

Book Review

How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle

By Gideon Rose
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REVIEWED BY JAMES N. SOLIGAN

Ongoing engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq have resurrected one of the most important and challenging questions facing political and military leaders in the United States and other nations: how to set objectives, conduct operations, and terminate wars in a manner that achieves intended political outcomes. The collective track record leaves much to be desired, and results of even the most recent conflicts would argue that we have not yet learned the necessary lessons from wars in the 20th century to prevent making many of the same mistakes and suffering similar consequences in the 21st century.

Until now, there has not been an in-depth look at and comprehensive treatment of decisions influencing the termination phase of major conflicts. Providing a rigorous and thorough analysis of conflicts spanning from World War I to the ongoing war in Afghanistan, *How Wars End* presents key factors that have shaped U.S. decisions on how to conduct and terminate

each conflict. It then provides an insightful look at factors surrounding and influencing these key decisions. Finally, based on lessons learned from previous wars, the author provides recommendations to help guide leaders through the endgame choices they are certain to face when terminating future conflicts.

How Wars End identifies several key factors that helped shape and explain American war termination decisions in each war. First, Gideon Rose draws on Carl von Clausewitz's definition of war as "an act of policy . . . simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means." He then notes that the United States, as a matter of practice, has often created a division of labor where civilians deal with political matters, military leaders deal with military matters, and control is handed off from the political leaders to the generals when the conflict starts and then back to the diplomats when the conflict ends. Rose states that this approach delineating a clear division of labor and a handoff between political and military decisionmaking is flawed because the decisionmaking related to political and military actions needs to be highly interactive before, during, and after the war. The second key factor shaping U.S. war termination decisions was that in addition to fighting *against* aggression, the U.S. effort was also fighting *for* a vision of a future international political and economic order. This influenced how decisionmakers interfaced with allies and adversaries during and after the conflict. A third key factor was how the freedom to choose between the various courses of action on terminating any specific war was enabled by the relative power of the United States—while

Lieutenant General James N. Soligan, USAF (Ret.), was most recently Director of the Center for Transatlantic Security Studies, Institute for National Strategic Studies, at the National Defense University.

at the same time, the freedom of action was constrained by the need to maintain political solidarity and a consensus with the other allies during the fighting and after the fighting had stopped. Finally, Rose postulates that the thinking of U.S. policymakers on how to terminate conflicts was often dominated by lessons drawn from recent wars, whether or not those lessons were appropriate for the challenges at hand. He cites several examples where U.S. leaders, concerned with not repeating past errors, improperly applied lessons from the last war, which often prolonged the conflict or resulted in unintended negative consequences.

Then, in a brilliant in-depth analysis of each conflict from World War I through the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, Rose explains the factors cited above as they relate to the complex political options being decided when the end of the fighting was in sight. For example, the consequences of agreeing to an armistice rather than unconditional surrender in World War I colored Franklin D. Roosevelt's decision to insist on unconditional surrender in World War II for both the European and Pacific theaters—even though an armistice with Japan, if reached, might have precluded the use of atomic weapons and ended the war prior to the Soviet entry into and seizure of additional territory in the Pacific theater. In a second example, the moral dilemma of forced repatriation at the end of World War II influenced Harry Truman's decision to insist on voluntary repatriation of all prisoners at the end of the Korean War. This decision extended the fighting for 18 months and resulted in an additional 25,000 United Nations casualties, while the final settlement on the ground was practically identical to their positions 2 years earlier. In a third example, Rose highlights that the lack of prior planning for the wars' aftermath tarnished

the overwhelming military victories in both the Gulf War and the Iraq War. It is also clear from how Rose addresses the U.S. manner of terminating involvement in limited wars such as Korea, Vietnam, and the Gulf War that he portends potentially dire consequences for Iraq and Afghanistan unless the United States commits to the “secure, hold, and build” strategy used in Korea rather than extracting U.S. support and turning the “hold and build” responsibilities back to the host nation as was done in Vietnam and in Iraq during the Gulf War.

The author concludes by providing the following recommendations to inform both political and military leaders on key steps needed to ensure that the termination of future wars will be properly planned and executed:

Plan ahead and work backward. Political and military leaders should focus on the desired end result as the starting point for all war planning, with all supporting activities serving as building blocks and preparatory stages for the final outcome.

Define goals precisely and keep the ends and means in balance. To ensure that a war achieves its intended political purpose, policymakers should have a clear sense of what will happen on the ground when the fighting stops, what political and security arrangements will look like, who will maintain them, and how.

Pay attention to implementation and anticipate problems. This requires decision-makers to identify critical assumptions underpinning their plans and to develop a backup plan in advance on what to do if the assumptions prove invalid.

In summary, this is a masterful piece of research on the decisions and actions leading to war termination in each of the conflicts. It was clear that while the conditions and circumstances in each conflict were unique,

decisions on how to terminate prior conflicts often influenced the mindsets of politicians, the military, and the public on how to deal with terminating the conflict in hand. In many cases, with the benefit of hindsight, it is apparent that many of these decisions prolonged the conflict, resulted in additional casualties, or sowed the seeds of a repeat conflict between the same nations. The examples from each conflict need to be studied by political and military leaders alike. And while the political and military circumstances of each conflict will never be exactly replicated in future wars, we need to learn the core lessons that political and military actions should be planned and conducted with the end result in mind; that we need to have a plan to manage what happens on the ground after the fighting stops, and backup plans to address unanticipated events; and most importantly, that it is necessary to tailor individual approaches to war termination to the unique circumstances of each conflict. **PRISM**