

# Guerrillas in the mist: reassessing strategy and low intensity warfare

M.L.R. SMITH\*

**Abstract.** The argument advanced here seeks to demonstrate that terms like ‘guerrilla warfare’ and ‘low intensity conflict’ are fundamentally flawed. They do not exist as proper categories of war. Often they constitute inappropriate distinctions that impede intellectual understanding of internal war phenomena, which has in the past had a negative impact upon policymaking. The usage of these terms in strategic studies literature does not facilitate understanding but rather undermines the attempt to comprehend the complexity of warfare as a whole. What we call low intensity conflict can be fully understood – can only be understood – within Clausewitzian parameters, which embrace the entire spectrum of war.

## **Introduction: a ‘new’ old phenomenon?**

While the attacks of 11 September 2001 on New York and Washington DC may have caused us to revise our threat perceptions in the international environment, making us more sensitive to the dangers posed by violent non-state actors and raising popular awareness of issues like ‘international terrorism’, it is important to realise that notions of low intensity warfare and sub-state threats were receiving considerable attention in writings on military and international affairs for at least ten years previously. A wide spectrum of opinion held it to be the most prominent form of conflict with which the international system would be confronted in the years ahead. Commendably, in many ways, analysts identified most of the long-term antecedents that were to manifest themselves in the events of 11 September. In particular, they highlighted anxieties about the capacity of economic globalisation to erode state authority and stimulate internal substate challenges resulting in violent disintegration. These concerns led some to speculate that the world was facing the growth of low intensity conflict in the guise of ‘new war’ in much the same way as we might talk about the ‘new economy’.<sup>1</sup> New war encompasses organised resistance to the homogenising effects of the global information age. This, it was contended, bred an assertive identity politics based on ethnicity and religious fundamentalism that possessed the capacity to generate publicity, raise money and

\* I wish to thank Nicholas Khoo and Frank Scott Douglas, both of Columbia University, Bruce Hoffman of RAND and David Martin Jones of the University of Tasmania for their help and insights during the writing of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 1–12.

purchase arms – somewhat ironically making full use of those very same global communications in the process<sup>2</sup> – in order to spread terror and instability in pursuit of their goals.<sup>3</sup> What initially prompted the resurgence of interest in low intensity conflict were the vicious wars of dissolution in the territories of the former Yugoslavia and former Soviet Union in the wake of the Cold War's demise. These provided the foretaste of the new wars to come. The prospectus was, commentators maintained, for the continuing rise in low intensity warfare.

Conflict and instability arising out of non-state threats, most graphically exemplified by the outrages in New York and Washington DC, and the increasing transnational problems they pose, plainly warrant the prominence with which politicians and diplomats have treated such problems since September 2001. The concern of this article, however, is not with the absolute necessity of controlling and eliminating these threats, but the way in which analysts have in the past often described and analysed such violence. The central contention of this argument is that we should think more carefully about the way we use descriptions like 'low intensity conflict', 'terrorism' and 'guerrilla warfare', and ask ourselves whether these terms really assist us in aiding our comprehension of the source and direction of many of these important conflicts?

Despite a sense that these manifestations of conflict constitute an increasing danger,<sup>4</sup> particularly given the growth of religiously motivated violence,<sup>5</sup> there is, of course, nothing intrinsically new in non-state insurgent challenges, either as a phenomenon or as an object of study. As the list on Table 1 reveals, we have gained over many years a familiarity with numerous terms to describe low intensity conflict. Guerrilla warfare, insurgency and terrorism are well established in the popular lexicon. The roster continues to expand if one includes synonyms of more recent provenance such as 'complex emergencies', 'intra-state war' and 'ethnic conflict'. However, the list also indicates that while some of these terms may delineate different aspects of the same issue, many of these descriptions are often used interchangeably despite sometimes having incompatible meanings, thus betraying a large element of definitional confusion.

### **The problem with guerrilla warfare: it doesn't exist**

The sheer number of different terms denoting more or less the same activity is symptomatic of the difficulty in trying to identify a particular category of war imbued with its own distinct characteristics. The resulting confusion in definitions and the occlusion of different terms and meanings has been noted by a number of

<sup>2</sup> Oliver Roy, 'Islam, Iran and the New Terrorism', *Survival*, 42 (2000), p. 160.

<sup>3</sup> See Steven Simon and Daniel Benjamin, 'America and the New Terrorism', *Survival*, 42 (2000), pp. 59–75; Michael Ignatieff, *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (London: BBC/Chatto & Windus, 1993), pp. 1–11; Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs. MacWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World Order* (New York: Ballantine, 1996), chs.15 and 19; Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), pp. 19–29.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Metz, 'Insurgency After the Cold War', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 5 (1994), pp. 63–4.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), p. 6.

Table 1. *Low intensity warfare and its variants.*

Anti-colonial war	Low intensity conflict
Asymmetric warfare	Low level war
Bandit warfare	Limited war
Civil disturbance	Partisan war
Civil war	Peasant war
Civil-military strife	People's war
Colonial war	Policing and public order
Complex emergencies	Political violence
Ethnic conflict	Rebellion
Guerrilla warfare	Resistance
Hit and run tactics	Revolt
Insurgency	Revolutionary war
Insurrection	Small war
Internal war	Sub-conventional war
Intra-state war	Sub-limited war
Irregular war	Sub-state war
Non-state warfare	Unconventional war
Wars of national liberation	Uprising

analysts over the years.<sup>6</sup> The capacity of the definition problem to defeat the best of minds is reflected in much of the literature. Rarely will one be offered a precise definition of guerrilla warfare (or its many variants). More often, one will be informed: here is a style of warfare; it has been around for a very long time; you can trace examples of guerrilla warfare from pre-biblical times all the way to the present.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the concept of guerrilla war is located in a tradition, rather than a definition.<sup>8</sup> The inference is that while we cannot define guerrilla warfare properly, we know what it is when we see it.

Tempting as it is to follow this path in order to overcome what may seem plodding semantic details, this is not a good way of trying to identify the essence of a particular kind of strategic practice. The problem is that by locating guerrilla warfare in a tradition, rather than pinning down the idea explicitly as a definition, writers are inviting their readers to accept a series of implicit assumptions that are not necessarily watertight. There are four main examples.

First, implicit in a lot of writing is that guerrilla warfare is about a weaker side confronting a more powerful adversary.<sup>9</sup> The weaker combatant tries to play the situation to its advantage by employing guerrilla methods to overcome the superior resources ranged against it. Superficially this seems a reasonable generalisation. But in no war can there ever be exact parity between combatants. One side will always

<sup>6</sup> See for example Andrew Janos, 'Unconventional Warfare: Framework for Analysis', *World Politics*, 15 (1963), pp. 637–8.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, Richard Clutterbuck, *Guerrillas and Terrorists* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1977), pp. 22–32.

