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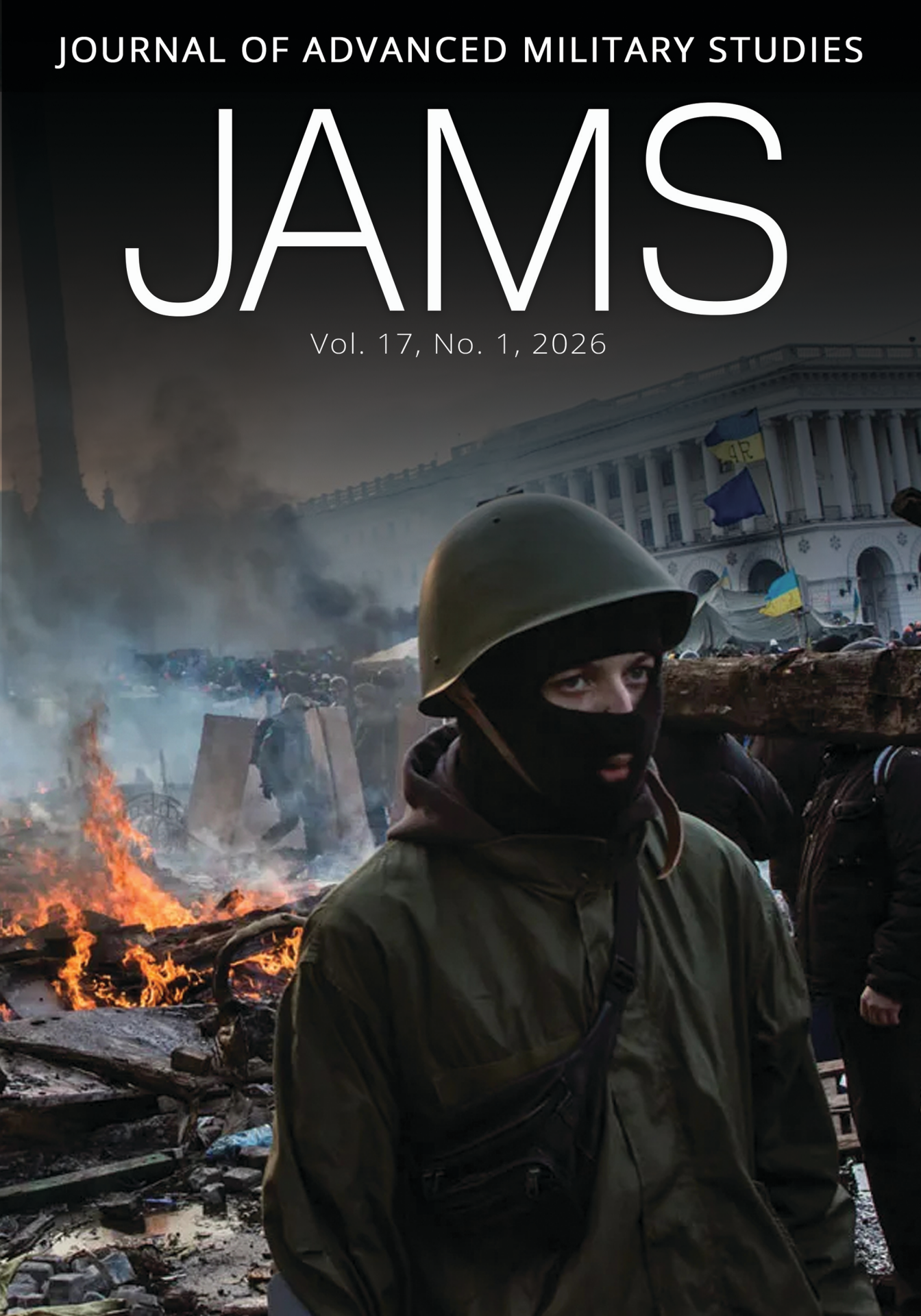

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Contents

Vol. 17, No. 1

From the Editor

Do we really believe that *will to fight* is the single most important factor in war? All U.S. military doctrine is predicated on the idea that war is at its essence a human contest of opposing, hostile and irreconcilable wills.[1] Marines ostensibly believe that the very object of war is "to impose our will on the enemy."[2] Elements of will, including leadership, cohesion, training, and *esprit de corps*, are woven into Marine and Joint warfighting concepts. But the whole Joint force has been ducking the hard work: How do the Services understand military will to fight and then apply that understanding to win wars?

