

2009

Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism

David Burbach

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Burbach, David (2009) "Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 62 : No. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol62/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

WHAT IS THE KEY TO VICTORY?

Desch, Michael C. *Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008. 232pp. \$45

The notion that “democracies don’t fight one another” is well known, but recently some scholars have made a stronger claim—that when democracies do fight wars, their battlefield effectiveness is far greater than that of nondemocracies with comparable technology and training.

Michael Desch challenges the supposed military prowess of democracies in his book *Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism*. Desch, a political scientist, holds the Robert M. Gates Chair in Intelligence and National Security Decision-Making at Texas A&M University and is an authority on civil-military relations. His past work argues that it is strategic interests, not regime types, that determine a nation’s security policy. His latest book extends that theme by delivering a convincing rebuttal to what he calls the “democratic triumphalists.”

The case of the “triumphalists” rests upon statistical analyses showing that democracies have been more likely to win wars than other political systems over the last two hundred years. Desch challenges these studies head on,

arguing that in most cases the democracies in question would have been expected to win in any case, due to traditional military advantages (the United States in the 1991 Gulf war) or to motivation, national survival being on the line (Israel in 1973), and that in other cases there may have been errors and uncertainties in the data sets themselves. To prove his point, Desch offers four case studies: the Russo-Polish War (1919–20), the battle for France (1940), the Falklands War (1982), and Israel’s wars from 1948 to 1982. These case studies trace the details of governmental decision making and the military operations of each conflict, showing that the factors identified by the triumphalists were not the key drivers of battlefield outcomes.

The combination of quantitative analysis and case studies is notable. Few authors are comfortable working in both methods, but Desch demonstrates both methodological sophistication and a command of military history. However, one might ask for a more thorough exploration of a few issues. One example is how quick Desch is to dismiss the

possibility that democracies grow faster economically than other regimes and thus accumulate more resources in the long run. Such questions are minor, though, and the overall case is quite persuasive.

This book is a must for scholars of military effectiveness or civil-military relations. The statistical sections will satisfy researchers; they might be a bit difficult for general readers, but overall the work should interest a broad audience of national security professionals. Desch's writing is excellent throughout, with lively case studies and clear explanations of his theories and results.

One hopes that policy makers will read this book. As Desch notes, democratic triumphalism has become popular in Washington. The mistaken belief that democracy itself is a "force multiplier" could lead officials to underestimate the risks of U.S. interventions or to encourage unduly weak but democratic U.S. allies. Desch offers a warning that it is superior strategy, resources, and skill, not the magic bullet of democracy, that remain the keys to victory.

DAVID BURBACH
Naval War College



Doyle, Michael. *Striking First: Preemption and Prevention in International Conflict*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008. 200pp. \$24.95

Even before the United States and its allies embarked on war in Iraq in 2003, the question of whether it is acceptable to strike enemies without clear provocation was an increasingly vexing one to policy makers, academics, and legal experts. "Preemptive war" (attacking an enemy who is clearly about to strike

you first) has always been an acceptable response to a dire and clear threat. But "preventive war" (striking a potential enemy while circumstances are favorable to the attacker, or striking in early anticipation of a possible, or even only theoretical, threat) has traditionally been regarded in the international community as not only unwise but immoral.

In this slim, tightly reasoned volume, one of America's foremost foreign-policy thinkers tackles the problem of preventive war and reaches surprising conclusions. While rejecting the so-called Bush Doctrine, which putatively grants to the United States almost unlimited permission to attack almost any threat in any form, Doyle delivers a clear warning that the previous rules of war do not apply in the twenty-first century. Doyle struggles (as have other scholars in many nations over the past decade) to find criteria that would allow preventive attacks in an internationally acceptable framework. He settles on four criteria: lethality, likelihood, legitimacy, and legality.

The book is actually a collection of essays by four other scholars, who supply a foreword and criticism of Doyle's chapters, to which Doyle responds in a conclusion. The debate format is lively and makes this work a particularly useful tool for introducing students at advanced levels to the subject.

Although Doyle's prose is direct and clear, in places he makes overly structured arguments, and his attempt to set his four criteria into a matrix produces something more like a rigid template. Doyle certainly recognizes that the perception of a threat, versus the actual threat, is often idiosyncratic and affected by a slew of factors, but his