<sup>8</sup> Robin Corbett, *Guerrilla Warfare: From 1939 to the Present Day* (London: Guild Publishing, 1986), pp. 10–21.

<sup>9</sup> See for example C.E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), pp. 21–2.

be, or appear to be, physically weaker than the other. All strategies are to a greater degree about maximising one's strengths and minimising weaknesses. Second, one cannot assume that guerrilla warfare intrinsically involves non-state groups fighting the existing authority of the state. This is a common assumption but easily exposed. In the Vietnam War, often taken as an archetypal guerrilla conflict, a fully fledged state – North Vietnam – sponsored a guerrilla insurgency against the South Vietnamese state, the main backer of which was the United States. Third, one cannot assume that guerrilla warfare necessarily denotes, or is an overriding characteristic of, intrastate war.<sup>10</sup> Only in a minority of cases are civil wars dominated by guerrilla conflict. One only has to think of the American Civil War, the English Civil War, or even the Chinese Civil War, from which much guerrilla theorisation evolved, where pitched battles were either the norm or the most decisive element, in order to defeat this generalisation. Finally, one cannot say that guerrilla war is all about hit and run tactics. Ambushes, sabotage operations, raids behind enemy lines, special forces and so on are regular features of 'normal war'.<sup>11</sup>

The fundamental point is that what we call guerrilla operations is a form of fighting that can be employed by any belligerent in any type of war.<sup>12</sup> It is a mistake to believe that the use of guerrilla methods connotes a weapon of the weak and the presence of non-state actors operating in a civil war scenario. Yet time and again commentators continually allude to examples of conflict throughout history claiming to identify the guerrilla phenomenon but without distinguishing what exactly the phenomenon is. Analysts like Harry Summers have taken the concept of low intensity warfare to task for its excessive ambiguity,<sup>13</sup> but thus far no one has pushed these doubts to the logical conclusion: that if the object one is trying to categorise defies categorisation, then does it actually exist?

It is the unresolved issues of categorisation that result in continuing confusion surrounding guerrilla war/low intensity war, and which in the past has contributed to distorted understandings of particular conflicts, sometimes with damaging implications for policymaking. The remainder of this analysis will illustrate the sources of the persisting intellectual difficulties in theorising about low intensity warfare, their consequences, and how they might be addressed in the future. The aim is to employ traditional ideas about strategic theory to examine the notion of guerrilla war, something hitherto lacking in previous explorations. The argument thereby intends to show that while the guerrilla method may exist as a tactic within war, it does not constitute a proper category of warfare itself.

In order to analyse these issues I shall first elaborate how treating guerrilla war as an exceptional category, detached from other traditional notions of modern war, makes for an unconvincing explanatory tool that contains the capacity to misapprehend the nature of certain forms of conflict. The analysis will then examine how guerrilla warfare came to be seen as a separate, and often mysteriously complex, type of war and how this has damaged strategic studies as a whole. Finally, I shall

<sup>10</sup> See John Shy and Thomas Collier, 'Revolutionary War', in Peter Paret (ed.), *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 817.

<sup>11</sup> Ian Beckett, 'The Tradition', in John Pimlott (ed.), *Guerrilla Warfare* (London: Bison, 1985), p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Toase, 'Introduction', in Corbett, *Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Harry Summers, 'A War is War is a War is a War', in Loren B. Thompson (ed.), *Low-Intensity Conflict: The Pattern of Warfare in the Modern World* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1989), pp. 27–49.

attempt to articulate a case for the inclusion of what we call guerrilla warfare/low intensity conflict within more basic understandings of war as defined by strategic theory.

Before embarking, it is necessary to acknowledge that many, if not all, analytical separations in the social realm are somewhat arbitrary distinctions and can easily be unpicked. Like a lot of deconstructive efforts, there is nothing overtly clever in doing this. It is no part of this argument to suggest that attempts at categorisation in the social sphere is an inherently fruitless exercise and cannot provide useful guidelines for policy and planning purposes. Nor is it the intention to deride those – in the armed forces, for example – who for valid operational reasons have sought to incorporate particular concepts of low intensity war fighting into their doctrines and procedures, no matter how artificial they may be in pure intellectual terms. What I wish to suggest, however, is that the idea of low intensity warfare is bound by a sufficiently high level of ambiguity that it presents particular analytical difficulties that render its usage as a sustainable category of warfare open to question.

### The decontextualisation of conflict

From a scholarly point of view, the attempt to identify and describe the alleged incidence of low intensity warfare leads the study of certain wars to become decontextualised. Trying to connect a diverse set of conflicts and political actors purely on the basis of their tactical similarity provides a poor, even non-existent, foundation upon which to explicate a particular military phenomenon. It is like proclaiming that World War II, the Arab-Israeli Six Day War in 1967 and the Indo-Pakistan War of 1971 were all directly comparable because the belligerents at some stage used tanks and machine guns. The comparison is bland and futile. Yet, linking not necessarily linkable wars as if this was capable of offering insight, is exactly what descriptions of low intensity conflict in its various guises has over the years tried to do.<sup>14</sup> Rather than treat the practitioners of armed force, and the conflicts of which they are a part, as uniquely individual objects of study, they are instead drawn together under the rubric of low intensity conflict and regarded as in some way analogous. Disparate examples of conflict are thereby disconnected from their historical and political settings by the attempt to make theoretical generalisations primarily on the grounds of their *modus operandi*.<sup>15</sup>

The operational and policymaking implications of this approach can be beguiling. The consequence of focusing on tactical modality as the principal defining element of low intensity conflict, can lead, and has in the past led, to an obsessive concern for developing counter-measures, sometimes to the detriment of comprehending the long term drivers of a conflict. Such a concern is, of course, understandable, reflect-

<sup>14</sup> For examples that reflect the tendency see Donald Featherstone, *Colonial Small Wars, 1837–1901* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973), pp. 11–13; Juliet Lodge (ed.), *Terrorism: A Challenge to the State* (Oxford: Martin Robertson, 1981); and Richard Preston, Alex Roland and Sydney Wise, *Men in Arms: A History of Warfare and its Interrelationships with Western Society* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), pp. 359–85.

<sup>15</sup> M. L. R. Smith, 'Holding Fire: Strategic Theory and the Missing Military Dimension in the Academic Study of Northern Ireland', in Alan O'Day (ed.), *Terrorism's Laboratory: The Case of Northern Ireland* (Aldershot: Dartmouth Press, 1995), p. 231.

ing as it does public policy imperatives to control and eliminate perceived dangers whatever their apparent tactical manifestation, be they 'wars of national liberation' or the current-day scourge of 'international terrorism'. As a rule, the general population is unlikely to be impressed with a convoluted discourse on the nature of 'the problem' and will expect those charged with upholding public safety to afford protection from the clear and present danger, whatever the difficulties of turning theory into practice. That said, there is a legitimate intellectual problem to be debated in the academic arena, which is, if the phenomenon one is meant to be countering is itself ambiguous and contestable, then both the thinking and operational methods designed to combat it are possibly going to be defective.

