

## Introduction

# Victory and the Moral Will to Fight



Americans today have been told to expect years of military action overseas. Yet they are also being told that they should not expect victory; that a “definitive end to the conflict” is not possible; and that success will mean a level of violence that “does not define our daily lives.”<sup>1</sup> A new administration is now bringing more troops into Afghanistan—where American troops have been operating for eight years—but without defining the terms of victory. The change in American military doctrine behind these developments occurred with astonishing speed; in 1939 American military planners still chose their objectives on the basis of the following understanding: “Decisive defeat in battle breaks the enemy’s will to war and forces him to sue for peace which is the national aim.”<sup>2</sup> But U.S. military doctrine since World War II has progressively devalued victory as the object of war. “Victory alone as an aim of war cannot be justified, since in itself victory does not always assure the realization of national objectives,” is the claim in a Korean War-era manual.<sup>3</sup> The practical result has followed pitilessly: despite some hundred thousand dead, the United States has not achieved an unambiguous military victory since 1945.

Historically, however, this debasement of victory in military planning is radical. Aristotle knew that “victory is the end of generalship,” and no Roman army fought for anything less.<sup>4</sup> The change in doctrine is not due primarily to the horrific destructiveness of modern war, for American leaders have adopted such aims even for conflicts that do not threaten to “go nuclear.” We inhabit a moral climate in which any attempt by victors to impose cultural values onto others is

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roundly condemned. We have largely accepted that the pursuit of victory would necessarily create new grievances and guarantee an even more destructive conflict in the future. This is a moral issue.

But this idea should be questioned. This book presents six major wars in which a clear-cut victory did not lead to longer and bloodier war, but rather established the foundations of a long-term peace between former enemies. Each of these conflicts began with an act of military aggression. Each stagnated during years of carnage that ended when a powerful counteroffensive and an unambiguous victory reached deeply into the moral purposes behind the war, and forced one side to give up its cause and to renounce the fight. The result, in each case, was not “universal peace,” but an understanding between former enemies that definitively ended the war and brought enormous benefits to thousands or millions of people. How and why these successes were achieved is the subject of this book.

The causes of war and peace run far deeper than the movements of armies and troops (strategy and tactics) into the reasons why armies form and move at all.<sup>5</sup> War is an exclusively human activity: animals eat each other, and clash over mates, dominance, and territory, but absent the capacity to pursue chosen goals and values with an organized commitment, they do not wage war. Contrary to Freud’s conclusion that mankind has a universal “instinct for hatred and destruction,” wars of a continental scale lasting years do not just happen, by chance, circumstance, or instinct.<sup>6</sup> The wellspring of every war is that which makes us human: our capacity to think abstractly, to conceive, and to create. It is our conceptual capacity that allows us to choose a nation’s policy goals; to identify a moral purpose for good or for ill; to select allies and enemies; to make a political decision to fight; to manufacture the weapons, technologies, strategies, and tactics needed to sustain the decision over time; and to motivate whole populations into killing—or dissidents into protest. Both war and peace are the consequences of ideas—especially moral ideas—that can propel whole nations into bloody slaughter on behalf of a *Führer*, a tribe, or a deity, or into peaceful coexistence under governments that defend the rights and liberties of their citizens. The great-

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est value of the examples in this book is to show the importance of ideas—especially moral ideas—in matters of war and peace.<sup>7</sup>

Moral ideas as they relate to war must not be conflated with the rules associated with deontological just-war theory—for instance, of proportionality and absolute prohibitions against attacks on civilians.<sup>8</sup> Such rules divorce ends from means, and are often considered by their advocates to be absolute strictures apart from context and consequences. In this moral framework, the goals of each nation are granted no import in evaluating the conduct of the war, and those fighting to maintain a system of slavery become morally equal to those fighting for freedom. That such rules can become weapons in the hands of an enemy who is fighting for conquest, loot, or slavery is said to be irrelevant to the categorical commandment that each side follow those rules regardless of result. But surely we should question moral rules that exempt a belligerent from attack because he hides behind civilians whom he intends to enslave. The moral purpose of a war—the goal for which a population is fighting—sets the basic context for evaluating a conflict and determines the basic moral status of the belligerents. Those who wage war to enslave a continent—or to impose their dictatorship over a neighboring state—are seeking an end that is deeply immoral and must not be judged morally equal to those defending against such attacks. It is vital to evaluate the purposes of a war when evaluating both the means by which that purpose is being pursued, and the social support for those directing the war.

