



## THE NATURE OF WAR

Last Updated: 27 Feb 2015

Because war underpins the reason for the Air Force's existence, an understanding of doctrine should also include an understanding of war. The ultimate objective of force preparation is their employment as instruments of national power to deter or win wars. Therefore, Airmen should understand the nature and consequences of war.

War is a violent struggle between rival parties to attain competing objectives. War is just one means used by nation-states, sub-national groups, or supranational groups to achieve disputed objectives. War has been a basic aspect of human affairs throughout history. The modern Western tendency to view war as an aberration in human affairs, only occasionally necessary as an operation with limited aims or an all-out campaign to destroy a clearly recognized evil, often distorts our understanding of warfare and its purposes. Warfare is ingrained in the very nature of certain cultures. While for nation states, war is an instrument of policy aiming at political objectives; it is also, even within this context, a phenomenon involving the full range of human emotions and irrationalities. War has a dynamic of its own, often fueled by anger, fear, revenge, and hatred. Thus, the resort to violence rarely remains for long tied to cold, clear political objectives; it can—and has—moved in unexpected directions.

Military professionals operate within an environment that cannot be fully replicated in training. The arena in which military professionals operate is a deadly one. Not only are they attempting, as General George Patton stated, to “make the other poor bastard die for his country,” the enemy is attempting to do the same to us. Consequently, war is an arena characterized by extraordinary fear, pain, uncertainty, and suffering.

Three enduring truths describe the nature of war. Despite technological advances and the best of plans and intentions, war will never be as straightforward in execution as planned, nor free of unintended consequences. The particular characteristics usually change from conflict to conflict, but the nature of war remains eternal.

✦ **War is an instrument of policy.** Victory in war is not measured by casualties inflicted, battles won or lost, number of tanks destroyed, or territory occupied, but by the achievement of (or failure to achieve) policy objectives or the cultural objectives of the actors involved (including nation states and non- or supra-state entities). More than any other factor, these objectives—one's own and those of the enemy—shape the scope, intensity, and duration of war. To support US national policy objectives, military objectives and operations should be coordinated and orchestrated with nonmilitary and partner nation instruments of power. Prussian

philosopher of war Carl von Clausewitz emphasized that war is a continuation of the policies of nations, but not all belligerents in war are organized nation states.

- ★ **War is a complex and chaotic human endeavor.** Human impulses and human frailties shape war's nature—it is not deterministic. Uncertainty and unpredictability—what many call the “fog of war”—combine with danger, physical stress, and human fallibility to produce what Clausewitz called “friction,” which makes even simple operations unexpectedly and sometimes even insurmountably difficult.
- ★ **War is a clash of opposing wills.** War is collision of two or more living forces. War is not waged against an inanimate or static object, but against a living, calculating, interactively complex, and adaptive opponent. The enemy often does not think as we think and often holds different values, motivations, and priorities than ours. Victory results from creating advantages against a thinking adversary bent on creating his own advantages. This produces a dynamic interplay of action and reaction. While physical factors are crucial in war, the will of the people and the character of their leaders are also critical components of war. Allied and enemy resolve—the determination to force one's will on one side and to resist on the other—can be the decisive element.

Success in war requires mastery of the art of war as well as the science of war. Warfare is one of the most complex of human activities. Success depends more on intellectual superiority, morale, and determination than it does on numerical and technological superiority. Success thus demands an intricate combination of science (that which can be measured, studied, and controlled) and art (creativity, flexibility, intuition, and the ability to adapt). Sound doctrine, good leadership, effective organization, moral values, and realistic training can lessen the effects of uncertainty, unpredictability, and unreliability that are always present in war.

---