

Statistics, Real Estate, and the Principles of War:

Why There is No Unified Theory of War

Dr. Jan S. Breemer

Callicratus: We're lucky men, you and I. We've been present at the moment the world changed.

Eupolis: What's that supposed to mean?

Callicratus: What's new, what's going to change the world, is that once they've beaten us they don't let us go. They're going to destroy this army, whatever it takes. I've been thinking about it, since we got cooped up in here, and I can't think of a single instance where it's happened before. Those men don't want to win a battle and set up a trophy and be big heroes. They want to kill us, and they want to do it as efficiently as possible.

HAD HE HEARD of the principles of war, Callicratus might well have told his comrade-in-arms that their enemy had changed the principles.¹ The above dialogue, from Tom Holt's story of the Athenians' last stand against the Syracusans in 413 BC, is fictional.² The event itself is real. Hunted relentlessly by their enemies, Callicratus and Eupolis, together with thousands of other Athenian soldiers, had taken refuge in a walled olive grove. Here, they were subjected to a constant barrage of javelins and arrows. When the survivors surrendered, they were sold into slavery.³

For the Athenians, the slaughter in the orchard was a different kind of war. An army used to fighting wars for limited objectives, they faced an enemy whose aim was unlimited. As Victor Hanson has observed, battle for the classical Greeks meant that after an hour or so of intense, close-in fighting, victory went to the side that still held the field. The winners had won the right to build a trophy; the losers fled, leaving most of their weapons behind, but rarely in fear of being hunted down and killed by the equally exhausted victors.⁴ In 413 BC, the Syracusans broke the rules. They had defeated the Athenians by the "normal" standards of victory and defeat, but they decided to eliminate them once and for all; they would finish them off.⁵ They did so by violating another principle. Instead of fighting according to what Hanson has called the "Western way of war" and battling their opponents face-to-face with spears or swords, the Syracusans bombarded the Athenians with "cowardly" stand-off weapons.⁶

All Wars Not Created Equal

War has always changed. Few people will disagree, but most will quickly add that this is true only for the conduct of war, not its nature. This essay disagrees: all wars are not created equal. Clearly the essence of insurgency wars is different from that of conventional wars, and both are intrinsically different from nuclear war. The difference between the three turns on the relationship between politics and violence. It necessarily follows that the

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bundle of ideas called “principles of war,” which apply to one “population” of wars, may have little or no relevance for others; those wars have their own principles. There is one other consideration. Principles of war not only vary *between* kinds of wars, they also change *within* wars. Some principles that appear cemented in stone today had no meaning in the past; conversely, principles we may not recognize today will be at the heart of tomorrow’s military doctrines.⁷

What are these things called “principles of war”? “Principle” has a dozen or so dictionary definitions—“axiom,” “fundamental,” “law,” and such synonyms. Whatever these martial principles are, they clearly do not have the same stature as scientific principles. Not even the most committed student of military science will claim that the principles of war can describe, and even predict, phenomena that are invariably true. The best we can say is that they describe tendencies about the conduct of warfare, tendencies that can inform military strategic and operational decisions.

The principles of war are somewhat analogous to statistical probability statements. In statistics, a group of values is commonly displayed by way of a curve. The curve shows that as long as the group is drawn from a “normal population,” nearly 70 percent of the values lay within one standard deviation of the mean value in the group. For example, suppose homes in a neighborhood sold for a mean price of \$200,000. Let us also assume a standard deviation of \$30,000. This means that a buyer has enough information, and need not make further inquiries, to know that \$170,000 to \$230,000 will give him an almost 70 percent chance of finding a suitable home. The principles of war do basically the same thing. Using them, a military commander knows that based on experience, and all other things being equal, he is more likely to be right than wrong if he heeds principles one through nine.

