

1976

Professional Reading: "Can America Win the Next War?"

H. G. Nott

Thomas H. Etzold

John Gaddis

Wayne Stephens
U.S. Navy

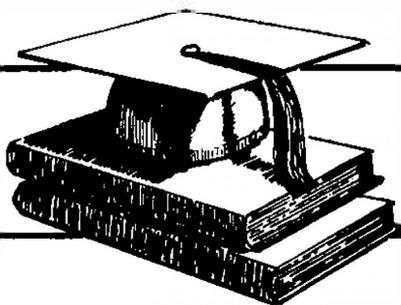
Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Nott, H. G.; Etzold, Thomas H.; Gaddis, John; and Stephens, Wayne (1976) "Professional Reading: "Can America Win the Next War?," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 29 : No. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol29/iss2/8>

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

Because of the complexity of the issues Drew Middleton discusses and his controversial analysis and conclusions, we felt it appropriate to have several different reviewers comment on this book. They have jointly summarized Middleton's thesis in the brief which appears before their individual comments. Ed.

Middleton, Drew. *Can America Win the Next War?* New York: Scribner, 1975. 271pp.

Believing that conflict characterizes human affairs and that the Soviet leadership considers conflict inevitable and is preparing for it, Drew Middleton, long a military correspondent for *The New York Times*, suggests that sooner or later the United States may be at war again. He asks a number of important questions about the future wars of the United States: Will they be nuclear, conventional, guerrilla? Of what scale? Who will be the enemy or enemies? Whatever the war and wherever, will America be able to win?

To answer these questions Middleton divides possible future wars into three categories: high-intensity, meaning large-scale war against a major adversary such as the Soviet Union; medium-intensity, meaning war in which the United States is a protagonist but faces less powerful adversaries than the Soviet Union; and low-intensity, or indirect warfare, in which the United States provides arms, equipment, advice, and moral support, but no men. Middleton concludes that in Class A, or high-intensity war, the United States could not win. In Class B, or medium-intensity conflict, the United States might do well, that is if the Soviet Union did not intervene on the other side. Only in

Class C, or low-intensity war, does Middleton accord the United States any fair prospect of victory in coming years.

What is to blame for the discouraging prospects of the United States in warfare, at least as Middleton sees it? Middleton cites public unwillingness to support foreign wars (a reaction to the Vietnam experience), the too-modest size of the all-volunteer military force, divergent United States/NATO and U.S.S.R. expectations about the nature of coming conflicts, differences in national perceptions of vital interests, a host of uncertainties about technological, economic, and political developments, and apparent Soviet determination to become the strongest military power in the world. On the plus side, he sees the best U.S. Armed Forces in the Nation's history, but reluctantly concludes that their contribution will not be enough to assure victory in a future major war.

A POSITIVE VIEW

In the thoughtful development of his personal answers to the sweeping question "Can America Win the Next War?" Drew Middleton has written an ambitious—probably a too ambitious—book, but the boldness of his intent, willing acceptance of his own challenge to say something important, and impressive

92 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

credentials as a long-term knowledgeable military commentator must command both admiration and respect for his undertaking. In passing, the author also drops refreshingly nice comments about the Naval War College, the *Naval War College Review*, and the quality of military professionalism in general, which perhaps inhibited criticism by this reviewer.

In some measure, however, Mr. Middleton's perception of resurgent military professionalism—smart, tough, and dedicated—is one of the strengths of his book. Perhaps he extrapolates too much from his observations and conversations, but he clearly has a good reporter's eyes and ears for appraising what people are thinking, saying, and doing. Undoubtedly, he has not recounted all the high-level interviews and frankly expressed opinions of military leaders which went into his research—for few doors are closed to Mr. Middleton—but it seems safe to speculate that he detected a consensus of concern that America might not win—or might be unable to make the concerted effort to win—a future big war.

Like most readers of the book, I suspect, I could wish that the author had more clearly defined the parameters of what he chooses to call Class A, B, and C wars, but he does address certain recognizable scenarios. Considering the ground that he covers—geopolitical, economic, technological, societal, and military—Middleton does exceptionally well in preserving the thread of his developing thesis throughout this modestly sized effort.

