

need both influence and control to create combat-effective units. The host nation can offer up decisionmaking authority to the United States, but if the Services frequently rotate culturally unprepared advisors, the mission will not be able to use its leverage. Conversely, well-trained advisors that spend a lot of time with the host-nation unit will not be able to move beyond rapport without control over key decisions.

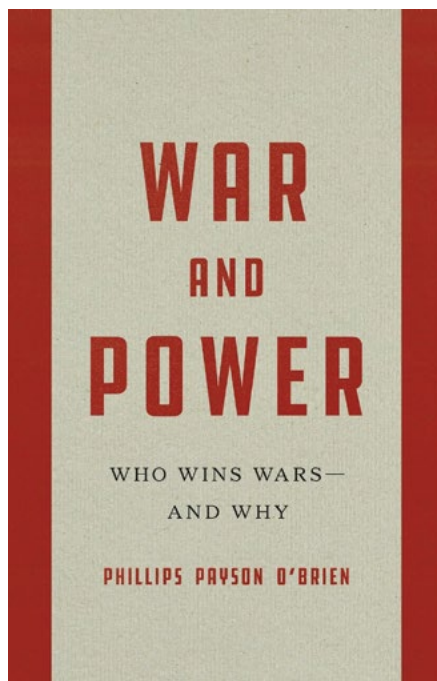
On the surface, *Training for Victory* appears relevant only to the special operations community, but a closer reading offers broader lessons to the larger security force assistance community and combatant commanders. Sobchak's framing of influence and control applies across the board. When building a foreign military capability—Special Operations Forces or otherwise—defense leaders must soberly assess how much influence and control they can assert in the advising mission.

Commanders should not wait for the outcome—the book's five cases averaged over 10 years, and in most, the work was left incomplete. However, influence and control are leading indicators of the mission's viability. Each of *Training for Victory*'s five advising factors was visible at the outset, or in the case of organizational control, emerged soon thereafter.

When the United States finds itself without the necessary influence and control of partner forces to reach its objectives, it should scale back its advising goals instead of accepting the physical and political risk that comes with combat advising and assisting. In those instances, more responsible alternatives are sending noncombat advisors to seek access and information about the host nation or withdrawing altogether.

Security force assistance is not a reliable strategy; it is a long-term relationship rife with uncertainty. Understanding the importance of influence, control, and time horizons can help the United States consider partners with forecasts better than “Ask again later.”

Tobias Bernard Switzer is an Adjunct Senior Policy Researcher at RAND and an Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Center for a New American Security.



War and Power: Who Wins Wars—and Why

Phillips Payson O'Brien
PublicAffairs, 2025
288 pp., \$30.00
ISBN-10: 1541606973
ISBN-13: 978-1541606975

Reviewed by Frank Hoffman

In the run-up to the start of the Russo-Ukraine War in February 2022, numerous analysts from the U.S. Government and academic sources assessed whether Vladimir Putin would invade and, if so, what the likely outcome of a Russian invasion would be. The U.S. intelligence community accurately projected that Putin would invade, but the predictions about the war's outcome turned out to be wrong. Russia *did* invade, but Ukraine successfully deflected the brunt of Russia's aggression.

Why were the assessments about Russia's prospects for a quick victory so far off? Was it an analytic failure stemming from faulty knowledge or flawed metrics? Do we need to develop a more holistic methodology for comparing the power of protagonists? *War and Power* develops and applies such a methodology or framework.

Phillips Payson O'Brien, the author of this relevant and timely book, is a

professor of history at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. In addition, O'Brien writes a provocative Substack newsletter and does podcasts on contemporary security issues. His previous works on World War II—*How the War Was Won* (2015) and *The Strategists* (2024)—are acclaimed for their serious scholarship. This current project draws on these superb histories for insights.