The statistical analogy has limited validity, of course. For one, the principles of war are based on

anecdotal, not statistical, evidence. Nevertheless, it is useful to continue the analogy. Suppose our homebuyer got word that one homeowner needs to move quickly and will sell below the market average, say, \$160,000. In statistical terms, the price lays more than one standard deviation from the mean. Thanks to this bit of intelligence, the buyer can abandon his conservative strategy of committing up to \$230,000. Similarly, the military commander who has the benefit of special intelligence about his opponent’s plans or dispositions can, in fact *should*, break the “rules.” The German panzers in May 1940 did exactly that; they could “safely” violate the principle of security and race ahead with flanks unprotected because, thanks to air superiority, the German field commanders knew where their opponents were.⁸

Our ability to use sample data to make inferences, draw conclusions, and ultimately make predictions about the world-at-large critically depends on whether the data is valid—in other words, that the data represents the “reality” we are interested in. Thus, knowing that most houses in a neighborhood will sell for between \$170,000 and \$230,000 may not help the buyer who is looking in a different part of town. The validity issue is just as important in the study of war. Standard mili-

PRINCIPLES OF WAR
Objective
Offensive
Economy of Force
Mass
Maneuver
Unity of Command
Simplicity
Surprise
Security

tary doctrinal publications acknowledge that the relevance and importance of *the* principles change with circumstances, but insist that they are “fundamental tenets” nevertheless.⁹ In truth, there are principles of war, and then there are principles of war. Principles can serve the military commander as reliable signposts only if they are *valid*; that is, they are drawn from the same population of battles and wars he is fighting. The U.S. military’s nine principles of war belong to a particular “neighborhood” of warfare: conventional state-against-state war, in which the belligerents field organized armies that wear distinct uniforms so as to tell them apart from the (civilian) nonbelligerents. This kind of war has been the Western way of war for centuries, but,

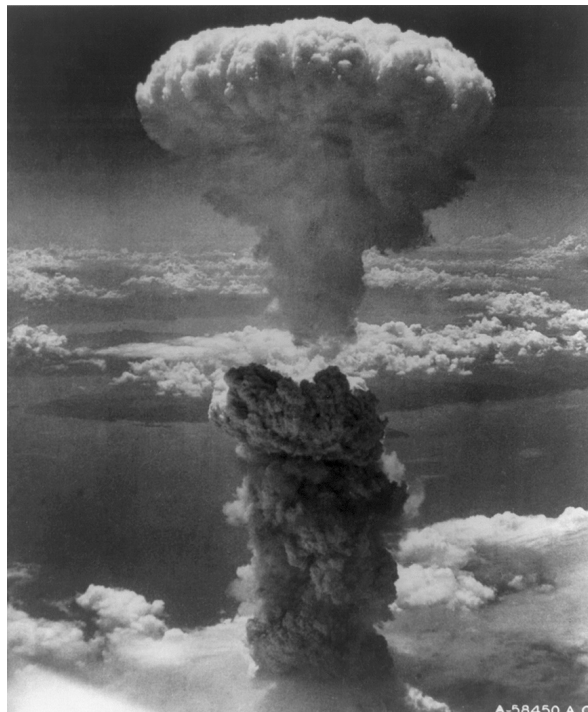
in recent decades, it has increasingly been joined by wars from two very different neighborhoods: nuclear war and insurgency war. Each of those has its own principles.

Principles of the Nuclear Neighborhood

It is arrogant for students of war to claim a single, stable body of principles when the much more scientific physical sciences have yet to fulfill the dream of a unified Theory of Everything.¹⁰ Growing specialization, with each discipline claiming its own laws and principles, has marked the history of science. We see a parallel in the development of the principles of nuclear war, or rather principles of nuclear non-war. To begin with, not long after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, nuclear weapons were recognized as more than just particularly powerful versions of conventional high explosives—they threatened to change the very *nature* of war. Bernard Brodie wrote down the implication as early as 1946: “Thus far the chief purpose of a military establishment has been to win wars. From now on its chief purpose must be to avert them. It can have no other useful military purpose.”¹¹

This simple statement became the foundation for our subsequent thinking about nuclear weapons. It set the stage for the development of a set of ideas about the problem of nuclear war, ideas that, because they dealt with the prevention of such a war, had to be radically different from the old principles. In fact, the specter of nuclear holocaust seemed to mark the ruination of Clausewitz’s basic definition of war as a political instrument. A handful of theorists made a valiant effort to prove the possibility of controllable and limited nuclear wars, but, in the end, it was broadly agreed that nuclear weapons were “different,” that this difference amounted to a “threshold” between the known and unknown in warfare, and that this threshold, if crossed, almost certainly spelled the end of politics. These were the givens that became the foundation for a whole series of principles addressing the deterrence and avoidance of nuclear war. Of these, the principles of mutual vulnerability and of mutual invulnerability are central.