It is often very attractive for politicians and military practitioners to assume that general operational solutions can be devised against ethereal notions such as terrorism or low intensity conflict. The resulting potential for tactical counter-measures to develop into a rigid creed is profound. This can be seen, for instance, in the rise of 'counter-insurgency' theory in the United States during the early 1960s. As Harry Summers observed: 'Counterinsurgency became not so much the [U.S.] Army's doctrine as the Army's dogma, and stultified military strategic thinking for the next decade' because of the prevailing 'myth' that guerrilla wars 'were something unique in the annals of warfare'.<sup>16</sup>

Summers goes on to note in another publication that the title 'low intensity conflict' is potentially hazardous for policymaking because it 'obscures the nature of the task and obfuscates what needs to be done'.<sup>17</sup> It possesses the capacity to insulate politicians, military planners and the wider public from the implications of certain military challenges because they are deemed to be low intensity and therefore of low importance, and thus not worth confronting with serious intent.<sup>18</sup> To an extent such a claim is an exaggeration since so-called low intensity campaigns like Vietnam were, of course, tolerated by both US policymakers and public at vast cost for many years before they finally got sick of the whole business from the late 1960s. Still, one does not have to travel all the way with Summers' argument to recognise the validity of his general point, that bracketing a range of politico-military phenomena under the heading of low intensity conflict is not conducive to understanding the manifold complexity of different conflicts and their implications for policymaking. As a consequence, it is not an effective classification. It is defeated by its very inclusiveness.

### **Beyond the paradigm?**

The very fact that what we call low intensity conflict has been seen as a unique form of war gives rise to the subsequent confusion in definition and analysis. The principal reason that it is pigeon-holed in this way is because many commentators insist on treating what they conceive as low intensity warfare as something that resides outside a traditional understanding of war, and is most clearly reflected in

<sup>16</sup> Harry Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1995), p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Summers, 'A War', p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

the expressions ‘unconventional’ or ‘irregular’ warfare. Understandings of conventional war postulate the notion of two more or less equally matched belligerents deploying highly organised armed forces in face-to-face battle, as opposed to the ‘unconventional’ image of a gaggle of rebels pursuing hit and run tactics. In particular, guerrilla combatants, and specifically the conflicts in which they partake, are felt to exist beyond the Clausewitzian paradigm,<sup>19</sup> where war is not regarded as a rational instrument of policy, but the product of primordial urges that are entirely resistant to ‘conventional’ forms of military coercion.<sup>20</sup> In John Keegan’s view, for example, the wars that broke out in the Balkans and Transcaucasia in the 1990s were ‘ancient in origin’ and would be, he claimed, familiar to anthropologists as examples of ‘primitive war’. He went on: ‘Such conflicts... are fed by passions and rancours that do not yield to rational measures of persuasion or control: they are apolitical to a degree for which Clausewitz made little allowance.’<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, the outbreak of seemingly intractable ‘ethnic conflicts’ during the early years of the post-Cold War era gave a considerable boost to the idea of low intensity conflict as a singular category of war. Analysts stepped forward to denounce the influence of Clausewitz for allegedly deluding military establishments the world over into preparing for ‘conventional’ interstate wars, thus leaving them ill-equipped to comprehend and deal with the vast array of low intensity conflicts that were bursting forth in places as far afield as Bosnia and Rwanda.<sup>22</sup> As Martin van Creveld trenchantly put it: ‘If any part of our intellectual baggage deserves to be thrown overboard, surely it is not the historical record but the Clausewitzian definition of war that prevents us from coming to grips with it’.<sup>23</sup>

To say that military establishments were unprepared for low intensity challenges is a simplistic generalisation, but whether they were or not is a different issue from whether any lack of preparation stemmed from the malign influence of Clausewitzian thought. Most of these imprecations are, as a number of scholars like Christopher Bassford have noted, based on quite seriously flawed readings of Clausewitz.<sup>24</sup> But in misrepresenting Clausewitzian thinking on war, some writers reveal their own confusion towards the notion of low intensity conflict. For instance, Mary Kaldor, in her 1999 book *New and Old War*, critiques Clausewitzian thinking for being unable to contend with examples of ‘new war’ as embodied by ethnic conflict.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, she advances the perfectly reasonable contention that ethnic conflict

<sup>19</sup> Bjørn Møller, ‘Faces of War’, in Håkan Wiberg and Christian P. Scherrer (eds.), *Ethnicity and Intra-State Conflict: Types, Causes and Peace Strategies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> See Jan Willem Honig, ‘Strategy in a Post-Clausewitzian Setting’, in Gerd de Nooy (ed.), *The Clausewitzian Dictum and the Future of Western Military Strategy* (The Hague: Kluwer Law International, 1997), p. 118.

<sup>21</sup> John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Vintage, 1994), p. 58. See also John Mueller, ‘The Banality of “Ethnic War”’, *International Security*, 25 (2000), pp. 42–70.

<sup>22</sup> For a selection of such offerings, see Kaldor, *New and Old War*, pp. 13–30; Keegan, *A History of Warfare*, pp. 20–23; Møller, ‘Faces of War’, pp. 15–34; Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991), pp. 33–62; K.J. Holsti, *The State, War and the State of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 1–18; and Ralph Peters, ‘The New Strategic Trinity’, *Parameters*, 28 (1998–99), pp. 73–9.

<sup>23</sup> Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, pp. 57–8.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Bassford, ‘John Keegan and the Grand Tradition of Trashing Clausewitz: A Polemic’, *War in History*, 1 (1994), pp. 319–36.

<sup>25</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, pp. 13–30.

can be manufactured to serve political ends,<sup>26</sup> which of course fits in very well with Clausewitzian nostrums concerning the instrumental rationality of force. This leads us to ask how such confusions have arisen and in particular how, and why, so-called examples of low intensity conflict came to be seen mistakenly as a separate category of war.

### **The orphaned child of strategy**

How the image of guerrilla warfare came to be perceived, and further compartmentalised, as a distinctive concept of war is a story bound up with the rise, and catastrophic fall, of counter-insurgency doctrine in the 1960s. In the aftermath of World War II, and coinciding with the era of the decolonisation of the European empires, an entirely new facet of warfare was believed to be emerging, that of 'revolutionary war', sometimes also referred to as 'wars of national liberation'. Revolutionary war encompassed the idea that guerrilla tactics could be fused with an overt propaganda campaign, employed by substate actors to win over the masses through political agitation while simultaneously eating away at the moral and physical authority of the state through violence, leading to the eventual overthrow of the government.

