
GOLIATH: Why the West Doesn't Win Wars and What We Need To Do About It

Sean McFate (Penguin Press, 2019), 18 pp., bibliography, index

Reviewed by J. R. Seeger

The first two decades of the 21st century must seem a period of unusually high level of violent worldwide conflict to the citizens of the United States or the United Kingdom. Compared to the relative calm immediately following the end of the Cold War, the military and intelligence communities of the United States, the United Kingdom and our closest NATO allies have been in what is termed in polite conversation “low intensity conflict” for 18 years in Afghanistan and for 16 years in Iraq and now northern Syria. Counterterrorism operations have focused on al-Qa’ida, Daesh (aka the Islamic State or ISIS), and a myriad of other violent Islamic extremists. The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are involved in proxy wars throughout the Arabian Peninsula and the Persian Gulf. For a dozen years, Russian operations in Crimea and eastern Ukraine show a more engaged Russian military in what Russian strategists have termed “the near abroad,” and in East Asia the Chinese have created islands in the South China Sea that serve as military platforms designed to control the Pacific almost to the national waters of the Philippines. A new multi-polar competition between the West and the East creates additional opportunities for proxy wars between states, as well as direct superpower confrontation in the shadow world of intelligence collection and special operations.

Since 2010, this strategic context has been the subject of multiple books. Some, like former CIA Deputy Director Michael Morell’s book, *The Great War of Our Time*, focus on the complexities of counterterrorism operations in the 21st century. Other books, such as General Stanley McChrystal’s *Team of Teams* and Michael Mazarr’s *Mastering the Gray Zone* focus on sophisticated operational methodologies used in the dynamic military environment of the 21st century. Others, such as Anne-Marie Slaughter’s *The Chessboard and the Web* focus on grand strategy of international relations.^a Regardless

of the focus, these books offer specific methodologies or, what the military would call “tactics, techniques and procedures” (TTPs), as they describe a threat continuum in which the United States and its allies face political and economic challenges from terrorism and covert operations through full-scale confrontation between superpowers and regional adversaries.

At the same time, military writers have been captured by the concept of “hybrid warfare,” in which a complex web of political, economic, and military resources are used by an adversary to bring about a favorable result, all the while avoiding direct confrontation. The term “hybrid warfare” is used to describe conflict between state and non-state actors, for example, the 2006–2007 conflict between Israel and Hizballah and the conflict in 2014 between Russia and Ukraine over Crimea and the Donbas region. Unfortunately, the use of the term has accelerated far beyond any formal definition. It is closer to a heuristic device, helping to frame a discussion than any doctrinal definition of operational art. In the introduction to *Goliath*, Sean McFate offers a simple description of the nature of modern conflict, one that cuts through the vague definitions of hybrid warfare:

Wars will be fought mostly in the shadows by covert means, and plausible deniability will prove more effective than firepower in an information age. . . . The most effective weapons will not fire bullets, and non-kinetic elements like information, refugees, ideology, and time will be weaponized. (8–9)

It is important to underscore that McFate’s book *Goliath* is a polemic. McFate spends most of his time offering strong opinions based on his own understanding of the world and his concerns over the difference between his worldview and current US strategies and policies. The book’s structure resembles popular business and leadership books in which authors frame their views in

a. Michael Morell with Bill Harlow, *The Great War of Our Time* (Hatchette Book Group, 2015); General Stanley McChrystal, *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (Penguin Press, 2015); Michael J. Mazarr, *Mastering the Gray Zone: Un-*

derstanding the Changing Era of Conflict (US Army War College Press, 2015); Anne-Marie Slaughter, *The Chessboard and the Web: Strategies of Connection in an Networked World* (Yale University Press, 2017).

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simple, short chapters. McFate's ability to distill the ideas of many different writers into clear, bullet points is the reason this book will be read by military and intelligence professionals as well as US political leaders. That said, most of McFate's views are not new. *Goliath* will be successful because of the way McFate presents his ideas.

Some of McFate's arguments have their origins in the early 20th century, for instance in the UK military's "small wars" in remote parts of their colonial empire. US Marines faced similar challenges in Central America, and the US Army did as well in the Philippines.^a In other parts of *Goliath*, McFate's discussion of the threat of unconventional warfare and information operations/warfare is a distillation of diverse discussions on these topics.^b McFate's argument of the exceptional nature of the 21st century threats and the failure of US defense policymakers to understand those threats suffers from a quick review of the history of political, economic and military conflicts between World War I and World War II. The challenges we face today are no more complex than those faced by the Western powers in the 1920s and the 1930s with the rise of totalitarian states, colonial insurgencies, the disruptive force of the worldwide depression, and advances in military weaponry. The key differences today are in the areas of information technology and the proliferation of small and exceptionally lethal weapons.