The principle of mutual vulnerability proposes that for mutual deterrence to hold, both sides must ensure that the opponent remains confident of his ability to inflict an unacceptable level of destruction



Nagasaki, Japan, under atomic bomb attack, 9 August 1945.

courtesy of Library of Congress

against the other’s civilian population. This means, for example, that neither side should build ballistic missile defenses. This principle is the essence of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD). Although the Principle of Mutual Invulnerability seems to contradict MAD, it does not. Mutual Invulnerability holds that both sides have an interest in ensuring that the other side is confident of its ability to survive a surprise first strike and then inflict unacceptable damage in a retaliatory strike. The underlying assumption is that, come a crisis, the side whose nuclear weapons could be destroyed by a surprise attack might be under pressure to use rather than lose its missiles and strike first.

These and a series of subsidiary principles dealing with such problems as how to control escalation, how to signal credibility, and so forth, in many cases constituted rejections of the old verities. Thus, the traditional principle of offensive became meaningless under the new principles of mutual vulnerability and invulnerability. Similarly, the principle of mutual invulnerability essentially denied the conventional principle of surprise. It is important to recognize, however, that the new rules of nuclear non-war did not replace their conventional predecessors. This was not a Kuhnian paradigm shift in the sense that the new principles marked a more authoritative

insight into the overall phenomenon of war.¹² Rather, the new and the old belonged to different neighborhoods of warfare.

Principles of War in the Slums

Since 1945, there have been a dozen or so conflicts that can be labeled conventional state-against-state wars. All others have been mostly intrastate wars variously called rebellions, guerilla wars, insurgency wars, wars of liberation, and so forth. Significantly, they are collectively described as “unconventional,” “irregular,” and, most recently, “asymmetric.” For our purposes here, we will use the term “insurgency.”

Insurgency has been around as long as regular warfare. One would therefore expect that a body of principles unique to it would have long been in place. Not so. The tendency has been for military professionals to treat insurgency as an exception to the rule, an anomaly that should not divert attention from “true” war and its “true” principles.¹³ The statistician would call insurgencies “outliers”—occasional exceptions to the normal and predictable distribution of events. The reality is that insurgency wars belong to an entirely different population of

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wars. To fight insurgencies according to the conventional principles would be like applying the real estate rules in suburbia to the slums in a city.

Insurgency wars embody a different relationship between politics and violence. If conventional state-against-state warfare is seen as a natural extension of international politics, and if nuclear warfare effectively spells the separation of politics and violence, then insurgencies mark the merging of politics and violence. In this kind of war, politics is violence, and violence is politics. Insurgencies are struggles about internal sovereignty; they are “competition[s] in government.”¹⁴ The insurgent’s rejection of the legitimacy of the existing system of sovereignty, or regime, means that he cannot be, by definition, part of the “normal” political process. Instead, his politics are aimed at proving and reinforcing the regime’s illegitimacy. His specific operational goal is to undermine, through violence, the most basic trappings of internal sovereignty and legitimacy: the regime’s monopoly on law and order.

One implication is that insurgent violence is directed only incidentally against the regime’s military. That is to say, the insurgent aim usually has far less to do with gaining an operational advantage—i.e., a military “victory”—than exposing the vulnerability of the regime’s principal instrument of internal sovereignty. This signifies that conventional measures of victory and defeat, such as numbers of casualties and terrain won or lost, rarely matter. In conventional wars, combatants seek to destroy each other’s military capability; in an insurgency, the rebels want to inflict pain and punishment. In the former, fighting is directed against the opponent’s physical capacity to resist; in the latter, the goal is to undermine his moral desire to continue fighting. Insurgent strategy has three targets: the regime in power, notably its security forces (including those of an outside backer); the



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General Mauricio Ernesto Vargas, right, of the Salvadoran armed forces, embraces Schafik Handel, left, commander of the FMLN, after signing of the El Salvadoran Peace Accords at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico City, Mexico, 16 January 1992. The peace accord signed by the government of El Salvador and FMLN guerrilla leaders officially ended the country’s 12-year civil war.

population at large; and in the case of an international backer, public support abroad.