The victory of the communist forces in China in 1949 led by Mao Tse-tung, who proclaimed victory through a strategy of 'protracted people's war', provided the catalyst that gave rise to the idea of revolutionary war. The outbreak of rural insurgencies in places such as Malaya, French Indochina and Latin America, most notably culminating in Fidel Castro's ascent to power in Cuba in 1959, prompted thinkers in the United States and Europe to consider that they were facing a new, and prolific, form of war aimed at subverting pro-Western regimes and stoked up by the forces of a global communist conspiracy.<sup>27</sup> It is from the era of so-called revolutionary wars that much of the continuing popular imagery about guerrilla warfare persists, imagining bands of peasants using hit and run tactics, sneaking around in jungles.

The term revolutionary war, then, was an analytical response to the fear of communist insurgency during the 1950s and 1960s and was to lead to the creation of an opposing body of military thought that came to be known as counter-insurgency. There was, however, a tension between counter-insurgency theory and counter-insurgency doctrine as operationalised by the military. Counter-insurgency military doctrines were logical and entirely understandable within their own terms of reference and often met with considerable tactical success on the ground. But two bitterly contested wars, in Algeria and especially in Vietnam, brought this tension to the fore and devastated the reputation of much counter-insurgency thinking, which was to further isolate the study and comprehension of so-called low intensity wars.

During the Cold War a number of counter-insurgency methods were developed. The British evolved an *ad hoc* counter-insurgent practice based on their tradition of

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 30–68.

<sup>27</sup> Lincoln P. Bloomfield, 'Future Small Wars: Must the United States Intervene?' *Orbis*, 12 (1968), p. 672.



colonial policing. This emphasised civil and military coordination, anti-guerrilla interdiction through intelligence operations, and, possibly most importantly, a willingness to negotiate limited political compromises with adversary groups from a position of strength or stalemate.<sup>28</sup> It was an approach that met with some success in Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus and later in Northern Ireland. However, it was in French and American military thinking that counter-insurgency doctrine reached its most formidable expression.

Following its defeat in Indochina by the Viet Minh, the French military establishment set about constructing a counter-revolutionary doctrine to explicitly oppose protracted communist insurgencies. Known as *guerre révolutionnaire*, the doctrine advocated that, along with the adoption of more sophisticated anti-guerrilla techniques, the French armed forces, and French society as a whole, had to become ideologically motivated to defend the West from subversion, in exactly the same manner as they perceived their communist opponents to be in pursuit of their goals. The effect of this doctrine in the war in Algeria (1954–62) was a political disaster. Despite its effectiveness in purely military terms, the problem was that *guerre révolutionnaire* so radicalised sections of the French military that when the politicians in Paris were believed not to be supporting the war against the supposed communist insurgents of the FLN with the necessary vigour, the armed services felt it their duty to make sure they did.<sup>29</sup> This led to political turmoil in France itself, accompanied by a military coup by French forces in Algeria in May 1958, followed later by violent internal subversion by sections of the armed forces, which ended in national humiliation when President Charles de Gaulle decided to grant Algeria independence.

American counter-insurgency sprang from a number of sources encompassing aspects of containment doctrine and limited war thinking derived from strategic nuclear deterrence theorisation, which posited that the United States should be prepared to show resolve – and thereby uphold general deterrence between both superpowers – by confronting communist inspired challenges below the nuclear threshold. Combined with the development of appropriate military tactics, United States counter-insurgency also stressed nation-building in order to stabilise pro-American regimes both economically and politically.<sup>30</sup> While reaping some success through the provision of military and police advisors in Latin America, it was, of course, the *dénouement* in Vietnam that scarred American counter-insurgency efforts after it became apparent that the doctrine could not effectively comprehend the nature of the particular enemy the Americans were facing, nor the regime they were trying to support, nor the consequences for the American domestic polity arising from the failure to win quickly.

In retrospect, there were two major interrelated weaknesses in the idea of revolutionary war, which ultimately condemned much counter-insurgency theorising. First, there was a conceptual problem, which was simply: what did one mean by ‘revolutionary’? We conceive revolutions to be about change of a radical and dramatic kind. But what is meant by change and how do we measure it? All wars are about

<sup>28</sup> For a survey see Bruce Hoffman and Jennifer M. Taw, *Defense Policy and Low-Intensity Conflict: The Development of Britain's 'Small Wars' Doctrine During the 1950s* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1991) and Thomas Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919–1960* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

<sup>29</sup> Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954–1962* (London: Macmillan 1977), pp. 480–504.

<sup>30</sup> Summers, ‘A War’, pp. 39–40.

change – fighting either to promote or prevent change. So what is particularly revolutionary about ‘revolutionary wars’? What added to the definitional problem was that the term ‘revolutionary’ could also be applied to the methods of fighting, implying that they were themselves unique, a notion embodied in the title of Regis Debray’s seminal 1960s text on armed radicalism *Revolution in the Revolution*.<sup>31</sup> Drawing promiscuously on theories derived from Maoist ‘people’s war’ and Cuban *focoquismo* strategy gave rise to the belief that political power could be won without the extensive use of military force. The false promise of these novel military techniques inspired a generation of political radicals and insurgent-nationalists to challenge state authority from the late 1950s onwards. Given its slippery nature and the occlusion of various meanings, the term ‘revolutionary war’ ended up as a somewhat arbitrary and politically loaded idea that, among both defenders and protagonists of the *status quo* alike, tended to denote only those conflicts that involved non-state challenges to pro-Western regimes.

Second, from a counter-revolutionary war perspective such arbitrary understandings sometimes resulted in the selective application, and thus misapplication, of the ‘revolutionary war’ notion with ensuing consequences. The nature of the Cold War and the fear of communism led to a belief that almost any outbreak of localised violence in the ‘Third World’ was communist inspired and an example of revolutionary war to be countered, despite the fact that in Algeria, and even South Vietnam, this was not necessarily so. In the case of the United States, its intervention in Vietnam, according to Colin Gray, bore the hall marks of ‘counterinsurgency faddism’ that was naively captivated by the ‘cult of the guerrilla’ and the ‘aura of Special Forces’.<sup>32</sup> The consequent preoccupation with military technique caused the weakness and corruption of the South Vietnamese government to be overlooked and the nationalist dimension of the conflict to be ignored.

In essence, there is nothing revolutionary about revolutionary war. Like other low intensity conflict terminology it was mainly a politically convenient, rather than a strategically viable, label with which to append certain wars. The failure by analysts to apprehend the complexities that caused internal instabilities in places like South Vietnam meant that incoherent counter-measures were designed to combat an incoherent idea. As Gray went on to note, few of the leading lights in the US strategic and policymaking community during the 1960s had much to say about how to fight such wars and, in the words of Herman Kahn, ‘what they did contribute was often misleading and irrelevant.’<sup>33</sup> In the aftermath of the US withdrawal from Indochina, the feeling grew that dealing with low intensity conflicts was unbearably problematic from which no good could come. It meant having to comprehend the multitude of complex socio-political and psychological factors that informed regional conflicts and drove actors, be they state or non-state, to employ or sponsor violent insurgencies. It contained a dangerous tendency to politicise both military and scholarly practice. It killed off a generation of the best and the brightest.