To be fair, this is complex stuff. Trying to assess and describe enemy will to fight might require examining an entire national culture and also gathering specific information about military leaders and units. While some intelligence agencies are working to address these complex issues at the national level, military leaders have no doctrinal starting point from which to build.[3] As of early 2026, there is no official Joint force definition of *will to fight*. Nor is there a widely available guide to help staffs think through the problem. At least in official military literature, will to fight remains an ethereal Clausewitzian concept to be wisely noted but perhaps not practicably applied.[4]

This issue of the *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* (JAMS) seeks to remedy these gaps in concept and practice. Authors in this issue build from a range of public works including a previous special issue of JAMS focused on understanding strategic culture.[5] This vast literature, much of it dating back to the early twentieth century—see, for example, Lord Moran's *Anatomy of Cour-*

[1] For example, see the 2017 update of *Doctrine of the Armed Forces of the United States*, Joint Publication 1 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017), I-3.

[2] *Warfighting*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 1-4.

[3] For reference to national-level efforts see, for example, Avril Haines, "A Conference on Today's Competitive Geopolitical Landscape—In Honor of Robert Jervis" (presentation, Columbia University, NY, 17 February 2023).

[4] A Joint concept note identifying the gap in will-to-fight analysis is no longer available on military websites. *Joint Concept—Human Aspects of Military Operations* (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2016).

[5] *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, SI (2022), https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.2022SIstratcul.

age—is of course immensely helpful; all good theories and analyses build on the works of others.[6] However, the complexity and diversity of this material can also be overwhelming to anyone not fully immersed in the study of human behavior in war.[7]

Where should one start when building a model of human will? Unfortunately, while thousands of historians, psychologists, sociologists, and other scientists have written about various aspects of human behavior and will to fight, they have not agreed on a central model of human behavior. Given the inherent limits on knowledge and many longstanding theoretical disagreements, it is highly unlikely that any reliable, generalizable model will ever exist. That leaves a perpetual crack in our foundation of common understanding. And it renders all of our conclusions about human behavior somewhat subjective and always in flux.

Still, progress is possible. If we really believe what we write and say about will to fight then that progress is also necessary. Some effective assessment theories and methods are already at hand. I co-led five government-funded research projects tailored to help define and assess will to fight.[8] The cross-functional research teams built a working definition of will to fight from more than 200 published works: *Will to fight is the disposition and decision to fight, act, or persevere as needed*.[9] More recent work at Rand and at the Center for Naval Analyses have further refined models and concepts and even generated some analytic tools suitable for military and intelligence use.[10] None of this work is perfect and no published report or method fully answers the questions posed above.

How, then, should the reader approach this issue of JAMS? I recommend treating all efforts to understand and assess human will as part of an ongoing dialectic. In other words: Complex scientific questions about human behavior may never be settled, but we learn a great deal from the ongoing debate and from the many efforts to reduce uncertainty. In this way, will-to-fight theories and assessment are like military intelligence.

Intelligence questions we ask about the adversary are always somewhat subjective and based on the needs of the commander. Information we gain on enemy dispositions and intentions is always uncertain and incomplete. Our

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[6] Lord Moran, *Anatomy of Courage* (London: Constable, 1946).

[7] For a list of recommended readings, see Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2018), 36, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2341.

[8] "Understanding the 'Will to Fight," Rand.org, accessed 5 March 2026.

[9] Connable et al., *Will to Fight*, xi.

