Success and Failure in Limited War: Information & Strategy in the Korean, Vietnam, Persian Gulf & Iraq Wars

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Readers should note that doing so requires us to maintain both a sufficient number of uniformed armed forces personnel and a treasury sufficient to fund both military operations involving soldiers conducting extended combat operations anywhere in the world and the significant expense of hiring private military contractors to perform the support services necessary to enable them. This economic model, while currently feasible and tenable for the United States as a wealthy nation, may not work for another nation with more-constrained resources. In the future, while the "demand" may be there and the "supply" of contractors may still exist, if a nation does not have the financial resources to pay for those contracted services, this model might not work.

*Outsourcing Security* is a valuable read for military and civilian defense professionals. Stanley applies a thoughtful analysis to what many may have thought they understood, and his work brings both depth and academic merit to the topic.

NEAL H. BRALLEY


This groundbreaking treatise by Dr. Spencer Bakich, visiting lecturer in political science at the University of Richmond, endeavors to explain America’s mixed success with limited war since 1950 by way of a new theoretical approach to analyzing policy-strategy formulation and execution at the highest levels of government. For the purposes of his theory, Bakich characterizes limited wars as those fought at a high level of intensity for limited aims but whose outcomes “are of a considerable consequence for the states involved and for the broader international system.” Furthermore, restraint is necessary to avoid escalation—a tendency of limited wars. Not surprisingly, Bakich focuses his analysis on four preeminent case studies from the “American century”: the Korean War; the Vietnam War; the Persian Gulf War (Operation DESERT STORM); and the Iraq war (Operation IRAQI FREEDOM).

The book’s first two chapters are largely theoretical. Bakich points out how established approaches such as “rationalistic strategic choice theory” and the “foreign policy decision making (FPDM) school” cannot fully explain how information influences strategy, or its outcome, in war. He argues that organizational theory does not capture the true nature of relationships between strategic leaders and national security organizations. As Bakich writes, “A gap remains in our understanding of the sources of strategic success in [limited] war.”

To bridge this gap, Bakich confidently posits his “information institutions” approach. Simply put, it is the pattern of information flow between those at the apex of power and their national security organizations that predisposes states to success or failure in limited war. The information institutions approach suggests that top decision makers served by an information-rich and densely networked national security apparatus should have a better grasp of the strategic environment and experience greater military-diplomatic coordination in planning and execution, significantly...
enhancing the effectiveness of their limited-war strategies. Bakich carefully explains the methodology used to test his theory and introduces two direct competitors: organizational culture theory and democratic civil-military relations theory. Key propositions on strategic performance are also tabulated to test each of the three theories against the empirical data (the four case studies).

In the next four chapters, Bakich convincingly demonstrates how only the information institutions approach correctly predicts (or explains) both the military and diplomatic strategic outcomes in all four limited-war cases, with the competing theories falling short in one way or another. For example, in the Persian Gulf War, defeating the Iraqi army without fracturing the international coalition defined strategic success for the United States. The information institutions approach alone correctly anticipates military and diplomatic success in the Persian Gulf War. Organizational culture theory expects both military and diplomatic failure (given the extant organizational culture characterized by a military-dominant conception of war and a Jominian norm of civil-military relations), whereas democratic civil-military relations theory forecasts military success but diplomatic failure (given divergent military and diplomatic strategic preferences). The book’s final chapter nicely encapsulates the results of the aforementioned analyses and their significance for theory and policy. One finishes the book persuaded that the information institutions approach offers a more satisfactory explanation for America’s mixed military and diplomatic results in limited war than do the alternatives.

Interestingly, Bakich’s emphasis on institutional as opposed to organizational relationships in ascertaining the pertinent information flows reveals the often-disproportionate influence of key individuals in the decision-making process. In the Korean War, MacArthur’s near stranglehold on strategic intelligence available to top policy makers was abetted by John Allison (in charge of the Department of State’s Office of Northeast Asian Affairs) arguing for American intervention north of the thirty-eighth parallel, against the advice of State’s own Policy Planning Staff—with disastrous results. In the Persian Gulf War, President George H. W. Bush’s personal, “hands-on” approach to information gathering, down to the analyst and desk-officer level, was tempered by National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft’s and his deputy Robert Gates’s deft management of the interagency process. These and other anecdotes will keep the reader engaged and enthusiastic about the book.

With over eight hundred endnotes gleaned from more than four hundred authoritative sources, this is first and foremost a scholarly work. Those in the international relations community seeking to understand the puzzle of America’s recent strategic performance in limited wars will find this information institutions approach a worthy adjunct to the more established theories. Those who read purely for pleasure will enjoy the four case studies, each offering a unique take on the various policies and strategies crafted and the decisions made at the highest levels of government. In short, the book has much to offer, to the serious reader and dilettante alike.

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