Although Mr. Middleton has clearly chosen not to address all the complex relationships among the many factors which influence the scale and character of war—and the projection of victory or defeat—he selectively illuminates a sequence of warning signs which he considers significant. His discussions of comparative military capabilities, doctrinal approaches to war-fighting

concepts, and order-of-battle asymmetries may be somewhat simplistic—more appropriate to the style of a *New York Times Magazine* feature article than to book-length analytical treatment—but he makes no pretense to rigorous methodology. Quite simply, Drew Middleton has surveyed not the whole world but one slice of it, which he instinctively senses is a representative cross-section of the good, the bad, and the indifferent in predicting America's fortunes in any future war. He obviously understands those factors he values as indicators, he tries to weight them realistically, and he may be right.

"Can America Win the Next War?" is a disturbing and unsettling question, but Mr. Middleton has performed a service in asking it. Few would suggest that he has wholly succeeded in answering this most subjective of all military questions, but he has given it one hell of a try, and it is difficult to imagine anyone doing it better in so brief, readable, and personalized a book.

PROFESSOR H.G. NOTT
Naval War College

WHAT SORT OF WAR . . . ?

One of Middleton's biggest concerns is what sort of war, or wars, the United States is likely to face in coming years. Curiously, he speaks little about some possible characteristics of war in prominent areas such as NATO Europe. Middleton agrees with almost all defense analysts that war there is low in probability; but he does not then address some of the more probable uses of violence, including nuclear weapons, which may plague the powers in their relations with one another.

In discussing potential NATO-WTO war, Middleton overlooks features of future warfare likely to come into play in Central Europe. First, it is important to understand the significance of the

Russian forces built up in the satellite nations. Middleton accepts the common Western understanding—or misunderstanding—in which these forces seem both the result and the evidence of Soviet offensive intentions. He does not consider another view now becoming current among NATO planners, a view in which the size and structure of Soviet-Warsaw Pact force in Central Europe signify that the Eastern countries firmly intend for large-scale war to take place on the land of their adversaries if, in fact, it must come. In this new analysis, the forces themselves may be no valid clue to the reasons and circumstances out of which war might come in that region. Whether he agrees or not, Middleton at least needed to consider that idea before coming to his conclusion that the size and structure of those forces warns of Russian aggressive intentions.

It is also misleading for Middleton to deal with European probabilities in crude categories of nuclear or conventional war. The problems in Central Europe have been more complicated than that, both tactically and strategically, at least since the mid-1950's. Soviet and WTO doctrines and configurations have warned Western observers for years that war in Europe would be conducted with a mixture of special and conventional weapons and tactics. One of the most worrisome scenarios at present envisions Eastern troops moving rapidly into Western territory, employing chemical weapons in conjunction with armor. That scenario leads also to political and strategic complexities, amid which the "short war" configuration of Soviet troops makes sense as something other than simple preparation for aggression. If and when hostilities open in Europe, Western Allies may have the unpleasant choice of either fighting on their own soil (which would likely inhibit the use of some weapons) or of negotiating with an enemy who is in a favorable position

in the field. If the choice is to escalate to nuclear weapons, the war will change character, whether or not it remains a theater-level conflict. It will probably be a short, drastic war. If the decision is to negotiate, then the fighting phase, the phase of greatest logistic difficulty, will end.

In another failing, Middleton does not specify the interval for which he expects his assessments of Soviet and Warsaw Pact strength to remain valid. He assumes for now that Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces can actually perform in Europe as they claim, that is, roll at will into and perhaps across Western Europe. Will that be the case 5 years from now, or later, when precision munitions may have taken away the offensive advantages of mobile and armored ground forces?

Finally, Middleton does not discuss two of the most troublesome security problems that the superpowers and other states may face in the near future: nuclear proliferation and international terrorism, particularly urban guerrilla activity. Failure to consider these problems weakens Middleton's analysis; many other commentators have predicted that in coming years some state or group of individuals will be incautious enough to cause a nuclear detonation, and one must wonder whether the United States—or the Soviet Union—is prepared technically and psychologically to evaluate such an event in its own terms rather than in mistaken or distorted strategic contexts. Events of public disorder continue to occur. There seems little chance that such events will supplant traditional interstate conflict, but they are probably going to be more and more frequent and more and more important in their consequences. The superpowers must expect to remain frontline victims of planned terror and political assassination not only in their own cities but in cities around the world. There will be many more incidents such as the

94 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

assassination of the American CIA station chief in Athens, and more Beiruts. It is a sobering prospect.

