

THE AMERICAN WAY OF WAR

First Year Seminar, Fall 2021
Will Reno: reno-at-northwestern-dot-edu
Tuesdays & Thursdays, 11:00 to 12:20,
Library 3322
This syllabus is available at www.willreno.org

OVERVIEW

This course traces the development of American military strategy in the pursuit of various political objectives. The course begins with the War for Independence when US armed forces fought a guerrilla war campaign to defeat a far superior British force and compel Britain's political establishment to recognize American political autonomy. The US Civil War turned tables: Victory followed a military strategy of applying overwhelming force to defeat separatists and compel them to submit to the US government's political will. As during the War for Independence, the weaker force resorted to selective use of guerrilla tactics. But in this case the weaker force failed to achieve its objective. The application of overwhelming force to annihilate the Civil War adversary shaped US involvement in the First and Second World Wars and remains a vital influence on strategic thinking that continues to shape the organization and the culture of our armed forces.

This legacy, very much an influence on American strategic thinking, confronts serious challenges that this course will consider: What is the utility of force in our nuclear age when its use against a nuclear-armed adversary seems only to promise massive retaliation and mutual annihilation? The Iraq War of 2003-2011 and recently concluded US military operation in Afghanistan raise a host of questions about the utility of force when seemingly weaker adversaries prevail against all that might. The overall picture of these conflicts has been an inability to accomplish the strategic aim of bending far weaker guerrilla forces to American political will despite notable tactical successes. Yet the campaign against the Islamic State from 2014 to 2019 appears to show how the selective application of superior US military force can play an important role in annihilating that adversary.

Our attention then turns to how contemporary military strategists, planners, and operators address these dilemmas. We consider the increased reliance on Special Operations Forces and other means designed to counter adversaries and to help friendly governments fight their own wars. We visit debates about targeted killings (i.e., drones), private military service companies, new autonomous weapons systems, and the integration of artificial intelligence technologies into the conduct of warfare. All raise serious political and ethical issues.

We then assess some broad challenges to defining military strategy in our era: How do we know if we are at war? Is a cyber-attack an act of war? Are we at "war" when an adversarial state uses "fake news" and other influence operations to promote domestic political turmoil within the US, a weaponization of an adversary's domestic social divisions, to advance its national interests at the expense of US power in the world? What is the utility of a conventional military force in a world of Great Power competition when adversaries can use the institutions and rules upon which US global dominance rests to weaken US global power?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & GRADING

Students need to complete the reading assignments listed under each meeting before the actual class meeting. Grades will be based on the following criteria:

- **Attendance and Participation (10%):** Every student is expected to attend every virtual class meeting and be prepared to engage with required reading material and with fellow students. Questions are provided with each meeting's reading assignment to provide a basis for discussion. Students are most welcome to pose other questions and issues.
- **Reflection Comments (30%):** From Week Two to Week Six of class (from Tuesday, 28 September through Thursday, 28 October) each student will (1) write a brief one to two paragraph reflection on one of the assigned readings, and (2) respond to reflections of other students.

The class will be divided into two groups, **Red Team** and **Blue Team**. Each week the **Red Team** will take the lead as each team member submits reflections by midnight Monday evening so that the **Blue Team** members can respond to these reflections in the Tuesday class meeting. Then on Wednesday evening each **Blue Team** member will post reflections so that **Red Team** members can respond to these posts in Thursday's class.

- **Bibliographic Essay (30%):** Each student will write an essay of about four pages [double-space, 12-point type] that presents the arguments of two or three authors of readings assigned for this course. The aim in this essay is to highlight the prominent idea of each author and to explain how these ideas are in dialogue (or in contention) over an important topic covered in this course. This assignment is due before class on **Thursday, 11 November**. We will discuss what a good bibliographic essay looks like and how to write their essays before this assignment is due.
- **Review & Advise Essay (30%):** Each student will write an essay of about four pages [double-spaced, 12-point type] in which the student offers advice about how to address a dilemma of US military strategy covered in this course. The essay's purpose is to take a position in a debate about one dilemma (of the many that will become apparent in due course) and to do so in a way that reviews contending positions in a debate. This essay is due before the final class meeting on **Tuesday, 23 November**.