[10] For example, Jonathan Welch et al., *Tactical Will to Fight Assessment Guide: A How-To Manual for Conducting Tactical Will to Fight Assessments* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2026), https://doi.org/10.7249/TLA3552-1; U.S. Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Formative Evaluation, Military Will to Fight," public summary 28 May 2025; and "Battle Research Group Will-to-Fight Assessment Tool," Battleresearchgroup.org, accessed 5 March 2026.

analyses are always laden with caveats like "probable" and "possible." Yet, that constant uncertainty does not deter us from continuing to pursue a better intelligence picture. We simultaneously accept the inherent uncertainty of war—another core tenet from *Warfighting*—and work to improve our knowledge.[11]

So, start from the assumption that your grasp on this subject will be perpetually imperfect. Read the authors' take on will to fight. Compare and contrast their ideas and recommendations and dive in to the broader literature on the subject. Then do something to apply the core understanding of war as a contest of opposing wills to daily practice in great power competition and as we prepare to fight and fight our nation's wars.

Ben Connable, PhD, USMC (Ret)
Executive Director of the Battle Research Group

[11] On uncertainty, see *Warfighting*, 7-9.

Forging the Will to Fight
Lessons from the Winter War, 1939–1940

Gilles A. Paché

Abstract: The Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union (1939–40) shows how small states can overcome major disadvantages by organizing society and institutions effectively. Despite facing far superior Soviet forces, Finland built strong resilience through focused military training, shared national narratives, and close coordination between civilians and the military. Civilians supported the war effort through fortification work, logistics, and cooperation with military goals, which strengthened national unity and boosted soldiers' morale and performance. Finnish forces used terrain, harsh weather, and decentralized leadership to turn this societal commitment into real tactical advantages. Modern Finnish defense practices—such as preparing for hybrid threats, conducting territorial exercises, and maintaining voluntary military service—reflect these lessons. Together, they demonstrate that readiness, cohesion, and resilience depend on deliberate planning and broad societal involvement. This article argues that the will to fight is not automatic but deliberately built, and that doing so improves both strategic independence and military effectiveness.

Keywords: Finland, military cohesion, resilience, Soviet invasion, survival motivation, Winter War, will to fight

Introduction

The Winter War, fought between Finland and the Soviet Union from November

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1939 to March 1940, illustrates the decisive influence of both civilian mobilization and the army's fighting spirit on conflict outcomes. Facing an adversary with overwhelming manpower and material superiority, Finland prolongs its resistance, inflicts significant losses, and preserves political independence despite territorial concessions.[1] Finnish effectiveness relied not only on territorial defense but also on the ability to convert limited resources into maximal operational performance through exceptional collective motivation.[2] Leadership adapted to local conditions and deliberately fostered civic engagement, serving as a causal driver of collective motivation that enabled the country to mitigate initially unfavorable imbalances. The Finnish case therefore suggests that fighting spirit emerges from deliberate social cohesion, meticulous planning, and organizational adaptability, acting as generators of operational and strategic advantages rather than appearing spontaneously. Such advantages subsequently reinforce and sustain the collective will to fight, clearly marking operational effectiveness as an effect rather than a cause.[3] Each participant, military or civilian, assumes a clearly defined role within national strategy, with collective motivation anchored in shared narratives and rigorous anticipation of challenges, thereby maximizing performance despite tangible and intangible limitations.

Understanding how a state cultivates superior fighting spirit despite material and numerical deficits requires examining the interplay among societal, institutional, and individual factors. Rather than a static attribute, fighting spirit represents a process actively generated by psychological preparation, institutional structures, and sociopolitical cohesion, which produces resilience, operational effectiveness, and enduring morale.[4] Historical Finnish experience demonstrates that intensive military training, deep-rooted social cohesion, and adaptation to extreme environmental conditions directly generate the capacity to sustain operational effectiveness and collective will under severe constraints, offsetting conventional disadvantages. This enabled Finland's population to

[1] Pasi Tuunainen, "New Approaches to the Study of Arctic Warfare," *Nordia Geographical Publications* 43, no. 1 (January 2014): 87–99.