In analytical terms, as Richard Betts observed, ‘Vietnam poisoned the academic well’, causing strategic studies to retreat into a nether world that was largely

<sup>31</sup> Regis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* (New York: Grove, 1967).

<sup>32</sup> Colin Gray, *Strategic Studies and Public Policy: The American Experience* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1982), p. 114 and p. 122.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 216. Also see p. 119.

'ahistorical and technical'.<sup>34</sup> The scholarly focus concentrated around narrow, managerial issues of arms control, deterrence and other bureaucratically enclosed matters of national defence policy. As a consequence, most strategic thinking centred on, according to one commentator, 'Elaborate debates between rival schools of nuclear deterrence and hair-splitting, abstruse exchanges between analysts over the relative merits of competing nuclear weapons systems to maintain the balance of terror'.<sup>35</sup> The language of strategy became further distanced, abstract, clinical and victimless. Absorbing this technocratic agenda, the strategic studies community itself gained a collective personality disorder, often becoming humourless, solipsistic and self-referential.<sup>36</sup>

Military establishments too – most notably in the United States – reversed their once enthusiastic interest in counter-insurgency doctrines and revolutionary war in order to get back to planning for a 'normal' war on the Central European front. Both in academia and military circles this tendency was fortified by a perception (inaccurate though it was), that the incidence of insurgency was declining.<sup>37</sup> By the early 1970s, with the outbreak of separatist violence in Northern Ireland and Spain and ideologically motivated acts of terrorism by offshoots of the radical student movements of 1968 in states like Italy and West Germany, the nature of the threat appeared to shift to urban based guerrilla challenges. Policy and analytical responses to this violence were seen to reside in the areas of policing and public order, rather than having military and strategic resonance.<sup>38</sup> Any residual scholarly interest in such matters was cast off into the subgrouping of terrorist studies, which was treated as a narrow sect, mainly a British, West European and Israeli pastime, possessing next to no relationship with the wider field of strategic studies.

So it was that the study of insurgency became the orphaned child of strategy. Brought into the world as an object of study by the military and scholarly communities in the 1960s, and heralded as something novel and, indeed, 'revolutionary', it was then abandoned by its own dysfunctional parents when it became rather too troublesome. It was left to wander the academic byways as a separate category of study – not that many did study it. From then on it was formally treated as a thing apart from the academic mainstream of strategic studies, thought of with wariness and suspicion – or preferably something not to be thought about at all.

### **Cold War consequences – the unconventional convention**

Isolating insurgency as a separate form of conflict permitted a number of things to happen during the Cold War that, while convenient for academic strategists, damaged

<sup>34</sup> Richard Betts, 'Should Strategic Studies Survive?' *World Politics*, 50 (1997), p. 16.

<sup>35</sup> Edward Kolodziej, 'What is Security and Security Studies? Lessons from the Cold War', *Arms Control*, 13 (1992), p. 2. For examples of such exchanges see Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Stein, 'Deterrence: The Elusive Dependent Variable', *World Politics*, 42 (1990), pp. 336–69 and Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, 'Testing Deterrence Theory: Rigor Makes a Difference', *World Politics*, 42 (1990), pp. 466–501.

<sup>36</sup> The esoteric nature of strategic theorising was noted by Hedley Bull, 'Strategic Studies and Its Critics', *World Politics*, 20 (1968), p. 596.

<sup>37</sup> Gray, *Strategic Studies and Public Policy*, p. 135.

<sup>38</sup> See Peter Chalk, *West European Terrorism and Counter-terrorism* (London: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 91–115.

the discipline and undermined the study of warfare as a whole. There is no better illustration of the distorting effects of this belief than in the term that seeks to describe guerrilla challenges as 'unconventional war'. Conventional war is taken to mean classical warfare between states. Yet statistical assessments of warfare indicate that only 18 to 20 per cent of wars since 1945 can be accurately classified as interstate wars. Holsti's study suggests that over 75 per cent of the 164 cases of warfare identified since the end of the Second World War involved armed conflict within states.<sup>39</sup> Given the relative lack of interstate war and the proliferation of violent sub-state actors<sup>40</sup> it is clear that insurgency and civil wars constitutes the dominant pattern of warfare over the past fifty years. This, it can be contended, represents the norm. It is unconventional warfare that is the convention.

From the perspective of Western military planning during the Cold War the emphasis on the spectre of a catastrophic force-on-force clash in Central Europe, possibly with nuclear and chemical weapons, was entirely logical.<sup>41</sup> Dealing with a potential survival-level threat mattered far more than the statistical significance of other wars a continent or more away. Nevertheless, without disputing the prudential desire to prepare a proper defence against a formidable adversary in an age of high-tempo combined arms warfare, it is still legitimate to pose the question in the academic realm about the extent to which, by segregating so-called low intensity war, strategic analysts could rationalise their avoidance of it. By locking onto nuclear and defence policy issues they could convince themselves they were dealing with vital concerns of world survival. 'This seemed to be', according to Ken Booth, 'where the action was, literally and academically'.<sup>42</sup>

In a way, the use of the description 'conventional war' in a great deal of strategic studies literature rationalised the orientation of the discipline towards the concentration on the prospects for interstate conflict. Such wars were described as 'conventional' – not because they were the convention – but because they were seen as 'more important'. But, one might ask, more important to whom? In truth, the capacity for ethnocentrism in strategic thinking was stark, because the focus of the discipline was not, as Betts observed, in 'war *per se*, than in cataclysmic war among great powers, war that can visit not just benighted people far away, but people like us'.<sup>43</sup> Thus, unlike theorists of counter-insurgency, strategists during the Cold War could ponder the improbabilities of general war between the US and the Soviet Union, safe in the knowledge that there was little prospect that their theories would ever be challenged in practice. At the same time, by holding forth on nuclear deterrence, arms control and East-West diplomacy, analysts could maintain that these were more important issues than the distractions of actual wars going on elsewhere in the world.

When we reflect upon the evolution of the discipline of strategy the underlying motives for the dismissal of so-called low intensity conflict as a separate, and less significant, category of war reveal themselves clearly. It becomes evident that most analysts have found it difficult to comprehend two fundamental points: (1) that most

<sup>39</sup> See Tables 2.1 and 2.2, in Holsti, *The State, War and the State of War*, pp. 22–4.

