As General Rupert Smith observed: we no longer understand the use of force.<sup>61</sup> To purposefully fight a war one must – at a minimum – know why one is fighting and what one hopes to achieve, understand the enemy, know what victory looks like, chart a sensible path for getting there, and plan for maintaining the peace.

The US cannot change what it does and how it does it in regard to waging war until it changes how it *thinks* about war. That is what this book seeks to do.