BOOK & OTHER READING MATERIAL

Russell Weigley. 1973. *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*. Indiana University Press (ISBN: 978-0-253-28029-9)

- ➔ This book is available via your favorite book seller & via the course Canvas site.
- ➔ Other reading materials are available through links on the electronic syllabus and / or the password-protected Canvas site for this course

GOALS OF THIS COURSE

The primary goal of this course is to lead students to their own understanding of theories and empirical evidence regarding historical and contemporary debates about US military strategy. This will require reading course material, discussing it in class, and writing essays based on readings, discussions and one's own analysis of core issues related to fighting wars. Additional goals include:

- Educate students regarding the nature and evolution of American warfighting strategies.
- Understand the substance of debates over American warfighting strategies.
- Examine questions that these warfighting strategies present to policy makers and citizens.
- Recognize the priorities and underlying assumptions of policy responses to conflicts.
- Promote critical analysis of the impact of technological innovations on warfighting.
- Gain an understanding of past and current norms concerning the conduct of war.
- Understand varied interpretations and debates about the role of international law in the conduct of warfare.
- Promote student capacities to read social science research, and understand and be prepared to debate its approaches and findings,

LEARNING OUTCOMES

At the end of the course, students should be able to:

- Have the capacity to distinguish among different warfighting strategies in their analysis of any conflict that they encounter.
- Evaluate the relative efficacy of different strategies in armed conflicts and understand why various actors in conflicts adopt particular strategies.
- Understand and explain why actors in some conflicts are more prone to certain kinds of violence against noncombatants.
- Understand and explain the role that official policies (i.e., counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, et al.) play in contemporary conflicts.
- Make informed judgements about the efficacy of policies and tradeoffs that policy choices entail.
- Think about and discuss plausible directions in which US military strategy might evolve to address new challenges.
- Critically evaluate how (and whether) social science theories can inform the public and government officials about the nature of warfighting generally and about specific contemporary conflicts.

AN ADDITIONAL NOTE: Materials for this course may contain graphic imagery of war and analyses & points of view that some may find distressing. At various stages of the course videos will be shown. Students will be warned of content prior to viewing.

AND THE COVID-19 STATEMENT

Students, faculty, and staff must comply with University expectations regarding appropriate classroom behavior, including those outlined below and in the [COVID-19 Code of Conduct](#). With respect to classroom procedures, this includes:

- Policies regarding masking and social distancing evolve as the public health situation changes. Students are responsible for understanding and complying with current masking, testing, Symptom Tracking, and social distancing requirements.
- In some classes, masking and/or social distancing may be required as a result of an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accommodation for the instructor or a student in the class even when not generally required on campus. In such cases, the instructor will notify the class.
- No food is allowed inside classrooms. Drinks are permitted, but please keep your face covering on and use a straw.
- Faculty may assign seats in some classes to help facilitate contact tracing in the event that a student tests positive for COVID-19. Students must sit in their assigned seats.

If a student fails to comply with the [COVID-19 Code of Conduct](#) or other University expectations related to COVID-19, the instructor may ask the student to leave the class. The instructor is asked to report the incident to the Office of Community Standards for additional follow-up.

ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Northwestern University is committed to providing the most accessible learning environment as possible for students with disabilities. Should you anticipate or experience disability-related barriers in the academic setting, please contact AccessibleNU to move forward with the university's established accommodation process (e: accessiblenu@northwestern.edu; p: 847-467-5530). If you already have established accommodations with AccessibleNU, please let me know as soon as possible, preferably within the first two weeks of the term, so we can work together to implement your disability accommodations. Disability information, including academic accommodations, is confidential under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY STATEMENT