PROFESSOR THOMAS H. ETZOLD
Naval War College

ARE THE RUSSIANS TEN FEET TALL?

Drew Middleton's assessment of the Soviet-American military balance leads him to conclude that the United States could win a Class B or C war, if public support for such wars could be sustained, and that it might be able to win a Class A war if nuclear weapons were used. If these conditions were not met, he asserts, the United States could not expect to win. These are conclusions which might legitimately give one grounds for both optimism and pessimism.

Middleton if of course right to stress the importance of public support as an element of military power, but his conclusion that the United States could not win a low-intensity war for which there was not such support seems neither new nor startling. That the United States has been involved in such a war in the recent past is no reason to lament the existence of a lower threshold of tolerance for such adventures in the future. Rarely can the national interest be pursued, separated from the national will; if Washington's definition of the former does not command the support of the latter, then some redefinition should be considered.

The Russians, Middleton argues, face no comparable problems and hence can generate internal support for whatever external operations they may choose to carry out. It is true, of course, that dissent is not highly visible inside the U.S.S.R. and that Soviet leaders can make decisions without worrying about demonstrations, press leaks, and congressional investigations. But Middleton fails to mention internal vulnerabilities

of another kind which significantly constrain the Soviet ability to project power in the world. One of these is the Russians' chronic dependence on imported food and technology. How far they could go in pursuit of foreign adventures without provoking embargoes of these vital commodities is a question which must weigh heavily with Kremlin leaders. Another potential vulnerability lies in the fact that the Soviet Union has no experience in fighting anything other than defensive wars. It is interesting to recall that an earlier Russian Government was almost overthrown in 1905 because of an unpopular aggressive war carried on beyond Russia's borders; to say that similar circumstances could not produce comparable results today may be to overestimate the amount of control autocratic regimes in fact have over their people.

Middleton also minimizes the external difficulties the Soviets face in trying to maintain a global presence. The constraints imposed by geography and limited lift capability are well known. So too is the realization that, because of the Sino-American rapprochement, the Soviet Union is the only superpower which must be prepared to fight two major wars simultaneously. Less widely recognized is the fact that the final collapse of colonialism has removed the Russians' best justification for intervention in the Third World just as they have begun to develop some rudimentary capability in that area. If Moscow follows the example others have set in letting capabilities shape policy, it will quickly find itself projecting an imperialist image, with all the vulnerabilities that implies. Finally, there has developed within the past year evidence that the Communist Parties of Western Europe may be moving toward a separation from the Kremlin as dramatic as that which the Chinese went through a decade and a half ago. If so, the Russians' ability to

exploit social and economic strains in that part of the world will markedly decrease.

Middleton's book provides grounds for legitimate concern in some areas. He makes a good case for the assertion that manpower and spending levels in the American military are too low. His argument that the United States could win a European war only by escalating it to the tactical, and possibly strategic, nuclear level raises the unpalatable (though not unfamiliar) prospect of destroying the objective in order to "save" it. He gives full attention to the possibility that the Western World's energy crisis might tempt the Russians to apply pressure at strategic choke-points, either directly or by proxy. But Middleton's preoccupation with American vulnerabilities and neglect of those facing the Soviet Union leads him to paint a gloomier overall picture than is justified.

PROFESSOR JOHN GADDIS
Naval War College

WHAT IS VICTORY? WHAT IS STRENGTH?

This book attempts to convince readers that the United States and its allies have allowed their military strength to reach such a low point that they are now incapable of defending against a major determined attack by the Soviet Union. Middleton may be correct in his conclusions, but he could have been more convincing if his analysis had been more detailed and more precise. As it stands, it is about on a par with the work of those in the Defense Department whom he criticizes for inept analysis and presentation of Soviet capabilities.

Middleton does not define what he means by winning except in the case of the Class A war, in which he thinks of victory as halting the attacking Soviet Armies and forcing them back to their

present borders. Although he does not tell the reader how to recognize victory in the other two classes of war, he concludes that "the outlook for an American victory in a major war in Europe is dim. The United States should be able to win Class B and Class C wars but only, and it is a major condition, if the American people accept the reasons and support the war."