The central theme in *War and Power* is that God and fortune are not necessarily on the side of the biggest battalions. The war against Ukraine is just the latest example showing that there is more to success in war than having the most troops, tanks, planes, ships, or drones. The book is divided into two parts. The first half lays out a framework of five elements for assessing national power. States that possess these elements and successfully apply them are *Full Spectrum Powers*. O'Brien devotes a chapter to each element or pillar. The second half of the book strives to highlight critical distinctions during warfare. Here, the author employs examples from contemporary conflicts including the Cold War and Kosovo, as well as Iraq and Afghanistan.

O'Brien finds fault with the notion of Great Powers, which he finds places a few states on a pedestal and misrepresents the value of allies. Admittedly, the term “Great Power” comes with hints of hubris and relegates the majority of states to a second tier or worse. But it also relates to the historical impact of powerful states and empires that have shaped history. O'Brien's preferred substitute is Full Spectrum Powers, a concept that suffers from terminological defects and a strange oversight. While the term “Great Powers” connotes a rather exclusive club of major states, it implies scale and reach, not just breadth. Many nation-states have some capacity in most of the various elements of national power—think of capable middle powers today, such as France and the United Kingdom.

The first pillar of the spectrum is economic and technological strength: “The states that have been the most powerful over the past two centuries” and dominated have been “the economically largest and most technologically

advanced.” As Paul Kennedy’s classic *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* notes, economic and financial potential are important in tracing the transitions of great powers.

As the second pillar, O’Brien’s framework includes leadership and how the personalities of political leaders influence policy. This also includes how political culture and social conditions may restrain critical conditions that lead to war. *War and Power*’s exploration of the intercession of leaders who are all too human is regrettably unique in measures of power. But the study of individuals is rewarding because, as articulated by Hal Brands in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy*, “it is people that formulate and execute strategy, and it is through their ideas and experiences that we can best comprehend the unrelenting demands of those tasks.”

History shows that competition between powerful states often juxtaposes very different societies and enabling structures. This is the author’s third component, and it addresses social values, culture, and beliefs. The reference to structure entails government agencies, bureaucracy, and power centers. The social dimension of strategy is often overlooked, a point that the late Michael Howard made years ago. More recently, researchers have examined the importance of society during periods of strategic competition and renewal. Competitive societies tend to be open, pluralistic, full of intellectual energy, and committed to learning and adapting, and they have a common sense of their own role in the world. This complex mosaic is consistent with O’Brien’s application.

The penultimate factor for the proposed framework is the military, or more accurately the construction of a military. Here, the author offers a bold observation: “[T]he constituent elements of a power tell us more about how effective a military will be than the raw numbers of equipment or doctrine.” In short, the strengths and weaknesses of a military will reflect its country’s political leadership, social system, and its technological capacity. O’Brien contends that if you want to know how a war will develop, “look at the powers involved as possessing

different military systems, and examine the factors that will govern not only how those systems will operate at first, but how they can be regenerated, adapted, and improved as a war goes on.”

While the author grasps the importance of advanced technology, he offers little advice on how to shape a military. For more detail on how Full Spectrum Powers have adapted their armed forces in the face of disruptive technologies, readers should consult *The Origins of Victory* by the defense strategist Andrew Krepinevich.

The final dimension of Full Spectrum Powers deals with alliances. “An alliance of states that work together,” O’Brien finds, “can be mutually supportive and probably greater than the sum of its parts. Such alliances won World War I, World War II, and the Cold War.” Here the author cites British diplomacy as part of the Entente Cordiale before World War I as “a textbook case” for diplomacy. From London’s point of view surely it was a success, but the British Cabinet’s refusal to publicly commit to Belgian sovereignty and France’s security made a German intervention more likely. London’s desire to retain British freedom of action undercut the Entente’s deterrence against Berlin.