[2] Pasi Tuunainen, *Finnish Military Effectiveness in the Winter War, 1939–1940* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-44606-0. The originality of Pasi Tuunainen's work lies in its analytical reframing. Rather than attributing Finnish performance to abstract cultural factors or solely to force asymmetry, the author advances a systemic analysis integrating organizational structures, operational practices, and environmental constraints. He demonstrates that Finnish effectiveness emerged from a dynamic interaction among decentralized command, tactical adaptability, resilience, and the methodical exploitation of terrain and climate. The book represents a major contribution to the literature on small-state warfare by conceptualizing military effectiveness as a multidimensional phenomenon—one that is measurable and explicable beyond mythologized narratives.

[3] LtCol Juoni Keravuori, *The Russo-Finnish War, 1939–1940: A Study in Leadership, Training, and Esprit-de-Corps* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1985).

[4] Eric Engle and Jukka Paananen, *Finland's Winter War: Strategy, Society, and Survival* (London: Routledge, 2019).

survive overwhelming odds and inflict disproportionate losses on a technologically superior adversary, as documented by Vesa Nenye and colleagues in their analysis of the Winter War.[5] Civic mobilization, national narratives, and culturally attuned leadership actively created fighting spirit (cause), allowing limited resources to generate strategic leverage and reinforce operational effectiveness (effect). Integrating terrain mastery, improvised tactics, and decentralized command, Finnish forces demonstrated that fighting spirit functions as both a psychological and force multiplier, transforming constraints into operational advantage.[6]

Physical environment plays a critical role in operational behavior and the maintenance of Finnish determination. Dense forests, frozen lakes, and harsh winter conditions severely restrict Soviet mobility while enabling the application of terrain-adapted asymmetric tactics.[7] Training from youth to exploit environmental constraints actively generated preparedness and initiative, which then enhanced motivation, cohesion, and combat effectiveness. Furthermore, the intimate understanding of local geography allowed Finnish forces to anticipate enemy movements, optimize small-unit maneuvers, and integrate natural obstacles into broader operational planning, amplifying both strategic impact and collective resolve. Mastery of the environment alone does not constitute fighting spirit; it merges with cohesion and leadership to enhance operational outcomes.[8] Terrain familiarity and anticipatory logistical planning act as causal instruments, producing operational leverage that reinforces the population's will to fight. By combining anticipation, cultural preparedness, and collective discipline, Finland demonstrates that fighting spirit is generated through an integrated system in which tactical actions, individual commitment, and logistical effort collectively produce resilience and operational effectiveness, consolidating institutional trust and military confidence.

From Strategic Preparation to Societal Mobilization

By the late 1930s, Finland faced a precarious geopolitical position in Europe,

[5] Vesa Nenye et al., *Finland at War: The Winter War 1939–40* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2015). This work represents one of the most comprehensive syntheses of the conflict, combining operational analysis, archival sources, and detailed battle narratives. It is distinguished by its ability to interweave the strategic, tactical, and human dimensions of the war, offering a precise reconstruction of engagements while situating Finnish performance within a broader geopolitical context. Through the integration of visual documents and firsthand accounts, the book provides an exceptionally nuanced, multidimensional understanding of Finnish military effectiveness.

[6] William R. Trotter, *A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish Winter War of 1939–40* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, a division of Workman Publishing, 1991).

[7] Carl Van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland, 1939–1940* (London: Routledge, 1997).

[8] Maj Gregory J. Bozek, *The Soviet-Finnish War, 1939–1940: Getting the Doctrine Right* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1993).

confronting an adversary with overwhelming material and numerical superiority. With a population of approximately 3.7 million and an army undergoing modernization, the country remained highly vulnerable to Soviet demands, which included ceding strategic territories on the Karelian Isthmus, permitting military bases along key points in the Baltic, and demilitarizing critical defensive sectors.[9] Finnish leaders perceived these requirements as existential threats, recognizing that any concession would undermine national sovereignty, weaken social cohesion, and erode institutional trust. Such circumstances necessitated careful strategic preparation, combining intelligence gathering, early mobilization, and comprehensive operational planning to ready the nation for a conflict that was both conventionally and psychologically demanding.[10] Here, early mobilization and societal coordination function as deliberate instruments to generate fighting spirit, establishing the population's readiness as a causal factor in resilience rather than as a by-product of preexisting morale. National strategy integrated military readiness, civil coordination, and moral formation to convert structural vulnerability into enduring resilience.