Because warfare is first and foremost a clash of moral purposes, acknowledging the place of moral ideas over physical capacities—expressed in Napoleon's dictum that "the moral is to the physical as three to one"—establishes a hierarchical relationship between the ideas fueling a war and the shifting details of terrain, tactics, and technology.<sup>9</sup> Certainly the tactics of Roman foot soldiers cannot be applied directly to tank divisions today, but the Romans might be able to tell us something about the motivations of a stateless enemy that is subverting a world power. This perspective on war leads to a certain conclusion about war's proper object, which is not the destruction of an enemy's army or industry. The goal of war is the subjugation of the

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hostile will, which echoes Carl von Clausewitz's identification that war is "an act of force to compel the enemy to do our will."<sup>10</sup> Clausewitz also wrote that "war is an act of human intercourse" and that "the essential difference" between war and the arts and sciences is that "war is not an exercise of the will directed at inanimate matter, as is the case with the mechanical arts, or at matter which is inanimate but passive and yielding, as is the case of the human mind and emotions in the fine arts. In war, the will is directed at an animate object that reacts."<sup>11</sup>

Clausewitz wanted to refute the idea, promoted by the Napoleonic officer Baron de Jomini, that military principles could be turned into charts and followed as rules.<sup>12</sup> Some theorists today, trying to understand warfare in scientific terms, are adopting the analytical methods proper to complex physical systems, using principles derived from chaos theory.<sup>13</sup> The idea here is to see every situation as a dynamic, interactive whole, to grasp an enemy's reactions as "feedback," to recognize that the complexity of the system does not allow us to grasp every detail of the action within it, and to understand the whole without being overloaded by its complexity.

But there is a limit to such analysis, for no mathematical methods will ever be able to quantify the primary factor that drives a war: the willingness of the leadership, soldiers, and civilians to butcher thousands in pursuit of an abstract moral purpose. Wars do have a fundamental cause: the moral purpose that motivates the decision and commitment to fight, which is expressed, in one form or another, from the highest levels of leadership down to every grunt with a rifle, a spear, or a club. The complexity deepens given the different ways such ideas are understood in different cultural contexts, the degrees of human ingenuity and technological sophistication available to pursue this purpose, and the commitment to achieve the moral purpose embodied in a nation's policy goals. The possibility of conflict increases to near certainty if a nation comes to accept that glory, loot, or moral sanctity can be achieved by the initiation of horrific force on behalf of a tribe, a ruler, a deity, or a collective.<sup>14</sup>

The will to war is the motivated decision and commitment to use military force to achieve a goal. How, then, can a commander use

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physical force to compel an enemy to change his mind and to reverse the decision and commitment to fight? Military planners have been consumed with this enormous question; debates among American strategists in the 1930s about the role of a new air force, for instance, grappled with the question of whether the destruction of an enemy nation's industry could break its will to fight. The selection of targets became the dominant issue in air strategy, and the solution required industrial experts to determine which factories had to be destroyed to break the will and the capacity of the enemy population to support the war.<sup>15</sup> This issue remains contextual—Germany was defeated by “boots on the ground,” whereas Japan surrendered under air assault, just as the Romans had to smash their way through the Goths, while Palmyra surrendered when threatened by a siege—but commanders knew that the defeat of the hostile will was invariably the object of the war. In his 1934 testimony before the Federal Aviation Commission, Lt. Gen. Harold L. George stated that “the object of war is now and always has been, the overcoming of the hostile will to resist. The defeat of the enemy's armed forces is not the object of war; the occupation of his territory is not the object of war. Each of these is merely a means to an end; and the end is overcoming his will to resist. When that will is broken, when that will disintegrates, then capitulation follows.”<sup>16</sup>

Clausewitz had seen certain principles behind this issue long before air power made its debut, in the nature of war as a duel akin to two wrestlers, each grappling for balance, albeit founded on a political decision that depends upon a network of political, economic, social, and military support.<sup>17</sup> The result, he concluded, is a certain “center of gravity” for each side, the point of greatest vulnerability, which is not necessarily its army. “If Paris had been taken in 1792, the war against the Revolution” would most certainly have been ended, Clausewitz explained. “In 1814, on the other hand, even the capture of Paris would not have ended matters,” given Napoleon's sizable army.<sup>18</sup> Clausewitz elaborated: “For Alexander, Gustavus Adolphus, Charles XII, and Frederick the Great, the center of gravity was their army. If the army had been destroyed, they would all have gone down in history as failures. In countries subject to domestic strife, the