<sup>40</sup> By 1983 Peter Janke recorded the existence of 569 violent non-state groups. See Peter Janke, *Guerrilla and Terrorist Organisations: A World Directory and Bibliography* (Brighton: Harvester, 1983).

<sup>41</sup> Robert Jervis, 'Deterrence Theory Revisited', *World Politics*, 31 (1979), p. 324.

<sup>42</sup> Ken Booth, 'Security and Self: Reflections of a Fallen Realist', in Keith Krause and Michael Williams (eds.), *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases* (London: UCL Press, 1997), p. 93.

<sup>43</sup> Betts, 'Should Strategic Studies Survive?', p. 7.

wars do not involve state actors only, and (2) that many wars do not necessarily threaten national survival. In other words, the deficiency of strategic studies with regard to the study of low intensity conflict has nothing to do with the supposedly malign influence of Clausewitz and everything to do with the legacy of twentieth century warfare that culminated in the titanic struggle for survival in World War II. It is this that accounts for the state-orientated, means-addicted, strategic mentality that was ill at ease in comprehending anything that did not encompass the massive clash of organised armed forces.

The military-intellectual legacy of World War II, of course, transferred easily to the era of superpower confrontation during the Cold War. Indeed, in the nuclear age the stakes appeared even higher. Ironically, it was for these reasons that for much of the Cold War era Clausewitzian ideas scarcely registered in strategic studies. If ever they were mentioned it was often to repudiate them as dangerously anachronistic.<sup>44</sup> In the early 1970s Senator William Fulbright claimed: 'There is no longer any validity in the Clausewitzian doctrine of "carrying out of policy by other means"'. Nuclear weapons have rendered it totally obsolete.<sup>45</sup> This is a definitive statement that summed up the essence of most Cold War military and strategic thinking during this era, namely, that in reality it was profoundly un-Clausewitzian.<sup>46</sup> It was the dry, apolitical, technocratic obsessions of nuclear deterrence theories, not the sway of Clausewitz, that held sway in the discipline and which blocked out the study of many other issues in the strategic ambit.

### The de-strategisation of warfare

The narrow disposition of strategic studies was also to a large degree a reflection of official military orthodoxy that prevailed in developed states. Like the scholarly community, military establishments – post-Vietnam – also felt particularly uncomfortable with the notion of guerrilla wars and counter-insurgency. It was with some relief that in the 1970s the major powers could turn their attention towards what they did best, which was to plan wars they could win. They could justify their demands for bigger budgets and large equipment procurements by locating their efforts planning for 'conventional war' as necessitating the essential task of upholding deterrence on the central front in Europe.<sup>47</sup> Other more 'limited' military contingencies were distractions from this supreme duty. In the introduction to C.E. Callwell's classic late nineteenth century exposition of British colonial warfare, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, Douglas Porch encapsulated the evolving military mentality:

. . . after the experience of two World Wars, together with a Cold War stalemate in Europe, most Western armies viewed small wars as missions to be avoided. Most proved unwilling to

<sup>44</sup> See for instance Peter Moody, 'Clausewitz and the Fading Dialectic of War', *World Politics*, 31 (1979), pp. 417–33.

<sup>45</sup> J. William Fulbright, 'The Foundations of National Security', in Morton Kaplan (ed.), *Great Issues of International Politics* (Chicago, IL: Aldine, 1974), p. 255.

<sup>46</sup> See David Baldwin, 'Security Studies and the End of the Cold War', *World Politics*, 48 (1995), p. 130. See Gray, *Strategic Studies and Public Policy*, p. 49.

<sup>47</sup> Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, p. 19.

alter force structure[s] designed for conventional conflict in Europe to face the challenges of unconventional warfare in distant lands. None of these factors made indigenous resistance unbeatable. It simply meant that small wars remained very much a minority interest in military establishments.<sup>48</sup>

In the policymaking realm the shortcomings of this outlook were revealed in the post-Cold War era, where it became evident that large segments of military and political thinking could not comprehend in any systematic way how to deal with contingencies that existed below the 'conventional' threshold. As Paul Beaver put it, military planners had inordinate difficulty contending with 'asymmetric warfare' because traditional 'staff college and command school solutions just do not work'.<sup>49</sup> With the outbreak of warfare in the Balkans following the break-up of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, options for peace enforcement were severely attenuated because the major military powers could not contemplate effective intervention policies other than strategies for total destruction and overthrow.<sup>50</sup> All other contingencies below threats to national survival and major national interests were, in effect, de-strategised. The result was to produce both among politicians and military practitioners a hand-wringing fatalism that could barely countenance passive, and ineffective, humanitarian assistance measures,<sup>51</sup> which almost certainly helped prolong the devastating war in Bosnia.<sup>52</sup>

### **The de-intellectualisation of warfare**

In scholastic circles the impact of the Cold War fixation that conceived intricate theorising about war and peace between the superpowers as the only thing that mattered was no less deleterious. The effect was to create a discipline that was squeamish and even decadent, which, somewhat ironically, for all its self-absorption in the minutiae of deterrence and defence policy, was not very interested in war itself. Writers were caught up in the hypotheticals of nuclear conflict that snared even supposedly critical thinkers who were prepared to knock the parameters of strategic studies but rarely ever tried to expand them.<sup>53</sup> The core of this disciplinary groupthink was captured well by Fred Kaplan when he wrote of the 'compelling illusion' of the endless discourse on nuclear deterrence: 'Even many of those who recognized its pretence and inadequacy willingly fell under its spell. They continued to play the game because [their closed conception of the discipline led them to believe] there was no other.'<sup>54</sup>

Above all, the Cold War conditioned a discipline of strategy that was often content to see its place as a supporting counsellor to an established defence policy

<sup>48</sup> Douglas Porch, 'Introduction to the Bison Books Edition', in Callwell, *Small Wars*, p.xvii.

<sup>49</sup> Paul Beaver, 'The Threat to Israel is Not War', *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 24 October 2000.

<sup>50</sup> Honig, 'Strategy', pp. 114–19.

<sup>51</sup> Edward Luttwak, 'Give War a Chance', *Foreign Affairs*, 78 (1999), pp. 36–44.

<sup>52</sup> See Jan Willem Honig and Norbert Both, *Srebrenica: Record of a War Crime* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 71–98 and 141–86; and James Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will: International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War* (London: Hurst & Co., 1997), pp. 298–331.

<sup>53</sup> For example see Gwyn Prins, 'Perverse Paradoxes in the Application of the Paradoxical Logic of Strategy', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 17 (1988), pp. 539–51.