Mobilizing Society and Shaping Strategy

Perception of threat extends beyond immediate military considerations, framing the conflict as a moral and historical test of national continuity. As Juoni Keravuori emphasizes, state beliefs, biases, and strategic culture shape threat perception, filtering rational assessments through historical memory, national identity, and institutional frameworks.[11] This understanding allows Finnish authorities to implement an integrated mobilization approach, combining social cohesion, civic discipline, and anticipatory logistical preparation. Interaction between regular forces, local militias, and coordinated civilian participation deliberately generates resilience, with operational effectiveness emerging as a reinforcing consequence. The causal chain runs from structured engagement to the cultivation of fighting spirit, ensuring that the population's willingness to fight is actively constructed rather than passively reinforced. Strategic anticipation also functions as a psychological lever, enhancing public confidence and collective determination against a technologically superior adversary. Every decision, from supply line planning to unit organization, is designed to maximize responsiveness, coordination, and the ability to maintain pressure on the enemy while preserving national cohesion.

[9] Bozek, *The Soviet-Finnish War, 1939–1940: Getting the Doctrine Right*.
[10] Tuunainen, "New Approaches to the Study of Arctic Warfare."
[11] Keravuori, *The Russo-Finnish War, 1939–1940: A Study in Leadership, Training, and Esprit-de-Corps*.

Training Minds and Shaping Battlefield Performance

A critical component of this preparation lies in the cognitive and cultural training of soldiers through national narratives. Ville Kivimäki and Matti Hyvärinen highlight coordinated efforts among military authorities, historians, and educators to frame the 1939–40 conflict as part of a centuries-long struggle against external domination.[12] By presenting contemporary soldiers as heirs to a tradition of resistance, these narratives instill a profound sense of duty and urgency, reinforcing unit cohesion and resilience. Narratives extend beyond propaganda, translating historical continuity into concrete operational principles and internalization of mission command. Such an approach ensures that every tactical decision and battlefield engagement directly aligns with national strategic objectives, transforming individual and collective morale into a force and discipline multiplier. The integration of these elements guarantees optimal coordination between individual initiative, tactical autonomy, and strategic purpose, thereby consolidating the nation's capacity to endure in hostile environments.[13]

Preparing Bodies and Reinforcing Resilience

Concurrently, the General Staff of the Finnish Defence Forces (*Pääesikunta*) implements proactive operational measures to offset structural weaknesses. Ammunition and fuel depots are dispersed to reduce vulnerability to artillery and air raids, while unit organization promotes decentralized command and flexibility for small detachments operating in forested, snow-covered terrain.[14] Soldiers receive intensive winter mobility training, including skiing and frozen-lake navigation, ensuring operational effectiveness even under extreme temperatures. Civilian participation further strengthens resilience, contributing to fortification construction and maintaining logistical networks.[15] Anticipation of foreign support, albeit uncertain, reinforces national determination and discourages premature surrender. Collectively, these efforts generate continuous adaptive capacity, wherein material preparation, societal preparedness, and effective leadership interact to produce resilience, ensuring the army can sustain prolonged operations despite significant initial disadvantages.

Finally, integrating social, institutional, and military mechanisms establishes a holistic system in which existential threats become drivers of collective discipline and operational effectiveness. Combining strategic foresight, cultural

[12] Ville Kivimäki and Matti Hyvärinen, "Forging a Master Narrative for a Nation: Finnish History as a Script during the Second World War," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 47, no. 1 (2022): 83–105, https://doi.org/10.1080/03468755.2021.2015430.
[13] Tuunainen, *Finnish Military Effectiveness in the Winter War, 1939–1940.*
[14] Philip Jowett and Brent Snodgrass, *Finland at War, 1939–45* (Oxford, UK: Osprey Publishing, 2012).
[15] Engle and Paananen, *Finland's Winter War: Strategy, Society, and Survival.*

preparation, and civic engagement ensures that logistics, training, and moral cohesion reinforce each other.[16] Soldiers' confidence in reliable supply lines and alignment of civilian support with military objectives guarantees operational continuity and optimizes battlefield performance. Thus, fighting spirit emerges from a national system capable of converting vulnerability into resilience, using historical memory, social cohesion, and institutional legitimacy as strategic multipliers.[17] This approach highlights that every aspect, from logistical support to cultural adherence, contributes to sustainable combat capacity, enabling a materially limited state to mount effective resistance while maintaining intact sovereignty.

