

1980

Limited War Revisited

W.A. Platte

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

Recommended Citation

Platte, W.A. (1980) "Limited War Revisited," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 33 : No. 1 , Article 20.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol33/iss1/20>

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.

PROFESSIONAL READING 105

and its connection with democratic societies. Roberts, the journalist-economist, and Novak, the columnist-theologian, provide short but stimulating arguments on why Western intellectuals are so critical of capitalism. Nelson and Cone, the two theologians, provide support for Robert's and Novak's positions by the theologians' dogmatic views that capitalism is an economic system based on exploitation. Herman Kahn, the futurist, sees 15 social limits to capitalism's economic growth, including some of Johnson's forces, but makes an observation worthy of note when he says, "If the public were better informed, it would often choose more economic growth and fewer social limits."

The contributions of the other respondents seemed less valuable to this reviewer. Banker-economist Alan Reynolds gives a libertarian argument that the burdens of the welfare state will lead to tax revolt and a purer form of U.S. capitalism. Congressman Jack Kemp sees the problems of capitalism to be due to the failure of political leaders who have overregulated and overtaxed an otherwise productive system, but in the course of his account he makes egregious errors in explaining Keynesian and monetarist economic theories. Former Senator Eugene McCarthy does no more than wave the populist banner that "corporations have corrupted capitalism"; and international lawyer Rita Hauser raises the perennial cry that capitalism's real problem is that it results in inequality in the distributions of wealth and income.

It cannot be said that Johnson or his respondents have answered the question "Will capitalism survive?" However, these writers do cause the reader to reflect on the nature of capitalism and its relation to freedom and democracy.

JOHN A. WALGREEN
Wheaton College

Osgood, Robert E. *Limited War Revisited*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1979. 124pp.

In the early days of the Vietnam war, Vice Admiral (then Commander) Jim Stockdale gathered his air group pilots and bombardier/navigationers together to talk about the war and their part in it. His main point was that although Vietnam was another in a series of "limited wars," their personal commitment to their missions had to be "total."

In North Vietnam, war planners knew their ace in the hole was a United States pledge to a "limited war." They had a chance of winning as long as the United States limited its objectives and methods, for they were totally committed to "total victory."

As Robert Osgood says, "limited war" is a matter of perspective. If you are the most powerful nation on earth, you can wage a "limited war." For your opponent and for your own fighting men, however, that same war may be "total."

This is an introductory truism of Osgood's *Limited War Revisited*. What this recognized scholar of war* examines here is the state of health of the theory of limited war. His premises are that after stalemate in Korea and defeat in Vietnam, limited war strategies have been discredited, and that this is a worrisome development.** Limited war theories come in vogue only after the horrors of a total war. For example, the Napoleonic wars resulted in Clausewitz' writing on limited war, and World War II with nuclear weapons resulted in the proliferation of limited war theories of the '50s. If limited war theory is discarded, the probability of another Armageddon increases.

Modern limited war theories cover the spectrum from guerrilla wars of

*Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957, 309pp.

**Foresadowed in *ibid.*, p. 6.

106 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

national liberation through local wars with conventional weapons to widespread or "central" war with limited use of nuclear weapons. Osgood examines each level in considerable detail in this compact book.

In the process he takes a hard look at the Vietnam war, drawing therefrom four reasons for failure:

1. . . . South Vietnam too vulnerable to insurgency to preserve its independence or to be rescued. . . .

2. American military not ready to fight an insurgency; they transformed the conflict into an expanding conventional war that the public was unwilling to sustain. . . .

3. Incremental expansion of the war was inefficient militarily and fatal politically, but it does not necessarily follow that rapid escalation would have been politically feasible or successful. . . .

4. National interests at stake were not sufficiently compelling to Americans to have justified a scale and duration of combat necessary to win the war.

Lessons learned from these reasons for failure should be regarded as "highly contingent," for no future conflict will replicate the conditions of Vietnam:

-National interests must be more faithfully assessed before commitment.

-If indirect assistance is not sufficient to rescue a beleaguered government, direct participation by foreign troops is not likely to succeed. . . .

-The United States must avoid fighting an unconventional war with its own forces. Counterinsurgency remains a task for special forces.

Has the Vietnam experience affected U.S. strategy in the Third World, where limited conventional wars may be required because significant U.S. interests are at stake? Osgood is afraid that it has. ". . . Vietnam has suspended creative thought in this area. Where foreign

policy is most in doubt military strategy is least active." This is unfortunate because in a dynamic world many more nations now are willing and capable of engaging in conventional conflict.

At the central war level, Osgood discusses the mismatch between U.S. concepts of limiting the use of nuclear weapons and Soviet notions of war fighting and winning. Much of this ground has been plowed before, but the treatment in *Limited War Revisited* is more clear and concise. Osgood concludes that the Soviet missile buildup seems destined to provide Moscow with a theoretical advantage (by U.S. logic) in waging controlled strategic war.

All of this means that concepts and strategies of limited war have fallen on hard times in the United States. There is much disillusionment. But as the alternative is even less appealing, limited war theory remains alive.

Limited War Revisited is most perceptive, balanced, and pungently presented. Its rationale and commentary, quickly sketched here, will be widely quoted.

W.A. PLATTE
Captain, U.S. Navy

Rohwer, Jürgen and Jaeckel, Eberhard. *Die Funkaufklärung und ihre Rolle im Zweiten Weltkrieg*. Stuttgart: Motorbuchverlag, 1979. 406pp.

This book deals with one of the best kept secrets of World War II: radio intelligence.

In 1974 it became known that British decoding specialists had, throughout the war, been able to decrypt all German messages encoded by the then used cipher machine ENIGMA, a machine in use from the very beginning of the war. Subsequent commentaries in the media gave the impression that the Allies knew all essential operations and operating instructions well in advance and the question then arose: why did it take so long to defeat