<sup>54</sup> Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), p. 390.

agenda. This largely passive role in the military-intellectual complex prevented analysts from pursuing those avenues down which their academic vocation should have beckoned them. In this respect, Fred Halliday observed that, 'in terms of shaping the post-war world, guerrilla warfare, in its revolutionary and counter-revolutionary forms, was at least as influential as nuclear weapons: yet it hardly figured in the orthodox curriculum of strategic studies'.<sup>55</sup> Part of the explanation for this imbalance lay in the fact that analysing nuclear deterrence or national defence policy possessed a more quantifiable empirical base. It was easier to count warheads and tanks, or determine throw-weights and yields, than it was to deal with the murky issues of civil-military coordination and the struggle for 'hearts and minds'. This, it might be argued, suited the economics and science backgrounds of many of the luminaries of deterrence theory.<sup>56</sup>

As for revolutions, rebellions, civil wars, and other conflicts between the un-great powers during the Cold War, these took place 'somewhere else', usually in a place called the 'Third World'.<sup>57</sup> These multifariously different conflicts were, so it seemed, altogether rather too complicated for strategists to deal with because, as Betts notes, 'the relative salience of concerns about political values, as opposed to material power, is usually greater [in such conflicts] than in international wars'.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, despite tyrannising the lives of far more people post-1945 than all the collective obsessions of strategists in the Cold War, these wars were often considered to be unworthy of individual attention. By lumping them together under the generic title of wars in the Third World, analysts could excuse their ignorance. Mirroring the impact on military practice, scholarly thinking about such wars could be de-intellectualised. Because such conflicts took place in the backwaters they could be neatly packaged and dismissed by a label: that is, one might add, until the United States was afflicted by a catastrophic act on American soil.

### Low intensity warfare rediscovered

Perhaps most deceitfully of all, secreting away the notion of low intensity conflict during the Cold War enabled international relations analysts to rediscover this apparently novel concept of war in the post-Cold War world, while at the same time excoriating the 'narrow, statist' outlook of the old discipline of strategy in which they once so enthusiastically participated.<sup>59</sup> There is a sense of wonderment in the proclamations of analysts who assert that in the post-Cold War environment the incidence and importance of internal warfare will 'spill over national boundaries' and thus 'become more frequent'.<sup>60</sup> 'There will be fewer inter-state wars', according to one analyst, 'but no shortage of low-level conflict within states'.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Fred Halliday, *Rethinking International Relations* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 126.

<sup>56</sup> See Colin Gray, 'What RAND Hath Wrought', *Foreign Policy*, 4 (1971).

<sup>57</sup> For example see Caroline Thomas, 'New Thinking About Security in the Third World', in Ken Booth (ed.), *New Thinking About International Security* (London: HarperCollins, 1991), pp. 267–87.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Betts, 'Must War Find a Way?' *International Security*, 24 (1999), p. 193.

<sup>59</sup> Booth, 'Security', p. 112.

<sup>60</sup> Edward Kolodziej, 'Renaissance in Security Studies: Caveat Lector!' *International Studies Quarterly*, 36 (1992), p. 422.

<sup>61</sup> Ken Booth, 'War, Security and Strategy: Towards a Doctrine for Stable Peace', in Booth, *New Thinking About International Security*, p. 356.

While international relations theorists may regard such observations as insightful, heralding an innovative move into ground-breaking territory, we should be sceptical. An alternative interpretation is that much of the pre-September 2001 interest in 'intra-state' wars was the product of Cold War displacement. Were the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall still standing today it is doubtful whether international relations scholars would have ever developed any real cognisance of such conflicts. The prosaic reality is that there has been no mass appreciation in the level of ethno-nationalist intrastate warfare except in the first decade of the post-Cold War in Eastern Europe. For this to inspire exhortations about the appearance of 'new wars' is itself an indication of the Eurocentric mindset of much contemporary security studies posturing. Vicious civil wars sustained by identity politics, supported by diasporas and waged by paramilitary gangs with a sideline in pecuniary crime have rumbled on from one decade to the next. For all practical purposes the end of the Cold War has been meaningless for most of these wars as any number of continuing violent struggles, including those in the Basque Country, Burma, Columbia, Kashmir, Northern Ireland, Sudan and Zaire, provide testament. The truth is that these wars and numerous others like them have always constituted the predominant form of warfare post-1945<sup>62</sup> and even pre-1945.<sup>63</sup>

What this analysis shows thus far is that, while the lethality of specific acts of terroristic/paramilitary violence may have risen, there has not been any dramatic upsurge in the number of intrastate wars *per se*, howsoever defined, to the extent that they have now outstripped the level of interstate warfare. Such wars *always have* outnumbered interstate wars. The key intellectual distinction is that this salient fact was ignored in mainstream strategic studies and international relations thinking for much of the Cold War years in favour of supposedly more important problems.

Those in the very recent past who have advanced the proposition that internal wars are of increasing importance often paid little attention themselves to low intensity war phenomena in the Cold War years. Now, by seeking to reconstitute this false category of war under different headings such as 'new war', 'ethnic war', or 'complex emergencies', writers merely reveal their own limited grasp of the history of warfare. It is also of relevance to note that the world's most recent manifestation of 'low intensity conflict', the 'war against terrorism' initiated after 11 September 2001, has proven so far to be anything but internal or low intensity.

In understanding war, the much maligned figure of Clausewitz rightly stated that one should not mistake the nature of it by 'trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature'. He continued: 'That is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.'<sup>64</sup> As Clausewitz above all recognised, the elemental truth is that, call it what you will – new war, ethnic war, guerrilla war, low intensity war, terrorism, or the war on terrorism – in the end, there is really only one meaningful category of war, and that is *war* itself.

<sup>62</sup> For a survey of post-1945 civil wars, see Table 1 in Barbara F. Walter, 'Designing Transitions from Civil War: Demobilization, Democratization and Commitments to Peace', *International Security*, 25 (1999), p. 128.

<sup>63</sup> See Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 71 and J. David Singer and Melvin Small, *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1816–1980* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1982).

<sup>64</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret (trans. and eds.) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 596.



### The case for Clausewitz and classic strategic theory

All war, be it 'low intensity' or otherwise, is inherently the same and can therefore be understood, in its entirety, within the Clausewitzian strategic paradigm: War is 'a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means',<sup>65</sup> and the deed of war itself '*an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will*'.<sup>66</sup> Clausewitzian notions, in this respect, as Honig notes, are 'easily adaptable to forms of warring social organizations that do not form states'.<sup>67</sup> What trips up many strategic and international relations analysts when considering wars that involve non-state actors, causing them inaccurately to see them as an altogether different form of conflict, is that while the objective is the same, the calculus in such wars is often different and more complex. In military clashes that take place between manifestly unequal combatants, be they state or non-state in nature, the interactions in war are somewhat more subtle, but they still fall very much within the Clausewitzian ambit.