Finnish Tenacity and the Dynamics of Combat

On 30 November1939, Finland entered in open hostilities against the Red Army, which deployed approximately 400,000 soldiers, thousands of armored vehicles, and massive air support, intending to rapidly overwhelm resistance. Soviet doctrine at the time favors mechanized breakthroughs and concentrated offensives, largely disregarding constraints imposed by extreme winter, frozen lakes, and dense forests.[18] Finnish effectiveness relied on the integration of three key factors: pragmatic leadership, rigorous tactical training, and a national culture of tenacity (or *sisu*).[19] Internal cohesion, or *henki*, transformed every engagement into an existential affirmation of sovereignty, while the combination of discipline, individual initiative, and mutual support converted initial inferiority into a lasting moral and strategic advantage.[20] This synergy reveals that fighting spirit functions as an "intangible asset," enhancing both troop resilience and overall operational effectiveness in hostile environments, with

[16] Keravuori, *The Russo-Finnish War, 1939–1940: A Study in Leadership, Training, and Esprit-de-Corps*.

[17] Engle and Paananen, *Finland's Winter War: Strategy, Society, and Survival*.

[18] Van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland, 1939–1940*.

[19] *Sisu* is a concept deeply rooted in Finnish culture, denoting a particular form of courage, determination, and perseverance in the face of adversity. It is not merely a momentary act of bravery, but a lasting inner strength that compels an individual to persist despite obstacles, fatigue, or discouragement. It can be described as the capacity to endure and strive even when circumstances seem insurmountable—a blend of stoic courage, tenacity, and steadfastness of mind and body. For more on the concept, see Pentti Henttonen, "A Measure for Assessment of Beneficial and Harmful Fortitude: Development and Initial Validation of the Sisu Scale," *Helion* 8, no. 11 (2022): e11483, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2022.e11483.

[20] *Henki* is a Finnish term that literally translates as "spirit," "soul," or "breath," but it carries a more nuanced cultural significance. It denotes the vital energy or inner force that animates a person—their life force and spirit of being. Unlike *sisu*, which is associated with perseverance in the face of adversity, *henki* refers more broadly to the very essence of life and presence, encompassing a person's inner dynamism and capacity to be fully alive. For more on the concept, see Ville Kivimäki and Tuomas Tepora, "War of Hearts: Love and Collective Attachment as Integrating Factors in Finland during World War II," *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 2 (2009): 285–305, https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.0.0273.

combat preparation extending far beyond mere accumulation of material resources.

Adaptation to terrain and climate constitutes a decisive factor in sustaining resilience. Frozen marshes, narrow transport corridors, and dense forests restricted Soviet mobility, exposed armored columns to ambush, and disrupted supply chains, while extreme cold exacerbated fatigue and triggered mechanical failures.[21] Finnish units employed skis, sleds, and light vehicles to achieve tactical surprise and maintain sustained operational tempo, fully exploiting environmental constraints as a strategic lever. Patriotism, belief in just cause, and unit cohesion strengthened individual and collective endurance. Every ambush, raid, or defensive action enhanced confidence in the group's ability to strike effectively and impose disproportionate costs on the adversary. Finnish leadership and national narratives intertwined with these tactics, linking morale, operational execution, and strategic outcomes, thereby transforming terrain mastery into a fundamental performance cornerstone.