As to the first target, a consistent theme in the history of insurgencies has been the difficulty regular armies have in maintaining high morale. First, by refusing to fight according to the normal rules of war—for example, by persisting despite casualties that conventional soldiers would find unacceptable—the insurgent deprives the regime soldier of the satisfaction of knowing he is getting closer to the “objective.” Frustration with lack of clear progress and with the insurgent’s “underhanded” methods has commonly led, in turn, to increasingly harsh retaliatory measures. Since all insurgency conflicts are to varying degrees “people’s wars,” and it’s difficult to tell insurgents from innocent civilians, the latter have commonly borne the brunt of any regime response. When this happens, the population tends to blame the regime. If lack of progress on the battlefield coincides with growing popular support for the insurgents (or at least growing disaffection with the regime), the third target in the insurgent’s campaign against morale becomes vulnerable: support at home for the regime’s foreign benefactor (if there is one). Because the benefactor’s stake in the conflict is usually smaller than the insurgents’, his threshold for pain is almost always lower.¹⁵ Once the insurgency’s three morale targets merge, the regime is almost certain to lose.

This leads to four clear-cut principles of insurgency wars (though there are others, no doubt). Some are deductive in the sense that they are distillations of the actual experience of insurgency conflicts; others are inductive of the basic proposition that, in this neighborhood, violence and politics are one.

● *The Principle of Morale.* Napoleon is supposed to have said that morale is to the physical as three is to one. The insurgent’s repeated ability to prevail despite being heavily outnumbered and outgunned, and despite far greater casualties, suggests that, in wars in the slums, the ratio between the two favors morale even more. This is equally true for the forces fighting the insurgents: the moral stamina to sustain the fight will weigh more heavily than the physical capacity. Moreover, just as it is the insurgents’ first

priority to undermine their opponents’ morale, so the insurgents’ morale must be the first and foremost target of the counterinsurgency effort. Maintaining the morale of forces fighting insurgents requires, first of all, that troops believe they are fighting “the right war.” Ideally, this means that soldiers believe the issue at stake is vital. Next, forces must see concrete progress on the ground. It is especially important that they understand the connections between tactical and operational actions and the strategic big picture.

● *The Principle of Objective.* This “old” principle has a different meaning in insurgency wars. First, the objective in counterinsurgencies is not to kill insurgents. For insurgent movements to thrive, they must enjoy at least passive support from a considerable portion of the people. It therefore follows that the true objective of a counterinsurgency effort at

the operational level of war is to separate the insurgents from the people. This has a political and a physical dimension. Politically, the counterinsurgency must hold out hope of a better future and a better regime than are offered by the insurgents. An important reason why the Malayan Emergency became a rare instance of insurgency defeat was the British

promise of Malayan independence. It vastly undermined the communist insurgents’ claim to legitimacy as the people’s sole champion of independence. Measures to isolate the insurgents from their popular base must be seen as reinforcing the promise of a better future. While the immediate military aim is to dry up the insurgents’ sources of recruits, intelligence, money, etcetera, the overarching political goal is to free the people of terror and intimidation and to create an environment of law and order. In this regard, the highly successful U.S. Marine Corps Combined Action Program (CAP) in Vietnam comes to mind.

There is an important corollary to the above. If the goal of separating the insurgents from the people is not undertaken early and consistently, and the insurgents are instead given the opportunity to become embedded in the population, it will be nearly impossible to dislodge them without inflicting severe collateral damage that risks aiding the insurgents in the battle for popular morale.

PRINCIPLES OF INSURGENCY
Morale
Objective
Defensive
Dispersion

● *The Principle of the Defensive.* In conventional wars, the objective is to destroy the enemy's military. Doing so naturally highlights the principle of the offensive and what Clausewitz called the *Ver-nichtungsprinzip* (principle of destruction). In insurgency wars, killing insurgents is merely a means to the true objective of separating the insurgents from their population base. The priority of the new principle of the defensive follows logically. It does not deny the need for offensive search-and-destroy tactics *when there is good intelligence*. But the key operational presumption is that counterinsurgency forces are mainly in business to protect a given piece of territory and its inhabitants. In this sense, the counterinsurgency's purpose resembles that of anti-submarine forces in World War I. Initially, the British Navy sought to defeat Germany's U-boats by applying the offensive hunt-and-kill tactics that had served it so well in past wars on the surface of the seas. When the offensive strategy failed and the British recognized that their real goal should be to maximize the safety of shipping and cargoes, not sink U-boats, the defensive convoy system was introduced.

