



Assessing War: The Challenge of Measuring Success and Failure

Edited by Leo J. Blanken, Hy Rothstein, and Jason J. Lepore
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Dr. Philip Meilinger of the Air University once wrote that “one of the most vital yet difficult tasks a wartime commander must perform is strategic assessment.” And yet, as the editors of *Assessing War* rightfully point out, strategic assessment is a topic that has been underserved by academic and military writers to date. It is into this void that *Assessing War* commendably charges, with three primary goals: to compile a set of in-depth historical accounts of a crucial, yet neglected, aspect of military history; to refresh our understanding of the assessment problem by refining our models in light of the evolving wartime environments we observe today and may find in the future; and to generate recommendations to assist in establishing future policy, strategy, and doctrine. This is a heady set of goals for one book, and

Assessing War ultimately delivers a mixed performance in accomplishing them.

The book is strongest in its presentation of history. The dozen chapters looking at cases spanning from the Seven Years’ War to contemporary conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan represent a major contribution to the discourse on this topic, even though the chapters themselves vary widely in quality. The best include the chapters by Edward G. Lengel (the Revolutionary War), Brooks D. Simpson (U.S. actions to subdue rebellion in 1861), Michael Richardson (U.S. cavalry operations against the Plains Indians), Bruce McAllister Linn (the Philippine War), and William C. Hix and Kalev I. Sepp (the Iraq War). The last of these especially fills a major gap, as little has been written about assessment in the Iraq War to date. Some chapters, most notably one about how al Qaeda assesses its progress and one on “alternative dimensions of assessment,” are fascinating but relatively out of place, while others—most notably those by John Grenier (Seven Years’ War) and Alejandro S. Hernandez, Julian Ouellet, and Christopher J. Nannini (Afghanistan)—completely miss the mark. But such unevenness is often the norm in an edited volume, and it should not detract from the utility of these works as a whole—there is much of value to be found here.

The book attempts to provide a new, useable model of strategic assessment for practitioners, but it struggles from the beginning. One major reason for this is the book’s confusion of terms; authors continually conflate *wartime* assessment, *strategic* assessment, and *operations* assessment, and in some cases other forms (for example, *intelligence* assessment) also creep in. This lack of singular understanding of the topic dilutes the section on theory, which is mostly aimed at strategic assessment (are we winning the war?) but also touches inconsistently on operations assessment (are we successfully prosecuting military campaigns?). The concepts presented, such as the “metrics triangle,” principal-agent models, the “Clausewitzian Gap,” and the dominant indicator theory, are rendered more as interesting abstractions than useable models.

That is not to say there is nothing of value here for practitioners. Numerous important points are discussed—for example, that assessments can and do significantly influence the behaviors of the units and individuals being assessed. This aspect of assessment is one of the most overlooked in my experience and the one that can have the most disastrous consequences, both in terms of missed opportunities to shape outcomes and in creating incentives for counterproductive actions.

The book’s greatest weakness is its inability to synthesize its theoretical concepts and empirical examples to generate new insights for the field of strategic assessment. More work should have been done to pull consistent threads across the concepts and cases presented in order to explicitly offer the reader something of enduring value at the book’s conclusion. To be sure, there are many issues pertaining to strategic assessment that could have been broached—for example, whether assessment approaches used in the Revolutionary or Civil wars are still viable today, given increases in the complexity of the battlefield and in our national command structures, or whether technological advances in areas such as communications have improved our ability to assess progress (by “flattening” the battlefield) or made things worse (by generating volumes of data beyond what we can process and interpret). That the book eschews any real attempt to learn from its component chapters and address critical issues facing the future of strategic assessment is its most disappointing aspect.

So what is the overall assessment of *Assessing War*? To use the pithy yet unfortunate assessment lexicon of the day, the book is “green” when it comes to its first goal, “yellow” for its second, and decidedly “red” for its third. Does this mean it is a success or a failure? The ambiguity of that question and the data available to answer it lies at the heart of every strategic assessment—a final point the book would have done well to address better. JFQ

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