Students in this course are required to comply with the policies found in the booklet, "Academic Integrity at Northwestern University: A Basic Guide". All papers submitted for credit in this course must be submitted electronically unless otherwise instructed by the professor. Your written work may be tested for plagiarized content. For details regarding academic integrity at Northwestern or to download the guide, visit: <https://www.northwestern.edu/provost/policies/academic-integrity/index.html>

CLASS SCHEDULE

Part I: Attrition to Annihilation

Tuesday, 21 September: This session is an opportunity to re-engage after Wildcat Welcome activities and to discuss the aims and objectives of this first-year seminar. This meeting also gives us an opportunity to do a comms check to make sure that we're properly connected. Then perhaps we can discuss what a course on the American Way of War is about.

→ No assigned readings for this class meeting

Thursday, 23 September: Waging war with limited resources and pursuit of a strategy of attrition. Winning by surviving was possible through the avoidance of enemy concentrations. Nathaniel Greene: Crafting a guerrilla warfare strategy that forced the dispersal of superior British forces and leveraged guerrilla relations with non-combatants. Guerrilla forces show how to make a strong army become weak as it fights the weak.

Weigley. 1973. *American Way of War*, 3-58

Tuesday, 28 September: The rise of a naval strategy oriented toward defense and the impact of steam powered warships. Winfield Scott applies Jomini's strategy in Mexico. Dennis Hart Mahan and Napoleon's strategy of annihilation The Civil War. The Confederacy's defensive strategy of winning through surviving, transformed under R.E. Lee to an offensive-defensive strategy to take battles to the North. Sherman's and Grant's use of indirect means informs a military strategy of mass and concentration to wage war against the adversary's economy and political system. What was the logic of terror campaigns against civilians, and did it work?

Weigley. 1973. *American Way of War*, 59-163.

Thursday, 30 September: Combatants and civilians in the Civil War. The identification problem: Who is a combatant and who is a non-combatant? What is the relationship between different uses of violence (discriminate versus indiscriminate) and non-combatant behavior? What is the role of international humanitarian law in the conduct of war?

Clay Mountcastle. 2009. "Proving Ground for Punishment: Pope, Halleck and Schofield in Missouri," in his *Punitive War: Confederate Guerrillas and Union Reprisals*, (University of Kansas), 21-55.

Stephen Ash. 1995. "Rebels and Conquerors," in his *When the Yankees Came: Chaos and Violence in the Occupied South*, (University of North Carolina), 38-75.

Tuesday, 5 October: Sea power and Empire: Stephen B Luce and Alfred Thayer Mahan explain why the US needs a strong navy. The Great War experience supports the argument for mechanized forces to break the defensive deadlock. Billy Mitchell's argument for air power in an offensive operation. Plan ORANGE and the development of a strategic approach to a Pacific Ocean war

Weigley. 1973. *American Way of War*, 167-265

Thursday, 7 October: The strategic logic of A.T. Mahan. The argument for a focus on maritime dominance and the destruction of Japan's battle fleet. UK–US debate in the European war over envelopment versus concentration and mass strategy. The application of concentration and mass destroyed the German army. Strategic bombardment and debate over the appropriate target—German civilians (Douhet doctrine) or Germany's economy (daylight precision bombing)

Weigley. 1973. *American Way of War*, 269-359.

Tuesday, 12 October: Transformational technologies: How did atomic weapons lead to a strategic revolution? What is the impact of the strategy of deterrence on warfighting plans? Can combats be included in a viable nuclear strategy? Is discipline and restraint compatible with the maintenance of a military geared toward winning wars through the destruction of the enemy's armed forces?

Weigley. 1973. *American Way of War*, 363-440

Thursday, 14 October: Vietnam and the dilemma of applying a military strategy of annihilation and political strategy of limited objectives. Do wars of annihilation work in "struggles of national liberation?" Are counterinsurgency and nation-building remedies? The Powell Doctrine and the return to the strategy of annihilation of the enemy's forces. The start of US military's three decades-plus engagement in Iraq. Is there a place for annihilation in US strategy?

Weigley. 1973. *American Way of War*, 441-477.