In justifying this point, one can begin from the observation that war is a reactive environment. To use Bassford's phrase, it is 'a contest between independent wills'.<sup>68</sup> The will of each combatant is generated by its political and social nature and responds reciprocally to the actions of its opponents. This helps establish one of Clausewitz's important observations that 'wars should never be thought of as something autonomous but always as an instrument of policy'. War will always therefore 'vary with the nature of their motives and of the situations which gave rise to them'.<sup>69</sup> The course of a war will be determined in part by the relative power of each combatant, which will influence how they will choose to fight. Thus, a combatant may decide to avoid or delay open battle with its adversary, engage in evasion, sabotage, hit and run operations, in order to maximise its advantage at any particular point in time. The actions and tactics pursued in war will, consequently, affect its direction and duration. Clausewitz notes, war always 'moves on its own goal with varying speed'.<sup>70</sup> This reflects the infinite diversity of wars throughout history, be they short, sharp wars between states, like the 1982 Falklands War, or twenty-year long internal struggles within states, such as the Chinese Civil War (1927–1949).

One can develop this line of thought further by emphasising Clausewitz's observation that war is never an isolated act but consists of a series of engagements, and which, therefore, may make certain conflicts particularly protracted.<sup>71</sup> This simple insight is crucial because it recognises that real war is not simply about the crude employment of military might but is a more calculating environment. This understanding is especially pertinent to conflict between materially disproportionate opponents, which helps us to see the relevance of other ideas in strategic theory such as those of Thomas Schelling who saw that under certain conditions war can be

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>67</sup> Honig, 'Strategy', p. 110.

<sup>68</sup> Bassford, 'John Keegan', p. 329.

<sup>69</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 87–88.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., pp. 75–80.

more akin to bargaining situations, rather than just the competitive application of military power. Like Clausewitz, Schelling acknowledges that war is a constantly reactive phenomenon, but also saw that in particular circumstances there could be an element of mutuality in war 'where the ability of one participant to gain his ends is dependent to an important degree on the choices or decisions that the other participant will make.'<sup>72</sup>

This idea is significant because it takes account of combatants that may wish to manipulate the military instrument, not necessarily in order to destroy the enemy's armed forces, but to influence enemy behaviour to facilitate the achievement of political goals. The notion of war as a bargaining process helps us comprehend those conflicts that exist between highly unequal participants, most notably of course, civil wars between powerful government forces and rebellious substate actors. For the demonstrably weaker side coercive bargaining will often embrace the use of military actions to signal to the adversary that the costs of non-compliance will outweigh the costs of concession to its demands. In this sort of conflict the weaker party may not be able to achieve any tangible military objectives, such as occupying territory or annihilating large segments of the enemy's armed forces. Instead, as Clausewitz well recognised, 'another military objective must be adopted that will serve the political purposes and symbolise it in peace negotiations.'<sup>73</sup> In this regard, a belligerent may feel, for example, that given its relative inferiority *vis-à-vis* its opponent, a campaign of guerrilla attacks or acts of terrorism to demoralise the enemy is a more appropriate course of action. By such means the weaker belligerent will hope to induce enemy compliance under the threat of coercion rather than physical destruction.

When political actors seek intangible, rather than purely physical, outcomes through military action strategic analysis takes on an even more intriguing dimension because it requires, amongst other things, a high degree of appreciation of the socio-political environment in which these conflicts occur. As commentators like Eliot Cohen have pointed out, a key problem is often that 'democracies handle the ambiguity of such conflicts very poorly indeed'.<sup>74</sup> Steeped in the traditions of mass clashes of survival and informed by imperatives to win quickly, at low cost, to minimise the impact on society at large and frequently compounded by a desire to stipulate clear divisions between the 'good guys' and bad in order to make the case for war more palatable for electorates, democracies and their supporting counsellors in the military and strategic studies community are often repelled by the thought of involvement in 'low intensity conflicts'.<sup>75</sup> 'The aspect they find most worrying about these conflicts', according to Honig, 'is the seemingly irrational motivations of parties which originate in the murky deepest depths of history'.<sup>76</sup> The unwillingness to discern the roots of 'complex wars' of an internally generated provenance, leads strategists into casuistry and the rhetoric of evasion that obscures the fundamental point that all war is essentially the same.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 5.

<sup>73</sup> Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 81.

<sup>74</sup> Eliot Cohen, 'Looks Like War', *Asian Wall Street Journal*, 16 October 2000.

<sup>75</sup> See Colin Powell, *My American Journey* (New York: Ballantine, 1994), p. 544.

<sup>76</sup> Honig, 'Strategy', p. 118.

### Conclusion: war and only war

This assessment has sought to demonstrate that terms like ‘guerrilla warfare’ and ‘low intensity war’ are fundamentally flawed as analytical abstractions. Guerrilla methods do exist as *tactics* within war, but they do not intrinsically constitute a separate category of war. Gradations of so-called low intensity war exist only as arbitrary distinctions with little coherent meaning. Their usage does not facilitate understanding but rather undermines the attempt to comprehend the complexity of warfare as a whole often because they are deployed by academic strategists to compartmentalise particular conflicts about which they feel uncomfortable. What we call low intensity conflict can be fully understood – can only be understood – within Clausewitzian parameters, which embrace the entire spectrum of war. War is war, regardless of what tactics are used.

The idea that the Clausewitzian paradigm is irrelevant to so-called internal war, ethnic war, and the rest is also a serious misapprehension. For a start, critics often overlook the fact that shortly before his death Clausewitz was becoming increasingly cognisant of the importance of non-state military actors as evidenced by the development of his ideas concerning ‘the people in arms’, which he recognised sprang from the same social and political sources as all warfare.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, those who misleadingly ascribe to him a state obsession are sometimes out to push their own tendentious theories about surmounting the state as the primary unit of analysis. This agenda is one wholly unrelated to the effort to understand the nature of warfare in all its hues and a distraction from the main, longer term, intellectual problems of strategy in its relationship to so-called low intensity conflict.

What most of us usually have in mind when we employ terms like guerrilla warfare and low intensity conflict, is war between grossly unequal combatants, where one side (or sometimes both), be it a state or another type of social organisation, will be predisposed towards utilising a particular set of tactics that enables them to optimise their military position. It is this process of reasoning that leads political actors to deploy the means they do in an attempt to attain their ends within the constraints of the environment in which they find themselves that should be of primary interest to the strategic analyst. This, as Clausewitz intimated, is the most important strategic question of all.

All wars are unique to their time and place. They all have distinctive origins and directions. Because they are multifarious they defy categorisation and cannot be reduced and subsumed under general labels like guerrilla war or low intensity conflict. Such labels only have intellectual significance with regard to the way that they have been used in the recent past to rationalise analytical avoidance. In this respect, they may not tell you much about strategy, but they do tell you a great deal about strategists.

<sup>77</sup> Werner Hahlweg, ‘Clausewitz and Guerrilla Warfare’, in Michael Handel (ed.), *Clausewitz and Modern Strategy* (London: Frank Cass, 1986), pp. 127–33.