

How Wars End: Why We Always Fight the Last Battle¹

Reviewed by Major David M. O’Dea*

*Time and again throughout history, political and military leaders have ignored the need for careful postwar planning or approached the task with visions of sugarplums dancing in their heads – and have been brought up short as a result. But there is simply no reason this process has to play itself out over and over, and if officials can manage a few general lessons from past failures, perhaps it won’t.*²

I. Introduction

Gideon Rose argues in *How Wars End* that American political and military leaders have consistently mismanaged the ending of wars.³ By failing to clearly define reasonable political end states after assessing their relative costs, and then marrying those desired end states with military strategy, Rose believes that our leaders have cost Americans in “blood and treasure.”⁴ Rose does an excellent job of tracing the missteps of every major American conflict since World War I, while identifying how those errors often led to squandered opportunities and needlessly protracted conflicts.⁵ While Rose presents this information in a cohesive and compelling manner that shows how the errors and lessons from one war often bleed into the next conflict, he is not a fatalist who believes that political and military leaders are doomed to another 100 years of folly.⁶ Rather, *How Wars End* converts the identified mistakes into relatively simple principles that may steer future political and military leaders away from the traps of history.⁷ While American political and military leaders presently attempt to extricate the United States from another war, *How Wars End* could not be more relevant or timely.

II. Background

Author Gideon Rose presently serves as the editor of *Foreign Affairs* magazine.⁸ From 1994 to 1995, Rose also served on the staff of the National Security Council as the

Associate Director for Near East and South Asian Affairs.⁹ In *How Wars End*, Rose undertakes a comprehensive examination of the closing chapters of every American war since World War I. In doing so, he pulls together discrete segments of history that predominantly have not been assessed collectively.¹⁰ The collective effect of these lessons is both powerful and informative for the reader.

III. The Uncomfortable Alliance

A central theme of *How Wars End*, as borrowed from Prussian military theorist Carl Von Clausewitz, is that war by its nature has “to be judged by two distinct criteria – political and military,” and that the successful conclusions of wars involve integrating military operations to political goals.¹¹ Rose argues that because this mixture is untidy to most military and political leaders, there is a “great temptation for government to clean up matters by creating a clear division of responsibility,” where “control should be handed off from the politicians and diplomats to the generals at the start of the conflict and then back to the politicians and diplomats at the end.”¹² However, Rose views this division of responsibility approach as flawed because “political issues can permeate every aspect of war.”¹³ Using as examples the closing acts of every major American war since World War I, Rose highlights the failures that occur when political and military leaders do not act in concert to end wars by matching military objectives to defined political objectives.¹⁴

Rose’s strongest example of politics not merging with military operations involves the Gulf War, a military operation that conventional wisdom has generally treated as an unequivocal success.¹⁵ However, Rose contends that a failure of the political leaders to clearly define a desired end

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¹ GIDEON ROSE, *HOW WARS END: WHY WE ALWAYS FIGHT THE LAST BATTLE* (2010).

² *Id.* at 5.

³ *Id.* at 4.

⁴ *Id.* at 4, 287.

⁵ *Id.* at 279–84.

⁶ *Id.* at 5.

⁷ *Id.* at 284–86.

⁸ COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS, http://www.cfr.org/content/bios/Rose_bio_Oct10_1.pdf (last visited July 3, 2013).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ ROSE, *supra* note 1, at 4.

¹¹ *Id.* at 3.