Joint Chiefs of Staff. 1992. [*National Military Strategy of the United States*](#). [The Powell Doctrine]

MAJ Frank Hoffman. 1994. [Decisive Force: The New American Way of War?](#) Naval War College, 156-193.

Part II: Recent & Contemporary Ways of War The Challenge of Fighting Wars of Attrition

Tuesday, 19 October: Fighting wars of attrition with a military largely designed to fight a war of annihilation. How does counterinsurgency (COIN) define victory? Hearts and minds versus combats as a COIN strategy. Is COIN a strategy or a collection of tactics? Are lessons from the past integrated in the development of COIN, and are these lessons meaningful in the contemporary context of warfare?

Max Boot. 2003. "[The New American Way of War](#)," *Foreign Affairs*, 82: 4, (July / Aug), 41-58.

Eliot Cohen, Conrad Crane, Jr., John Horvath & John Nagl. 2006. "[Principles, Imperatives, and Paradoxes of Counterinsurgency](#)," *Military Review*, (March-April), 49-53.

Gian P. Gentile. 2009. "[A Strategy of Tactics](#): Population-centric COIN and the Army," *Parameters: Journal of the Army War College* (Autumn), 5-17.

Steven Metz. 2017. "[Abandoning Counterinsurgency](#): Revising Antiterrorism Strategy," *Parameters*, 13-23.

Thursday, 21 October: Fighting wars in states in which partner governments lack the political will and / or capacity to fight. Learning the hard way about dealing with insurgents, or is it just lather, rinse, and repeat? The importance of ground-level information: how much information is enough information? What does counterinsurgency say about whether experience defines what we will, can, or must do in the future? When we repeat mistakes, is it because we are forced to because of bad habits, or have we failed to embrace the challenges of wars of attrition?

Karl Eikenberry. 2013. "The [Limits of Counterinsurgency](#) Doctrine in Afghanistan: The Other Side of the COIN," *Foreign Affairs*, 59 (Sept/Oct), 59-74.

Mike Martin. 2014. "From the US Re-engagement: 'Counterinsurgency', 2009-12," in his *An Intimate War: An Oral History of the Helmand Conflict*. Hurst & Co., 195-231.

Tuesday, 26 October: Going Big--Stabilization Operations - "Whole-of-government" approaches to overseas operations. Is this just another name for state-building? Can we identify a case of a successful stabilization operation? Are stabilization operations new? What place, if any, is there for an emphasis on democratic governance? Is stabilization in Afghanistan the same as "winning" in Afghanistan?

Department of Defense. 2005 [*Directive 3000.05: Military Support for Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction \(SSTR\) Operations*](#), 28 Nov. (These few pages save all but those with lots of time on their hands from the 250 page [*Joint Publication 3-07, Stability*](#).)

Jennifer Taw. 2012. "Explaining the Military Mission Revolution," in her *Mission Revolution: The U.S. Military and Stability Operations*, Columbia University Press, 109-140.

Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. 2021. "Introduction," "Context," and "Monitoring and Evaluation" in [*What We Need to Learn: Lessons from Twenty Years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*](#). Arlington, VA; SIGAR, 1-8, 71-94.

Thursday, 28 October: Going Small--Light Footprints - the utility of applying military force in countries with which America is not at war. The ascendancy of [Special Forces](#) and of foreign military training operations: How & why does the US train foreign soldiers? Title 10 and Title 50 operations. Should US troops be in Syria, and what are they doing there?

Andrew Feikert. 2018. [*US Special Operations Forces \(SOF\): Background and Issues for Congress*](#). Congressional Research Service. (13pp.)

US Special Operations Command. 2018. [*USASOC 2035*](#).

Daniel Byman & Ian Merritt. 2018. "The [New American Way of War](#): Special Operations Forces in the War on Terrorism," *Washington Quarterly*, 41:2, 79-93.

Lt. Col. Jahara Matisek & William Reno. 2019. "Getting [American Security Force Assistance](#) Right," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, 92, 65-73.