Logistics assumed here a decisive role, acting as both operational and psychological multiplier. Decentralized depots, field maintenance, and adaptive transport methods—skis, sleds, horses, and light vehicles—ensured continuous supply of ammunition, food, and fuel even under extreme conditions.[22] Each successful delivery reinforced soldier confidence, sustained combat endurance, and enabled coordinated action across dispersed units. The Battle of Suomussalmi, fought from 30 November 1939 to 8 January 1940, exemplified this integration: a smaller Finnish force, leveraging intimate knowledge of terrain, unit autonomy, and innovative tactics, destroyed two Soviet divisions despite numerical inferiority. Skis and sleds enabled rapid redeployment and surprise attacks, while decentralized supply chains ensured continuous support. Coordination between leadership, logistics, and tactical initiative amplified morale and operational effectiveness, allowing Finnish units to strike, withdraw, and exploit enemy mistakes repeatedly.[23]

The Battle of Suomussalmi illustrates that a small state, leveraging environmental knowledge, cohesive leadership, and adaptive tactics, can impose disproportionate costs on a superior adversary. Careful coordination of reconnaissance, flexible command, and continuous situational assessment further enabled Finnish forces to anticipate enemy movements, exploit vulnerabilities, and maintain operational tempo. Finnish experience offers enduring insights for contemporary operations, showing that fighting spirit, cohesion, and terrain exploitation remain central to operational effectiveness and resilience, whether

[21] Jowett and Snodgrass, *Finland at War, 1939–45*.
[22] Bozek, *The Soviet-Finnish War, 1939–1940: Getting the Doctrine Right*.
[23] Trotter, *A Frozen Hell: The Russo-Finnish Winter War of 1939–40*.

in conventional or asymmetric conflicts. Psychological preparation, discipline, and national culture substantially offset material and numerical disadvantages, transforming initial vulnerabilities into sustainable operational and strategic advantages, consolidating Finland's reputation as a model of resilience. This combination of human, social, and environmental factors underscores how an integrated system maximizes a small state's capacity to resist and inflict significant losses even against a technologically superior adversary.

Pillars of Fighting Spirit

Finnish fighting spirit rests on four foundational pillars, closely integrating social, institutional, military, and international factors to generate durable resilience. The unique combination of societal preparedness, military discipline, logistical planning, and perception of shared legitimacy enables a small state to convert material and numerical constraints into operational and psychological advantages. The Finnish case provides evidence that fighting spirit does not arise spontaneously but emerges from a holistic system in which social cohesion, leadership, historical memory, and anticipation of alliances interact to produce resilience capable of sustaining prolonged campaigns against a technologically superior adversary. Each pillar reinforces and amplifies the others, transforming objective limitations into durable strategic levers.

Sociopolitical Cohesion and Legitimacy

The first pillar relies on an integrated sociopolitical system, where national mobilization, social cohesion, and perceived legitimacy interact to generate resilience.[24] Civilians actively contribute to defense, building fortifications, maintaining infrastructure, and supporting frontline troops, forging an inseparable bond between society and the military.[25] This multidimensional cohesion produces collective effectiveness exceeding the sum of individual contributions, reinforcing soldier morale and operational confidence. National narratives emphasize duty to society and continuity of historical identity, converting cultural

[24] Anthony King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199658848.001.0001. Anthony King analyzes how unit cohesion and combat effectiveness do not arise merely from soldiers' voluntarism, but from a systemic combination of organizational and sociopolitical factors. He notes that clear hierarchical structures and a shared culture within platoons enable forces to maintain high levels of confidence under intense pressure. His analysis demonstrates how resilience depends on the integration of collective norms rather than on isolated individual qualities, reinforcing the notion that national mobilization, social cohesion, and perceived legitimacy constitute essential pillars for sustaining a durable fighting spirit.

[25] Ben Connable, "Structuring Cultural Analyses: Applying the Holistic Will to Fight Models," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 13, SI (2022): 153–67, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.2022SIstratcul009.

adherence into concrete operational motivation.[26] A politically unified society, convinced of the legitimacy of its struggle, sustains prolonged military effort despite the adversary's material superiority. Integrating such human and social factors into national strategy enhances the durability of fighting spirit and establishes a framework of collective discipline that is difficult to undermine.