One problem is that the reader has to search for Middleton's listings of troop strengths, equipment, and capabilities, for they are scattered throughout the book and never brought together for comparison and evaluation. The author recognizes the difficulty of comparing dissimilar organizations but fails to apply much rigor to the exercise. He probably should have provided more detailed information about the individual contributions of the allied nations.

Middleton writes at some length about the growth of the Soviet land forces without adequately gauging this growth. Other writers have consistently maintained that the Soviet Armed Forces have remained relatively constant in size and have made only moderate improvements in their land and air equipment. One has to concede that the Soviets have acquired much new equipment, much of it with improved capabilities, but what has been the rate of change over time, say from 1964, 1969, and 1972? He leaves the reader to wonder how much the change in relative power is due to Soviet increases as against reductions made by the United States and its allies. In addition to a list of forces, the reader feels the need for more discussion of the role of those forces, their tactical concepts, and the limitations as well as the strengths of their divisions.

Absent from the author's discussion of whether we can win the next war is an analysis of the capability of Western forces to convince the Soviets that the invasion of Western Europe will be

96 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

extremely costly under normal political circumstances. Perhaps the role of the West's conventional forces is one of deterrence; if so, Middleton's definition of victory needs reconsideration and the reader needs a discussion of the feasibility of that mission.

Middleton recognizes that domestic factors within the United States preclude building a force large enough to achieve "victory." He has not provided a prescription for overcoming public attitudes and making necessary changes in our military forces, and he does not discuss the probability that the Soviets would view such an expansion as a threat to what they see as an acceptable balance of military forces.

WAYNE STEPHENS
Captain, U.S. Navy

Aichinger, Peter. *The American Soldier in Fiction, 1880-1963: A History of Attitudes Toward Warfare and the Military Establishment*. Ames: Iowa University Press, 1975. 143pp.

Reading Mr. Aichinger is like overhearing a Canadian explain to a European the character, as it pertains to military matters, of his southern neighbor. The speaker is never quite sure whether to ascribe literary or military "tradition," that prolific European grande dame, to his American cousins. Mr. Aichinger, whose succinct, idea-laden book I read with great delight, is a Canadian, a professor of English at the Collège Militaire Royal de Saint-Jean, and his "outside" perspective adds a pleasing and percipient dimension to this book.

Mr. Aichinger identifies five main characteristics within the American military experience: pragmatism, a "team" syndrome, a persistent democratic-aristocratic tension, idealism, and a general lack of experience and psychological preparation for combat. Only pragmatism and the team mentality persist to the present day. The other elements, argues Mr. Aichinger, have

either evolved new forms or they have disappeared altogether. Within military fiction these elements—their reasons for being, their agonizing mutations, their intricate interrelationships, and their influence on civilian attitudes toward the military—come to life. Mr. Aichinger serves his readers well by extracting and organizing these elements from the themes of the greatest American military novels.

The American Soldier in Fiction is not mere literary criticism. It is, as the author writes, an attempt "to discuss works of literature in relation to the historical, economic, and political events that accompanied or preceded their appearance on the scene." The discussion moves along briskly from the idealism and belief in heroic action expressed during World War I to the bitter disillusionment of that war's aftermath; from the realistic and consistent attitudes of World War II to the cold war's outpouring of black humor in the literature of the absurd.

To show how attitudes toward warfare and the military establishment vary, Mr. Aichinger contrasts American military fiction with that being written in Europe at the same time. He concludes that the American novel distinguishes itself from its European foll by the frequent use of the enlisted man, not the officer, as the protagonist. Our egalitarianism makes all the difference. It accounts for the pre-1952 American perception of war-as-the-enemy, tracing itself back to the work of Stephen Crane, as well as the American failure to accept war as an integral part of life.

In American fiction before 1952, war remained an aberration, a disease in need of a cure, so that an authoritarian military organization's steel grip on the citizen-soldier's liberty and individuality could be broken. World War II was a hateful thing, mostly bereft of ideals for the average GI, but the war had to be won so that he could go home and live the life he loved best.