Barnett Koven & Chris Mason. 2021 "[Back to the Future](#): Getting Special Forces Ready for Great Power Competition," *War on the Rocks*, 4 May & Jeff Schogol. 2021. "[US Troops are in Syria](#) and Nobody Can Give a Good Answer as to Why," *Task & Purpose*, 16 Sept.

Tuesday, 2 November: Private military service companies, i.e., "contractors." Under what conditions might private sector security be effective? Does the use of private security services

affect the place of the military in US society? How does the use of private security companies affect elected and other officials' decisions about the use of force? A case study of one firm.

Deborah Avant & Renée de Nevers. 2011. "Military Contractors & the American Way of War," *Daedalus* 140: 3 (Summer), 88-99.

Christopher Spearin. 2014. "Special Operations Forces & [Private Security Companies](#)," *Parameters*, 44:2 (Summer), 61-73.

Thursday, 4 November: Drones and the continuing quest for more information, speed, and precision. Are drones precise? Controversies over targeting: how do "collateral damage" (the killing of civilians, unintentional targets) matter? Do new technologies of this sort obviate the limitations of strategies? Do tactics drive "strategy"?

Daniel Byman. 2013. "Why Drones Work: The Case for Washington's Weapon of Choice," *Foreign Affairs*, 92:4 (July/Aug), 32-43.

Audrey Kurth Cronin. 2013. "Why Drones Fail: When Tactics Drive Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, 92:4 (July/Aug), 44-54.

Material on drones & AI in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (2020) to follow.

Part III: Present and Future Ways of War: What is War? What is the Contemporary Utility of Force?

Tuesday, 9 November: Hybrid Warfare I: Is hybrid warfare just old-fashioned political warfare with new tools? How does one know if one is at war? Consider the dilemma of distinguishing acceptable political activities from subversion. What is the significance of non-American views on hybrid warfare?

George Kennan. "Policy Planning [Memorandum](#)," 4 May 1948, National Archives and Records Administration, RG 273, Records of the National Security Council, NSC 10/2.

Frank Hoffman. 2009. "[Hybrid Warfare](#) and Challenges," *Joint Force Quarterly*, 52, 34-39.

General Valery Gerasimov. 2013. "[The Value of Science in Prediction](#)," originally published in *Military-Industrial Kurier*, 27 February.

Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, 1999. [*Unrestricted Warfare*](#), PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, especially 124-148.

Thursday, 11 November: Hybrid Warfare II – information warfare: Is the role of cyber activities in warfare a transformation? What is the role of information operations in an offensive strategy? Is the offense–defense distinction relevant in the cyber realm? Does (or should) law play a special role in the conduct of information operations, when compared to other kinds of warfare?

Thomas Zeitzoff. 2017. “How Social Media is Changing Conflict,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 61: 9, 1970-1991.

Office of the Director of National Intelligence. 2017. [*Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections*](#). (Update and analysis in Scott Shane & Mark Mazzetti. 2018. “[The Plot to Subvert and Election](#): Unraveling the Russia Story So Far,” *New York Times*, 20 Sept.

Clint Watts. 2017. [Statement](#) Prepared for the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence hearing, “Disinformation: A Primer In Russian Active Measures and Influence Campaigns,” 30 March.

(Not required: US Senate. 2019. [Report of the Select Committee on Intelligence, United States Senate, on Russian Active Measures Campaign in the 2016 US Election](#), President of the United States of America. 2018. [National Cyber Strategy](#); Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 3-12 (R), [Cyberspace Operations](#)).

Bibliographic Essay is due

Tuesday, 16 November: Tech futures? How do strategists think about the roles and impacts on the American way of war of nanotechnology, artificial intelligence, human brain–machine interface and other technological innovations? [Force 2025 and Beyond](#), [Army Rapid Capabilities Office](#) &c. Is AI an invitation to an arms race? What are the implications of AI for a strategy of annihilation?

