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Spencer D. Bakich, *Success and Failure in Limited War: Information and Strategy in the Korean, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and Iraq Wars*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014. P: xiii, 329. ISBN 978-0-226-10771-4.

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Fifty-five years ago, Kenneth Waltz speculated that the “mutual fear of big weapons may produce, instead of peace, a spate of smaller wars.”¹ His informed guess proved to be right on the money. There have been no nuclear wars, but the world has averaged about thirty “smaller wars” ongoing at any given time since his prediction. These conflicts have varied in intensity, duration, and number of participants, but almost all have been conducted with some sense of bounds, well short of the sort of “total war” that Joseph Goebbels ranted about during World War II. Many have been irregular in nature, waged by insurgents who have, often successfully, challenged the strength, will, and military expertise of opposing conventional forces.

The extensive literature on small wars began with a focus on fighting in the shadow of weapons of mass destruction; even contemplated “tactical” nuclear strikes were to be confined to military targets.² Jimmy Carter’s Presidential Directive 59 outlined just such a “counterforce” doctrine. The infeasibility of this option quickly became clear. President Ronald Reagan put it starkly: “A nuclear war cannot be won, and must never be fought.” This was a tacit announcement of a looming age of limited conflict. Yet, despite all the interest in preparing for short, sharp wars, including counterinsurgency and counterterrorism efforts at various operational levels, no effective conceptual basis for such conflicts has been formulated.

In *Success and Failure in Limited War*, Spencer Bakich (Sweet Briar College) has taken a big step toward plugging that gap by stressing and clarifying the much tighter bonds between military action and diplomacy in limited wars. During the Second World War, diplomats mostly fell silent while the cannons roared. By contrast, in limited wars, they may play crucial roles in preventing escalation—a key concern in this type of conflict. The often glaring asymmetries of strength in smaller wars require the better armed party to exert the right amount of force in the right way.

To navigate this complex strategic terrain, Bakich fixes on “information institutions,” that is “information extraction and conversion capacities ... [which] can be seen as *causing* strategic choice” (14, my emphasis). In the American case, information institutions include military, diplomatic, intelligence, and other national security decision-makers. The author surveys the activity and varying fortunes of the National Security Council from the Korean War (1950–53) to the invasion and occupation of Iraq (2003–2011).

For each of his case studies, Bakich tests his favored hypothesis against two alternative explanations—the influence of organizational culture and the state of civil-military relations. Unsurprisingly, he finds that the information institutions approach has the greatest explanatory power. But he does fairly assess the results of all three theories and musters impressive archival evidence. Indeed, his account of strategic discourse prior to Operation Desert Storm closely corresponds to my personal memories as a participant in some of these discussions. Bakich is correct, for example, in emphasizing that planning for the bold “left hook” invasion route in Iraq met with significant resistance by the military services.

The best example of Bakich’s fair-mindedness is his treatment of the Korean War. After Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s brilliant amphibious assault at Inchon, US troops kept pushing north to the Yalu River, despite very clear warnings from the Chinese of their intention to intervene. Bakich observes that “on numerous occasions MacArthur’s command failed to provide accurate, complete, and timely information pertaining to

1. *Man, the State, and War* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 1959) 236.

2. See, e.g., Henry Kissinger, *Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy* (NY: Harper, 1957), and Robert E. Osgood, *Limited War: The Challenge to American Strategy* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 1957).

American fortunes on the battlefield" (94). But he also makes clear that, in this case, "organizational culture theory" (96) helps us better understand the Far East Command's approach to the war. In particular, poor civil-military relations contributed to the crisis, because "civilian intrusion into matters of war was deemed inappropriate" (96) by the armed services. Flawed or incomplete information was often the byproduct of difficult interactions between civilian and military leaders or narrow organizational preferences.

Bakich argues that the wars in Vietnam and Iraq are best understood from the perspective of his information institutions theory. But, in Vietnam, matters of organizational culture had far stronger effects on the conduct of the war than he acknowledges. The services' preference for a "big unit" war drove policy and profoundly influenced the kind of information President Lyndon Johnson was receiving. By contrast, in the first Iraq war (1990–91), healthy civil-military relations ensured that timely, high value information reached the decision-makers who devised and implemented the left hook strategy in the field.

The author's approach really proves its worth in explaining the debacle of the second Iraq war. His analysis of the co-optation of intelligence, the virtual crippling of the National Security Council, and systemic organizational flaws is both compelling and deeply troubling. *Success and Failure in Limited War* would be an even better book, however, if Bakich had addressed three matters more thoroughly: the definition of limited war, his basis for case selection, and his judgments about the outcomes of the wars he studies.

Bakich defines limited war as falling between conflicts involving great powers in total wars, on one end of the spectrum, and small wars "entailing minimal mobilization commitments for the state," on the other. "Limited" in his usage denotes not level of effort, but an effective desire to keep the number of participants to a minimum. Thus, limited wars "are waged at a high level of intensity ... [but] with restraint in order to avoid undesired escalation" (21). In taking this position, he differs from strategic thinkers like Henry Kissinger and Robert Osgood,³ and, indeed, from that master of limited warfare, Otto von Bismarck, who single-mindedly determined that the aims pursued in the German Wars of Unification were strictly defined and achievable.

I would have liked more specifics about what types of limited military actions might be allowed and when and where they might take place. And, too, it needs stressing that one belligerent's limited war can be the other's total war—as the United States learned in Vietnam. Further, limited war aims can expand to encompass far larger objectives, as when in Korea the goal of liberating the South evolved into an attempt to conquer the North.

As to case selection, Bakich chooses to explore American involvement in limited wars since World War II because of their diversity of outcomes and because they took place both during the international system of the Cold War dominated by the USSR and the United States, as well as during the US "unipolar" period. Neither rationale particularly supports the author's case for the decisive role of information institutions in strategic decision-making. It is curious and unfortunate that he omits the Kosovo War; that intense 78-day air war against the Serbs featured tricky diplomatic maneuvering to keep the Russians out and get them to accept NATO's position. Some consideration of the protracted Afghan war, too, would have allowed Bakich to evaluate the role of information institutions in American strategic decision-making, in particular, their interplay with military organizational culture.

Another area of concern is the author's judgments of the results of the limited wars he analyzes. Many readers will question his conclusion that the Korean War "resulted in both military and diplomatic defeats for the United States" (57). Yes, American troops were driven back from the Yalu, but South Korea was after all saved from communist takeover. The failure to prevent Chinese military intervention should not be the sole or chief criterion of American success on the peninsula. Conversely, though China was prevented from fully intervening in Vietnam, Beijing did provide some support and manpower in limited roles and the war ended with the fall of Saigon and the costly unraveling of US strategy and policy in the region. Bakich takes too little account of such more commonly held views of these wars.

3. See note 2 above.

These concerns aside, Spencer Bakich has opened a rich new vein of research into international relations in matters of war and peace. *Success and Failure in Limited War* will inform and guide future students of civil and military decision-making in crisis and conflict for years to come.