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center of gravity is generally the capital. In small countries that rely on large ones, it is usually the army of their protector. Among alliances, it lies in the community of interest, and in popular uprisings it is the personalities of the leaders and public opinion. It is against these that our energies should be directed.”<sup>19</sup>

But Clausewitz’s conclusion needs to be more solidly anchored in the social support for a war, which provides irreplaceable ideological, material, psychological, and moral resources for a nation’s armies and its leaders. The “center” of a nation’s strength, I maintain, is not a “center of gravity” as a point of balance, but rather the essential source of ideological and moral strength, which, if broken, makes it impossible to continue the war. A commander’s most urgent task is to identify this central point for his enemy’s overall war effort and to direct his forces against that center—be it economic, social, or military—with a view to collapsing the opponent’s commitment to continue the war. To break the “will to fight” is to reverse not only the political decision to continue the war by inducing a decision to surrender, but also the commitment of the population to continue (or to restart) the war.

To force this reversal of the decision and commitment to fight, a commander must *know himself, his own people, his enemy, and his enemy’s people—and, he must know his own moral objective as well as that of his enemy*. An effectively aimed, well-planned, and quickly executed counteroffense—or, even better, a credible show of strength that collapsed opposition with little killing, a feature of three of the examples here—was the climax of the six conflicts in this book. But each of these counteroffenses worked not only because of its physical success but because it forced that enemy, including the civilian population, to confront the enormity of what it had done, to recognize its hopeless inability to continue the fight, to lose heart as it lost support, and to give up the pretenses, misunderstandings, and delusions that had fueled the war from its start.

The chapters illustrate these effects on several levels. Strategically, each illustrates a major war, lasting more than a year and costing thousands of lives, which began with an attack against a political state that controlled a distinct territory, and whose survival was on the line.

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I do not here deal with usurpations by competing Roman emperors, long-standing struggles for power between medieval families, or wars within a single territory, whether religious, civil, or revolutionary. The American Civil War warrants inclusion because the United States was geographically divided into two distinct territories, with opposing governments motivated by opposing moral ideals, and it is necessary to consider the two territories as distinct in order to grasp the nature of the conflict and the constitutional peace that has followed. In each of the examples, the war became a bloodbath without end until the side under attack launched an energetic offense against its opponent's social, economic, and political center. The military success was accompanied by a forthright claim to victory, so that there were no illusions about who had won the war.

But strategy alone does not explain the result; the tide of war turned when one side tasted defeat and its will to continue, rather than stiffening, collapsed. To understand this, it is vital to consider the cultural background of the opponents. For the Persians of the early fifth century BC, to take one illustration, the destruction of Xerxes' navy was an indirect projection of power against the ideological center of his rule, which was founded upon a culture in which people expected him to assert his magnificence through conquest. The defeat laid bare his fundamental weakness, which potentially undercut his position fatally. To protect his reign (and his neck), he had to abandon the goal of expansion that he had inherited. This became the policy of the king's court beyond his own lifetime. Despite differences in politics, terrain, technology, and tactics, similar results followed for each of these examples; in each case, the military failure reached deeply into the very identity of the regime itself and undercut the moral basis of the regime's actions as it destroyed material support for the war. The result was not only a change in the strategic balance of power, economic resources, or technology but a long-term change in *policy*.

In chapter 1, the Greek city-states faced decades of attacks by the Persian Empire. The Greeks ended the aggression—and discredited the ideology behind it—by ruining the enemy's army and threatening the king's position on his own soil. The Persians never again attacked the Greeks. In chapter 2, Sparta, home to the world's most feared

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infantry, mounted years of attacks against an alliance of farming communities headed by the city of Thebes. The conflict should have been no contest—but the Spartan mirage was shattered when those farmers marched into the Spartan heartland and made Sparta's defeat unmistakable. The Spartans never again attacked the Thebans. Chapter 3 pits Carthage against Rome, via a long indirect route leading to Hannibal's attack against Italy in the Second Punic War. After years of indecisive warfare, the Romans won quickly with a direct attack on Carthage's homeland. Carthage accepted its position and never again attacked Rome. In chapter 4, third-century AD Rome was rent by internal usurpations and external attacks that divided the empire into thirds. The emperor Aurelian reunited Rome in an energetic campaign that collapsed the threats posed by its eastern and western enemies. As in the previous cases, a display of overwhelming force exposed the physical and ideological bankruptcy of those advocating war, which led to an immediate collapse in the will to fight.