Zachary Davis. 2019. [Artificial Intelligence on the Battlefield: An Initial Survey of Potential Implications for Deterrence, Stability and Strategic Surprise](#). Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

Department of Defense. 2019. [Summary of the 2018 Department of Defense Artificial Intelligence Strategy](#).

Michael Horowitz. 2018. “[Artificial Intelligence, International Competition, and the Balance of Power](#),” *Texas National Security Review*, 1:3 (May), 36-57.

Thursday, 18 November: Great Power Competition: Recognizing the reality of competition while maintaining American military advantages and deterring challenges from Russia and China. Does the new NDS offer a strategic roadmap or an ideological roadmap? Are we preparing for our preferred way of war, and what happens if situations (hybrid warfare, consequences of climate change, pandemics) present security threats?

Department of Defense. 2018. [*Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*](#).

Fred Kaplan, 2019. The Decade Big Power Politics Returned, [*Slate*](#), 16 Dec.

Colby, Elbridge Colby & A. Wess Mitchell. 2020. "The Age of Great-Power Competition: How the Trump Administration Refashioned American Strategy." *Foreign Affairs*, 99:1 (Jan.-Feb), 118-130.

Tuesday, 23 November: Schismogenesis ("the creation of division") to weaponize society. Social media warriors and the complicated prospect of internal defense. Is propagation of "fake news" subversion in an open society? Can an open society defend itself?

Buddhika Jayamaha & Jahara Matisek. 2019. "Social Media Warriors: Leveraging a New Battlespace," [*Parameters*](#), 48:4, 11-24.

Michael Mazarr, et al. 2019. "The Death of Reality" and "The Emerging Risk of Virtual Societal Warfare," in their [*Emerging Risk of Virtual Societal Warfare*](#). (RAND), 97-116 & 153-169.

Review & Advise Essay due

Additional Resources

[War on the Rocks](#) provides what they call “experience-based commentary and analysis on national security affairs.” The site features commentary and analysis that brings together debates about policy and operations. It’s generally regarded among experts as among the more credible fact-based online venues of this sort. It attracts contributions from leading figures in the field.

[Strategy Bridge](#) publishes essays on strategy, national security, and military affairs. Its *Journal* focuses on ‘big picture’ topics and reviews of recent books. Its podcast series provides in-depth interviews with academic and policy experts on enduring issues that occupy the minds of people who think about strategy.

[Small Wars Journal](#) “facilitates the exchange of information among practitioners, thought leaders, and students of Small Wars, in order to advance knowledge and capabilities in the field.” It is run by a private foundation, and its editor-in-chief is a retired USMCR Intelligence and Counterintelligence / HUMINT officer. Contributions tend to be from diverse perspectives and are sourced to varying degrees of reliability.

[Lawfare](#) publishes essays at the intersection of law, legal institutions, and national security topics, which include (among many others), topics such as cybersecurity, targeted killing, and secrecy & leaks, etc. The site is generally regarded as having a moderate-liberal bias, is reliably sourced, and usually has more academic contributors than most other sites. Contributors include scholars, and military and civilian experts. The editor-in-chief is a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institute.

The [Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs](#) is a think-tank affiliated with Harvard University, a big school out East. I suspect that the more seasoned among you may already know it. This center’s mission includes advancing policy-relevant information about threats to U.S. national interests and international security threats. It is widely regarded as superior in terms of unbiased and well sourced factual reporting.

The [Center for a New American Security](#) is a Washington, D.C.-based think tank which specializes in U.S. national security issues. It strives to produce research that will inform bipartisan policy debate. The co-founders include a former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy and a former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

[Defense One](#) is an online news site that reports primarily on matters relating to national defense and security and is owned by Atlantic Media. It reports on recent developments and provides analysis for a policy. It is regarded as reliably well-sourced and accurate among “security professionals” that include government officials, members of the military, and industry.

[Task & Purpose](#) provides news and analysis by and for the military community and the interested wider public. The site also covers general topics of military culture, history, opinion, and essays on post-military career advice. (For more humor, try [Duffelblog](#).)