McFate frames each chapter with a "rule" of 21st century conflict. These rules allow him to expand on the central premise that this century will be a world of "durable disorder" with persistent armed conflict. The persistent armed conflicts will be, as often as not, wars without states. McFate's forecast is of a Hobbesian world where the United States will not be able to accomplish any strategic objectives through alliances and diplomacy. McFate's dark view is probably as exaggerated as Slaughter's positive argument of a networked world, in which states work together to accomplish strategic goals.

a. See Caldwell, Colonel C.E. 1996 *Small Wars. Their principles and Practice*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press and The Small Wars Manual. United States Marine Corps 1940. Reprint of Original by Manhattan, KS: Sunflower Press.

b. For other discussions on unconventional warfare and information operations see: Christopher Rawley, *Unconventional Warfare 2.0*. (Periplus Media, 2014); Andrew Fuller, *Hacking the Bomb: Cyber Threats and Nuclear Weapons* (Georgetown University Press, 2018); David Sanger, *The Perfect Weapon: War, Sabotage and Fear in the Cyber Age* (Crown Books, 2018); and Kevin McCauley, *Russian Influence Campaigns Against the West* (CreateSpace Publishing, 2016).

In both cases, the authors intend to offer policy guidance and alternatives that are not currently in use. However, while Slaughter frames her discussion in a manner consistent with polite grand strategists of the 20th century, McFate does not mince words. McFate is an excellent writer, but he is often blunt. On page 2 of the book, he displays the reason he wanted to address the future of military operations: "*The last time the United States won a conflict decisively, the world's electronics ran on vacuum tubes.*" Given this premise, McFate argues that US defense and policy bureaucracies are not properly aligned and, more importantly, US military and political leaders are not prepared to cope with this new world order.

McFate's discussion of the IC, and especially the CIA, is equally critical, though less detailed. It does not appear to be informed by anything other than newspaper and journal interviews of former directors of central intelligence and a vague understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the IC. He brings up the old (and perhaps tired?) criticism of the CIA's supposed failure to predict the fall of the USSR as an example of why the IC is incapable of understanding the dynamic world of the 21st century. He also argues the CIA is incapable of influence operations. Specifically, he argues,

The West needs to update its information-warfare game. Until it does, it will continue to get outplayed by its enemies that wage war in the information space, and that's most everyone. In America's case, this will require structural change. Currently no one in Washington really knows who's in charge of strategic influence. Is it the State Department, the military, the CIA, the National Security Council, or something else? Yes, they say. No wonder the superpower is losing. The correct answer is the CIA, because only it is authorized to conduct covert, or "Title 50" programs, which are essential for this kind of warfare. But the CIA should just manage it, because bureaucrats are not artists. Instead, it should outsource the heavy lifting to Hollywood and invest real money. The Pentagon spends \$120 million on a single F-35 that never flies in combat—surely some money can be spent on something that might be useful in war.

McFate's 10 "rules" offer strong arguments against the current structure of Pentagon warfighting doctrine. He punctuates these arguments with specific comparisons between modern military technology in Pentagon projects such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter or the Special

Operations Tactical Assault Light Operator Suit (TALOS) and the low cost offensive tactics of terrorists, insurgents, and even our near peer adversaries. He says

Contemporary and future threats are not conquering states but failing ones, and what emanates from them are terrorists, rogue regimes, criminal empires, or just plain anarchy. None these are “detractable,” a fact repeatedly proved since the end of the Cold War. (107)

McFate’s stated mission is to shake up thinking inside the policymaking community and force a discussion on whether we are preparing for the challenges of the 21st century or simply resting on the laurels of the Cold War victory. At the end of the book, he says,

Half of winning is knowing what it looks like, and this requires a grand strategy. In an age of durable disorder, our grand strategy should be to prevent problems from becoming crises and crises from becoming conflicts. (247)

McFate shares this mission with another writer who is a veteran of this century’s wars, Frank Ledwidge. Ledwidge was a British military officer in Afghanistan and Iraq, and his views “from the foxhole” are very similar to those presented in *Goliath*. Ledwidge offers an argument for a grand strategy for military operations in this century and states categorically that

The old ways of “cracking on” and then muddling through using a combination of wishful thinking, old myths, and “initiative” are (or should be) long gone.^a

a. Frank Ledwidge, *Losing Small Wars: British Military Failures in Iraq and Afghanistan* (Yale University Press, 2011), 258.

For the intelligence professional, the book is an important read for many reasons. First, the book’s structure and the author’s credentials will make the book popular inside the Beltway. The positions McFate argues in the book are controversial, but they not so out of the box that they can be dismissed. McFate’s current position as a senior professor both at the National Defense University and at Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service also means that he has a regular opportunity to argue his positions to the next generation of military and political leaders. Fair or unfair, his criticisms will resonate in the current political environment.

Second, although McFate is very critical of the CIA and what he sees as the bureaucracy that affects both analysis and operations, he raises analytic questions and operational opportunities that should be central to CIA operations in the future. McFate never states in detail how he expects policymakers to understand the complex networks of rogue states, terrorist organizations, or transnational criminal enterprises. For those of us who have served in the IC, it is abundantly clear that espionage operations, whether HUMINT or human enabled SIGINT, are the only real way to acquire the type of information that he deems essential. Finally, when he raises the questions of information operations, influence operations, and paramilitary operations, he is speaking directly to the Title 50 role which is acknowledged throughout the US government to be one of CIA’s strengths. If *Goliath* becomes a popular read inside the Beltway, it will be essential for senior intelligence professionals to understand his arguments and criticisms and be prepared to answer direct questions from policymakers and Congress that are based on them.



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