The ancients are worthy of this much of the text because they reveal the basic issues behind every war in terms that are stripped of their modern nationalistic, technological, and logistical embellishments. Ancient writers placed the human elements first, especially the motivations that fuel a war and that must be reversed if long-term peace is to follow. We are hard-pressed to find such lasting victories, either in our own day or in the ancient world—they are in a certain sense anomalous in history—but there are three modern examples in this book. In chapter 5, a long, deeply rooted war of rebellion within the United States ended quickly when one Union army pinned the southern forces in the North, while another marched through the South and destroyed the economic and social foundations of the rebellion. Once again, military defeat accompanied the psychological and ideological collapse of the will to fight.

Chapters 6 and 7 consider World War II—the worst slaughter in history, which killed millions until the defenders mounted an overwhelming offense against the capitals of Germany and Japan. Chapter 6 takes up a very specific aspect of this conflict: how certain moral ideas conditioned Britain's response to Hitler and became causal fac-



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tors in the onset of war. This chapter differs from the others in that it deals little with fighting and not at all with the end of the war—its concern is with the prelude to war and the way in which a clear-cut aggressor was empowered to attack. Warfare studies are not only about strategy and tactics but also about why armies end up on the battlefield when and where they do. Chapter 7 turns to the Pacific war and considers the nature of the victory over the Japanese decision and commitment to fight.

A rich variety of details adorns these events. In each case, the leadership of the defeated side was discredited, emasculated, or demoralized by the visible evidence of defeat; neither Agesilaos of Sparta, Hannibal of Carthage, Zenobia of Palmyra, Jefferson Davis, nor Hirohito could rouse his people to further action. For others, cruel war came directly to their homes; they saw their economies destroyed and their former vassals rise against them—as the Spartans, the Carthaginians, and the Palmyrenes saw their support evaporate, and southerners in America saw former slaves set free by a Union army. In some cases their cities were surrounded and pulverized, as the Goths, the people of Atlanta, and the Japanese saw their towns burned. In others, civilians shook with fear, knowing that an enemy army was on the way; the bloodless campaign of the Theban leader Epaminondas parallels the campaigns of the Roman emperor Aurelian into the East as well as Sherman's march through the South. Reliance on divine providence—through Ahura Mazda in Persia, Baal-Shamim in Carthage, Sol in Rome, and the Chrysanthemum Throne in Japan—played a part in unifying the efforts of some, and in the victory or defeat that followed. In one case, the focus is on the prelude to a war: the defensive posture assumed by British leaders, who failed to challenge the moral claims of the Germans, left them unwilling to oppose Hitler while it was possible to do so. This is a powerful example in reverse of the effects of certain moral ideals on the policies of rational statesmen who genuinely wanted to avoid a new war.

Each of these examples has been studied in great depth, and there is a mountain of scholarship for each. No chapter-length essay should aspire to provide the details that specialists will crave, or to even attempt to exhaust the studies made of these events. Some readers may

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criticize the omission of many wars that could not be included. But all authors must be ruthlessly selective. B. H. Liddell Hart, in his important book *Strategy*, surveys history in order to present his thesis of indirect strategies. Yet he reduces the medieval period to eight pages (given “the drab stupidity of its military course”). Similarly John Lynn, in his important book *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture*, claims to take a global view of warfare in order to refute claims to historical continuity from the Greeks. Yet Lynn ends his discussion of Western antiquity with Greece circa 400 BC, skips past the Hellenistic and Roman periods, and pauses on ancient China before jumping ahead seventeen hundred years to the Hundred Years War, which he equates with the medieval period. No Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Justinian, et al. beyond scattered mentions—and neither were these necessary. Each of these authors illustrates his own thesis and invites readers to look further at the areas he chooses not to cover. I do the same.<sup>20</sup>

There is no single strategic pattern, no universal “theory of war,” and no moral “rules” divorced from context or purpose to emerge from this book. The major point is to *take moral ideas seriously*. The lessons of history relate not to tactical or strategic rules but to the ideas that motivate people to fight and their consequences in action. An aggressive nation can be empowered far beyond its physical strength by a conclusion that its opponent does not have the will to fight—surely a factor in Xerxes’ invasion of Greece and Japan’s commitment to the “Asian War”—and then be demoralized and beaten by an offense that exposes the physical and moral bankruptcy of its position. Conversely, a powerful nation may give up if its people come to think that a war is unjust, their nation’s position is morally untenable, or its goal unclear or simply not worth it. In either case, our recognition that war is the product of human ideas, ambitions, intelligence, and morality allows us to put the primary focus of warfare studies where it belongs: on human beings, who are the locus of the decision and commitment to fight, and the only agents capable of creating freedom and peace for themselves.