● *The Principle of Dispersion.* The new principles of objective and the defensive dictate that concentration of force, so essential to the conventional battlefield, makes little sense in an insurgency environment.¹⁶ In the first place, it has been shown time and again that insulating the people from the insurgents requires a strategy of garrisoning—the establishment and gradual expansion throughout the countryside and urban areas of small but mutually reinforcing and very mobile military

strong points. Insurgent raiding parties are usually small in number; in a fight with an equal number of professional soldiers, they almost always lose. This suggests that outposts should be built around company-sized units. Battalions or even larger formations are too big, too unwieldy, and have historically been shown to be too slow in responding to sudden emergencies. Physical dispersion must go hand-in-hand with dispersed command and control. It may be argued that this strategy will be highly vulnerable to the third and last phase of a Maoist people's war, when insurgents have coalesced into full-blown regular armies. On the contrary. New technologies in the areas of reconnaissance, surveillance, and mobility strengthen the case for friendly dispersion, and *invite* enemy concentration.

Ideal and Real Principles of War

Clausewitz makes an important distinction between the abstract phenomenon of “ideal” war and the practice of “real” war. The first, he says, only exists in a theoretical world in which the collision of arms is uninhibited by chance, friction, and the intervention of politics. The “laws of probability,” he claims, determine the ebb and flow of real war.¹⁷ The conventional principles of war are the U.S. military's “ideal” principles; they are the do's and don'ts for fighting the kind of wars America excels at. We cannot exclude future conventional conflicts, in which case some, if not all, of the “old” principles will serve us well. But given America's excellence at this kind of warmaking, the laws of probability dictate that most “real” wars of the future will likely be fought in the slums. **MR**

NOTES

1. Unless specified otherwise, the term “principles of war” refers to the U.S. military's nine principles: objective, offensive, economy of force, mass, maneuver, unity of command, simplicity, surprise, and security.

2. Tom Holt, *The Walled Orchard* (London: Little, Brown and Co., 2001), 346-47.

3. For an account of the Athenians' Sicilian campaign, see Donald Kagan, *The Peace of Nicias and the Sicilian Expedition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981). The events in the olive grove are related on pages 347-48.

4. Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 35-36.

5. Kagan, 333.

6. On the classical Greeks' disdain for projectile weapons, see Hanson, 15-16.

7. An example of how a modern-day principle of war would have been meaningless for armies of the past concerns the Macedonian phalanx. Armed with long, heavy spears, it was almost unbeatable in a set-piece battle in open terrain. It was also incapable of maneuver; for example, it could not deal with a sudden threat to its flanks. Its final demise came in 168 BC at Pydna in modern-day Greece, when it was defeated by a more maneuverable Roman legion.

8. The influence of “intelligence asymmetry” on operations during the German campaign of 1940 raises possibly interesting questions about the stability of the principles of war in an information-rich combat environment.

9. See, for example, *British Maritime Doctrine BR 1806*, 2d ed. (Norwich: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1999), 229.

10. For a brief explanation of the Theory of Everything, or the “theory to end theories,” see Brian Greene, “A Theory of Everything?” <www.pbs.org/wgbh/nowa/elegant/everything.html>

11. Bernard Brodie, *The Absolute Weapon* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1946), cited in Lawrence Freedman, *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 44.

12. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

13. Two early and outstanding exceptions are C.E. Callwell's *Small Wars—Their Principles and Practice* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1899) and the U.S. Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual*, first published in 1940.

14. Richard L. Clutterbuck, *The Long, Long War: Counter-Insurgency in Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), cited in Robert B. Asprey, *War in the Shadows: The Guerilla History*, vol. 2 (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1994), 788.

15. This is one of the themes of Gil Merom's *How Democracies Lose Small Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

16. Asprey, 787.

17. Clausewitz's discussion of “ideal” and “real” war is contained in Book One of *On War*. See the edited and translated version by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75-89.