Book Reviews

Who Wins? Predicting Strategic Success and Failure in Armed Conflict

By Patricia L. Sullivan

Reviewed by Thomas G. Mahnken, Jerome E. Levy Chair of Economic Geography and National Security, US Naval War College

Patricia L. Sullivan's *Who Wins?* seeks to understand why strong states so often are unable to achieve their aims in wars against weaker adversaries. She demonstrates that the reason rests not merely with the belligerents' resolve or their strategic choices, but rather with the nature of the political objectives they pursue. In particular, she argues strong states are most likely to succeed when their aim is to seize territory from a weaker opponent or overthrow its regime. By contrast, victory is least likely to follow attempts to coerce a weaker adversary into changing its behavior.

This is a timely and important study, one that illuminates the relationship between political objectives, the value that statesmen and soldiers attach to them, and victory. Two centuries ago, Carl von Clausewitz wrote about the correlation between the value a state attaches to its ends and the means it uses to achieve them:

> Since war is not an act of senseless passion but is controlled by its political object, the value of this object must determine the sacrifices to be made for it in *magnitude* and also in *duration*. Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.

Sullivan delves deeply into this relationship, examining different political objectives and how easy—or difficult—it has been for the stronger power to achieve its aims in war. She develops several sets of hypotheses and tests them systematically in conflicts from the end of World War I to the present. It is a thoughtful and relevant work of scholarship.

That said, one suspects that "predicting strategic success and failure in armed conflict" (the book's subtitle) using the model she describes is more an art than a science. First, one wonders just how accurately we can know *a priori* how much we, or our adversaries, value achieving a particular aim, or even what the precise aims of our opponents are. As she points out in her recapitulation of conflict between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the United States (31-43), such estimates are often mistaken and frequently plagued by misperception. Furthermore, both ends and assessment of the political, social, and economic costs of war often change as a conflict unfolds. States may continue fighting beyond the "rational" point of surrender when their leaders' prestige becomes invested in the war or the passions of the people become aroused. Alternatively, heavy losses may lead to escalation of a conflict, changing its character.

Second, it is worth questioning the author's taxonomy of political objectives. At times, she portrays them as existing on a spectrum

running from "brute force" objectives (including acquiring or defending territory, seizing resources, overthrowing a regime, or defending state sovereignty) to coercive ones involving changing an adversary's policy (46). In other places, she views such aims discretely (124), although her main argument is built around the dichotomy between "brute force" and "coercive" objectives. Yet the line between brute force and coercion is hardly clear. Having seized territory (a "brute force" objective), a government must then coerce its adversary into renouncing efforts to retake it. Indeed, most of the "brute force" objectives in Sullivan's taxonomy require a great deal of coercion to bring a war to a successful conclusion.

If there is to be a useful distinction among the varieties of aims that states may pursue in war, it is likely that which Clausewitz drew between wars fought for limited aims and those fought for unlimited aims. As he wrote:

> War can be of two kinds, in the sense that either the objective is to *overthrow the enemy*—to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please; or *merely to occupy some of his frontier districts* so that we can annex them or use them for bargaining at the negotiating table.

The former is a true "brute force" aim, while the latter involves considerable coercive leverage.

These observations should not obscure the value of the volume. *Who Wins?* is a book that both scholars and policymakers will find insightful and thought-provoking.
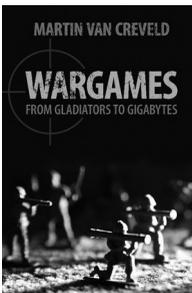
Wargames, From Gladiators to Gigabytes
By Martin van Creveld

Reviewed by Douglas B. Campbell, Director, Center for Strategic Leadership and Development, USAWC

Martin van Creveld has produced an extensively researched and exhaustively written history of wargaming. This is especially timely given that wargaming is regaining visibility within the national security community writ large. As the United States, NATO countries, and other regional leaders seek to understand the national security issues developing post Arab Spring and, more specifically, post Iraq and Afghanistan, wargames are returning as a key tool in this effort.

Van Creveld defines a wargame as a contest of opposing strategies that, while separated from real warfare, simulates some key aspects of real war. He begins his study examining the behavior of animals, then transitions into hunting, combat sports and contact sports, all which reflect issues associated with warfare and wargames. Play fights, as he describes them, provide the earliest indications of the conduct of wargames and the concepts of wargaming. During his discussion of Great Fights—staged engagements between primitive societies—he highlights some of the limitations of wargames, which are encounters prearranged in both time and place, sacrificing perhaps the most important "principle of war," surprise. Throughout the book, van Creveld constantly returns to the theme regarding the limitations of wargames in substituting for