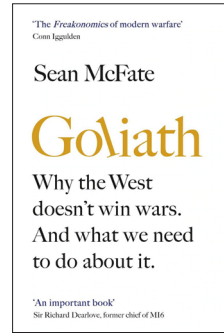


Book Review

Goliath: Why the West doesn't win wars. And what we need to do about it.



By Professor Sean Mcfate

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Reviewed by Paul Stoddart

Biography: Paul Stoddart served in the RAF from 1983 to 1991 as an aerosystems engineer officer and, following a short stint as a journalist on a car magazine, has worked in MOD since 1993. He worked on the Tornado successor study at Farnborough, managed the Harrier and Sea Harrier trials programmes at Boscombe Down and attended the Advanced Command & Staff Course at the Joint Services Command & Staff College. He is currently a scientific adviser at the Air Warfare Centre. He is a Fellow of the RAeS and a member of the RAeS Air Power Group committee.

Introduction

Sean McFate served in the US Army 82nd Airborne Division, left the service to gain a PhD and then worked for (according to the flyleaf biography) a 'major private military corporation'. He is currently a Professor of Strategy at the National Defense University in Washington, DC. Professor McFate is nothing if not blunt with his views. The book opens with the question "*Why has America stopped winning wars?*" and then claims that the USA has not achieved victory in conflict since 1945. He characterises Korea as "*an ongoing stalemate*", notes that Vietnam was reunified under communist rule and regards the US's actions in Afghanistan and Iraq as failures. He goes on to state "*Over the last seventy years, a disturbing trend has emerged: the West has forgotten how to win wars. It's obvious but no one talks about it, because the implications are too terrifying*". He dismisses the West's core military strengths of money and technology stating that this approach has been tried unsuccessfully for decades. He compares previous and current political and military

leaders to those of France in 1940 collapsing in the face of the German blitzkrieg, quoting the French historian Marc Bloch "...our leaders ...were incapable of thinking in terms of new war...".

He characterises Western militaries as prisoners of the conventional war strategy of World War 2, i.e. based on weight of kinetic effort and attrition, while claiming that the adversaries have moved on. The criticism of outdated or inadequate strategy is supported in the foreword where General Stanley McChrystal, US Army (retired) states that the West often applies a tactical focus at the expense of the strategic: "...our tactical successes gave both soldiers and policy-makers the false impression that our strategy was working. We were living one operation at a time; we celebrated our successes, but lacked wide enough perspective to clearly assess the impact we were having". General McChrystal was speaking of the fight against the so-called Islamic State but the point arguably applies in many other cases as well; America's failure in Vietnam being a prime example as well as the first stages of the NATO action against Serbia in 1999, Operation Allied Force.

Professor McFate criticises the continuing centrality, indeed reverence, accorded to Clausewitz in defence academies. He regards Clausewitzian, conventional state-on-state war as a thing of the past along with the notion that wars have distinct beginnings and endings. Instead, he states (the third of his ten rules) that "*there is no such thing as war or peace – both coexist, always*". There is much to be said for this point given the growing recognition of sub-threshold activities ("*shadow wars*") but it is debatable that direct state-on-state conflict will not occur again (Rule One: *Conventional war is dead*). His criticisms of big ticket assets, such as aircraft carriers and the F-35 Lightning, are trenchant and based on a view of their relative lack of utility against insurgent type foes, but he does not give enough weight to the possibility of once again having to face a peer level adversary where leading edge weapon systems will be essential. One interesting potential risk raised is that certain non-state entities, such as crime cartels and business corporations, now have greater wealth and influence than some countries and could choose to use military means to protect or further their interests. This would be a novel challenge to the West and one that merits study well in advance of the actuality occurring. Another interesting fact is that US special forces, though in continual heavy demand, get only 1.6% of the Pentagon's vast budget; a single aircraft carrier costs more than all these forces combined. Clearly, the balance between the various elements of modern western militaries need careful attention in terms of breadth of utility and cost effectiveness.

Though an academic, Professor McFate does not employ an academic tone in this work. Engaging and readable though it is, the book is often anecdotal and occasionally has a rather tabloid headline style. He is rightly suspicious of the claims made that new technologies will solve our sub-threshold and warfighting challenges; this reflexive belief in technology is widespread in Western militaries and should be balanced by emphasising the essential need to understand a problem fully before seeking a solution – especially one that involves buying yet more new equipment. On the other hand, he is rather too dismissive of the value of military

aircraft but presumably appreciated the mobility, situational awareness and fire support while he was serving in counter insurgency campaigns. (He implicitly acknowledges the value of air power when recounting its effectiveness in repelling a major attack by Russian Wagner Group mercenaries on US Delta Force rangers in Syria in May 2018). As for COIN campaigns, McFate explores the option that Western nations should 'outsource' military capability and use mercenary forces rather than deploy their own troops. It is a controversial notion, but not one to be summarily dismissed; as he suggests, faced with an insurgency, do not use a conventional army but instead "*beat the insurgents at their own game and start your own armed, social movement to compete with theirs*".

Professor McFate writes with the authority of one who has both experienced war directly and studied it in depth. While you might not agree with all his views, it is definitely worth reading this book so as to consider the challenges of and options for the modern world from a perspective that is notably different from that found in many of the defence world's standard studies. In his review in *The Times*, Sir Max Hastings disagrees with certain of Professor McFate's arguments but he also comments "*the British senior officers whom I know best regard much of McFate's thesis as a given*". Such views, whether considered rational, provocative or even iconoclastic, merit attention and this book is a useful contribution to an important debate.

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