O’Brien’s suite of dimensions appears incomplete. Readers will be surprised by the absence of any mention of information; here, the “I” is missing from the heuristic DIME (diplomatic, informational, military, economic) model. The importance of connectivity, content, and cognition should be noted given today’s fast-paced information environment. The author’s conception of what constitutes power in the “full spectrum” should be extended to account for nonkinetic sources. For a comparative analysis on national power in this enabling dimension in competition, see National Defense University Press’s *Strategic Assessment 2025* (ed. Thomas F. Lynch III).

Despite the author’s holistic approach and examples, the book does not appear to generate definitive solutions to the crucial issue of prediction or foresight. O’Brien’s own case study on Ukraine is revealing. Few observers would have credited the amateur Volodymyr Zelensky with Churchillian qualities in

competition with the experienced and ruthless Vladimir Putin. Few observers would have had a sufficiently strong grasp of military reforms and security assistance to Kyiv since 2014 to judge that it could withstand a conventional invasion from a neighbor with thousands of tanks and a robust air force. In economics, the Russian gross domestic product is 11 times that of Ukraine, and Russia can ramp up manufacturing for armor, missiles, and other materiel. Ukraine’s entrepreneurial ingenuity and adaptability would have been quite hard to assess before the war but are obvious now. It is perhaps only in social cohesion and resilience that analysts might have sensed how Ukrainians would rally to defend their independence, given the Maidan demonstrations of 2014.

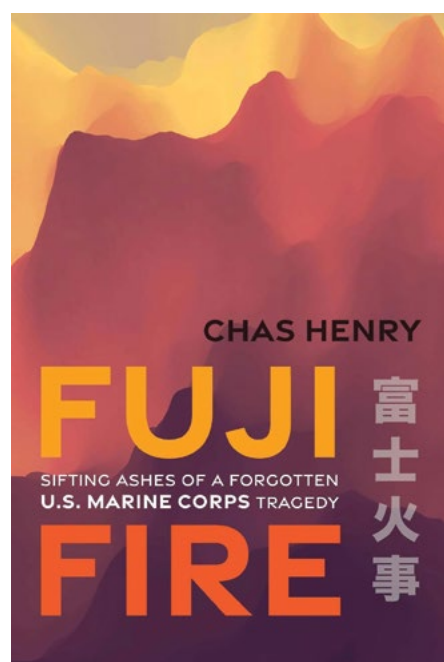
The outcome of any war is difficult to predict. As any good student of Clausewitz realizes, war is inherently nonlinear. *On War* reflects that war is a nonlinear phenomenon, and that “similar causes do not always produce similar effects, and causes interact in ways unforeseeable even by the historically sophisticated”—like our author. Thus, any war may reflect different outcomes that will not be predicted with great accuracy. Much of the uncertainty comes from the unpredictable interaction of states, societies, economics, and military forces that O’Brien depicts over the last century and a half.

We should learn to accept the reality that conflict is the realm of contradiction and paradox, not of rationality or precision analytics. No individual or algorithm will capture all the patterns of the past or eliminate uncertainty in future human affairs. That said, a framework that incorporates more than a military order of battle or static metrics appears extremely useful when formulating policy (or studying it).

While Paul Kennedy will not be retitling his classic *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers* anytime soon, this splendid book is just as important. *War and Power* manifests a nuanced grasp of 20th-century wars, especially the complexities of two world wars. The book has particular utility for top-level joint professional military education students because of its informed exploitation of the past to demonstrate the

dynamic interaction of the instruments of national power. O'Brien reminds us that wars are not necessarily won by the state with the largest army, the biggest missile inventory, or the most exquisite technology. Students of war must evaluate all the elements of power and anticipate their interaction. *War and Power* illuminates the past and guides serious students of war into the future.

Frank Hoffman retired from National Defense University (NDU) in 2024 after 46 years of service in the U.S. Department of Defense (now the Department of War), including a dozen years researching and teaching at NDU.



Fuji Fire: Sifting Ashes of a Forgotten U.S. Marine Corps Tragedy

By Chas Henry
Potomac Books, 2025
297 pp., \$36.95
ISBN-13: 978-1640126459

Reviewed by Colonel Ken Allard, USA
(Ret.)