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.* at 284–87.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 197–35.

state about the future of Saddam Hussein's regime caused the United States to squander a battlefield victory.¹⁶ Rose highlights that the coalition hastily stopped military operations against Hussein without assessing if the battlefield gains matched political objectives, which functionally squandered its influence over him and the United States' ability to shape the regime's future.¹⁷ But shortly after military operations ceased, the United States urged Iraqi Shiites to rise up against Hussein in southern Iraq in order to advance a policy of regime change.¹⁸ Rose argues that the inconsistency in these actions was not by choice, but rather as a result of the confusion caused by "coyness about whether Saddam's ouster was a 'stated' goal," and a failure to clearly define a desired end state at the beginning of the war.¹⁹ Ultimately, when it was decided that Hussein should be removed, the author declares that the opportunity for regime change had already been lost, and the United States was forced into a series of low-level enforcement actions against Hussein until the Iraq War.²⁰

Rose is clear that the Iraq War was the outgrowth of the failure to align military and political goals during the Gulf War.²¹ But Rose does not believe that the failures to heed the Clausewitz theory ended there. The author does a masterful job identifying how, during the planning for the Iraq War, the civilian and military leadership created a fatally flawed structure.²² In Rose's view, the Bush administration's flagrant disregard of the distinction between military and political objectives set the groundwork for future disaster when it drew artificial lines between military combat operations and peacekeeping operations that were "left an orphan."²³ The author pulls no punches in discussing the failure of the Bush administration to plan for the peace, describing the lack of peace planning as "an act of gross negligence" which predictably led to a downward spiral.²⁴ In this way, Rose does an exceptional job demonstrating that the failure to merge political and military goals pervaded the Iraq War.²⁵ Further, his characterization of the cataclysmic damage caused by the Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) independent decision to pursue "de-Baathification, the disbanding of the Iraqi army, and the imposition of direct

and open-ended American rule" is a stark reminder of how unnatural and dangerous it is to draw lines between politics and military operations in war.²⁶

While the book centered on the ending of wars, the majority of the Iraq War section focuses on the road leading up to the war and the squandered opportunities that were lost within weeks after the invasion.²⁷ Although the road to war and inadequate battle preparation are both important topics, the author should have focused on a more in-depth analysis about the dramatic shift towards a counterinsurgency approach in Iraq, which was well under way and gaining momentum at the time of publication.²⁸ Rose instead oversimplifies the counterinsurgency approach in Iraq when he describes it as a stall tactic where "more U.S. troops rather than fewer" would "protect the population rather than killing enemies," while making agreements with any party who was willing to cooperate.²⁹ Because Rose does not inquire deeply into the counterinsurgency strategy, an area with a modicum of success in Iraq, this section feels stifled and more intent on tearing down the Bush administration rather than evaluating how the war in Iraq truly ended.³⁰ But ultimately Rose's conclusion seems accurate: needless suffering in Iraq could have been avoided if political and military leaders had paid attention to each other's objective earlier in the planning process for the Iraq War and during the Gulf War.³¹

IV. Connecting History

Because Rose sequentially examines modern American wars, threads begin to emerge which connect conflicts over time in an illuminating way. One example directly applicable to judge advocates is his discussion of the impasse between belligerents over the involuntary repatriation of Chinese and North Korean prisoners of war during the Korean War.³² This issue emerged during peace negotiations when the Chinese and North Korean governments demanded that prisoners of war must to be returned to their home countries at the end of the war, even if the prisoners did not wish to be repatriated.³³ The United

¹⁶ *Id.* at 199, 226–27, 234.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 234.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.* at 235.

²² *Id.* at 245.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.* at 239.

²⁵ *Id.* at 248–50.

²⁶ *Id.* at 249.

²⁷ *See id.* at 241–71.

²⁸ *See id.* at 272; *see also* FRED KAPLAN, *THE INSURGENTS* (2013) (examining the struggle to develop and implement the counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq).

²⁹ *See ROSE, supra* note 1, at 272.

³⁰ *See id.* at 271–76.

³¹ *Id.* at 275–76.

³² *Id.* at 125.

³³ *Id.* at 134–35.