From the “Old Breed” World War II memoirs of Eugene Sledge and Robert Leckie, Marine grunts with a flair for writing have added immea-

surably to our understanding of war. Their storytelling tends to capture the bottom-up perspectives of warriors suddenly confronted by the imponderables of military history, those unforgettable moments when events smite the best-laid plans of officials far removed from current conflicts. That same perspective frames every chapter of Chas Henry’s superb quest to preserve the memories of the 13 Marines killed and more than 73 injured when a bizarre flash fire erupted on the slopes of Japan’s Mount Fuji in October 1979.

So how bad was it? Henry extensively quotes the Marine Commandant at the time, General Robert Barrow, whose military career began in the grim days of 1942: “Having witnessed a lot of bad things, ugly things, none could compare to that experience.” Although it quickly became known as the “worst-ever peacetime disaster” in Marine Corps history, hospital orderlies remembered something else: “You could smell them as soon as the elevator door opened . . . [the] acrid odor of charred flesh” infused into their uniforms, hair, and skin. Equally upsetting was the constant shivering of the burn victims. As one Marine with second- and third-degree burns explained, “It’s 110 degrees in there but we didn’t have skin to keep our heat in.”

How could such a calamity have occurred? As a former enlisted Camp Fuji Marine, Chas Henry coolly lays bare the roots of the disaster. Although his book includes neither bibliography nor footnotes, his acknowledgments give ample testimony to his exhaustive research across two continents amid the COVID-19 pandemic: “One hundred and thirty individuals . . . shared memories of the incident . . . despite the tears often generated as they did.” Equally important: “Scores of archivists, public affairs officers, librarians, and others” raided their files to assist Henry in assembling the most comprehensive analysis ever attempted of the Fuji fire and its aftermath. Aided by maps, command chronologies, timelines, articles, and even pilot logs, the Fuji Marines at last had a historian capable of telling their unique, heart-rending stories.

Everything else about the base and its mission reflected the primacy of tough operational drilling. Pacific-based Marines typically used Fuji as a training destination after months aboard amphibious vessels, exploiting its hiking, maneuver, and live-firing ranges to sharpen their wartime skills. Since realistic, short-term exercises were their primary mission, Fuji’s bivouac areas were ramshackle, with Quonset huts “put together by infantry carpenters” that seemed “right out of Gomer Pyle.” The only real hazard of the bivouac areas came from a fuel farm improbably located uphill from the Quonset huts housing hundreds of hard-training Marines. These hazards were worsened by the use of rubberized fuel tanks that both the Army and Marines believed represented a quantum improvement in fuel-handling efficiency: “The Amphibious Assault Fuel System unpacked at Camp Fuji in 1979 included 20,000-gallon tanks. . . . When filled to capacity . . . a 20,000-gallon bladder would swell to 5 feet, 9 inches tall.”

An Army Field Manual published in 1977 gave an explicit warning about the location of fuel farms: “[N]ever choose one uphill . . . from other installations which would be in the path of escaping fuel.” Although a succession of training unit commanders seemed startlingly comfortable with the hazards to their troops, Henry cites a 32-year-old Navy chaplain whose “new eyes” enabled him to deliver a prophetic warning only weeks before disaster struck. “It just defies common sense that you would put fuel bladders . . . up above where people are living. . . . You’ve got stoves in there.” The chaplain remembered that a lieutenant colonel at the base camp curtly told him that “that’s the way it had been done for a long time. . . . So [I should] keep my thoughts to myself.”

Unfortunately, the looming menace of what became Typhoon Tip—which remains the largest tropical cyclone on record—made landfall on mainland Japan on October 19, 1979. Registering an astounding 870 millibars of pressure, Tip had gale-force winds that extended 690 miles in every direction. For the Marines at Camp Fuji, the storm was the critical