Nations insisted that repatriation should be voluntary, largely relying on prisoner screenings during the war that indicated a large portion of Chinese and North Korean prisoners did not desire to return to their home communist nations.³⁴

Relying on primary source documents, Rose first deconstructs the flawed methodology and known coercive techniques that caused the screening process to speciously over represent the number of communist prisoners who would have opposed repatriation.³⁵ After Rose exposes the flaws underpinning the stated basis for the United Nation's opposition to forcible repatriation, he argues that the actual motivation behind the opposition stemmed from two sources rooted in World War II.³⁶ First, he points out that much of the policy was driven by guilt felt by the major political and military leaders who viewed the United States' policy of forcible "repatriation, to certain imprisonment and death, of Soviet prisoners who had collaborated with the Germans," during World War II as "morally bankrupt."³⁷ Second, he argues that in a post World War II world, the United States possessed such an "abundance of relative power" compared to other nations that it could choose to take such a stand to make up for its lack of success on the battlefield.³⁸ The lesson from this experience is clear: both leaders in general, and judge advocates in particular, need to critically assess not only the proffered reasons for a policy, but also the data which underlies that support. By the time the flaws were discovered in the screening process, many individuals had relied upon and cited the results, and were fully invested in their being true.³⁹ Because of this, a "cover-up" took place that hid the reality of repatriation desires within the prisoner camps.⁴⁰

While the United States prevailed on this issue, Rose ultimately asks the critical question: Was this politically motivated stand worth the tremendous military costs?⁴¹ As he keenly points out, this single issue potentially extended the war for nearly two years, and cost the United States 9,000 dead and billions of dollars, while in the end the completed armistice was nearly identical to the earliest draft agreements.⁴² However, by understanding the context of

American power in a post World War II world, and the motivations of the key political and military leaders, Rose provides meaningful insights into this difficult law of war issue.

V. Lessons Learned

While not being overly complex or digging too deep, Rose ultimately concludes by writing a brief section that offers three straightforward lessons that can be gleaned from the book: first, to "[p]lan ahead and work backwards;"⁴³ second, to "[d]efine goals precisely and check prices before buying;"⁴⁴ and third, to "[p]ay attention to implementation and anticipate problems."⁴⁵ Ultimately the lessons are so simple and straightforward that it raises a key question: If it is all just "common sense," why have the most brilliant political and military leaders of past and present missed the mark?⁴⁶ Rose provides a weak rationalization as an answer to this question: people ignore common sense all the time, so why should our leaders be any different?⁴⁷ While true, the author's comparisons of fad dieting and counter-intuitive investing by amateurs to geopolitical decision-making experts rings hollow.⁴⁸ Certainly there is a substantial difference between Henry Kissinger engaging in diplomacy versus the public choosing a path to weight loss. While his lessons are valuable, Rose distracts the reader when he attempts to mimic an amateur psychiatrist. Although Rose falters somewhat in this section, the underlying quality of his scholarly research and the way the material is harmonized overcomes any of these minor weaknesses.

Unfortunately, Rose's lessons learned seem almost like an afterthought because their sole appearance is briefly at the end of his book. His thesis would have been much stronger had he previewed his three lessons from the beginning and referenced them throughout his writing.

VI. Conclusion

How Wars End will benefit any military professional who takes part in the planning process to go to war, or politicians who will make the decisions to go to war. At its essence, Rose's book is an appeal to leaders at all levels to critically think before acting. Despite the numerous examples of historical failures, Rose is an optimist who

³⁴ *Id.* at 146–47.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ *Id.* at 142–43, 157.

³⁷ *Id.* at 142.

³⁸ *Id.* at 157.

³⁹ *Id.* at 148–50.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ *Id.* at 158.

⁴² *Id.* at 156–58.

⁴³ *Id.* at 284–85.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 285–86.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 286.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.* at 287.

⁴⁸ *See id.*

believes that the lessons learned are not so remote or vexing that our leaders are doomed to repeat them.⁴⁹ While his pragmatic lessons may not yield all of the answers to the complex decisions implicit in going to war, he offers a

helpful template and numerous reminders that reinforce the importance of understanding the entangled relationship of politics and military affairs.

⁴⁹ *Id.* at 5.