Logistics and Environmental Adaptation

The second pillar relies on logistical planning and terrain adaptation, essential for resilience. Decentralized depots, autonomous units, and expert exploitation of forests, snow-covered terrain, and variable weather conditions transform structural constraints into significant tactical advantages.[27] Mobility on skis, mastery of frozen lakes, and deep terrain familiarity enable precise strikes, effective defense, and rapid maneuvers, reinforcing soldier confidence and fostering civilian intrinsic motivation. Logistics extend beyond technical supply: they act as a "catalyst," ensuring operational continuity, sustaining morale, and facilitating adaptive decision-making under stress. The capacity to convert physical, environmental, and climatic constraints into operational advantages suggests how a state prepares its forces to sustain prolonged combat and maintain a stable, resilient fighting spirit even against a superior adversary.

Civic Engagement and Perceived Legitimacy

The third pillar emphasizes civic engagement and perception of a just cause, enhancing fighting spirit beyond material limitations. Finnish society, fully informed and mobilized, accepted severe sacrifices to defend its ideals, including roughly 25,000 casualties, mainly young adults, in key battles such as Suomussalmi and Tolvajärvi.[28] Moral strength, grounded in shared societal values or what might be termed *spiritual formidability*, shapes endurance and unit cohesion independently of physical constraints, as exemplified during the Greek Civil War (1946–49).[29] Active civilian participation amplifies military effective-

[26] Tuunainen, "New Approaches to the Study of Arctic Warfare."

[27] Jowett and Snodgrass, *Finland at War, 1939–45*.

[28] The Battle of Tolvajärvi took place during 12–24 December 1939 in the Ladoga Karelia region, north of Lake Ladoga. Following the Soviet invasion, Finnish forces organized Group Talvela, including the 16th Infantry Regiment and several detachments, to confront the 139th Soviet Rifle Division, which was considerably larger and better equipped. Through a meticulously coordinated assault, featuring a "pincer movement" and the strategic exploitation of cold, snow, and frozen lakes, the Finns inflicted a severe defeat on the Red Army, with approximately 4,000–5,000 killed, numerous wounded, and substantial material losses. The battle is particularly significant as it represents the first major Finnish offensive victory of the Winter War, restoring morale to the Finnish Army and the civilian population and countering the perception of an unstoppable Soviet advance.

[29] Spyros Tsoutsoumpis, "The Will to Fight: Combat, Morale, and the Experience of National Army Soldiers during the Greek Civil War, 1946–1949," *International Journal of Military History & Historiography* 44, no. 1 (2022): 103–27.

ness, demonstrating that resilience is a sociocultural construct. Soldiers perceive that their commitment directly contributes to collective survival, reinforcing the link between morale, discipline, and strategic outcomes, and transforming cohesion and national legitimacy into "tangible assets" for operationalizing fighting spirit.

Alliances and Anticipated International Support

The fourth pillar relies on anticipation of alliances and international support, influencing strategic calculations and consolidating national resolve. In 1939, Finland anticipated potential support from Sweden and Western powers, which, even if uncertain, significantly strengthened civilian and military confidence, reinforcing a shared sense of purpose and collective determination. Public communication, morale management, and strategic transparency further reinforced collective trust and resilience. Integrating social cohesion, shared responsibility, and perception of external support allowed limited material resources to be converted into symbolic and operational power, amplifying both psychological and tactical effects. This experience reveals that fighting spirit depends as much on legitimacy and civic solidarity as on logistics and material means, highlighting the importance of a holistic vision combining internal preparation, societal cohesion, and strategic anticipation.[30]

From History to Modern Military Resolve

The Winter War profoundly shaped Finnish strategic memory, demonstrating that fighting spirit is not spontaneous but institutionally cultivated through societal preparedness and shared national culture. Lessons from 1939–40 reinforced mandatory conscription for men, voluntary service for women, and a large network of trained reservists capable of rapid mobilization.[31] This framework ensures societal role awareness, strengthening adherence to defense ob-

[30] Alexandru Mihai Serban, "The Role of Military Morale as an Essential Dimension of Combat Power," *Security & Defence Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (2024): 174832, https://doi.org/10.35467/sdq/174832.

[31] Jarkko Kosonen and Juha Mälkki, "The Finnish Model of Conscription: A Successful Policy to Organize National Defence," in *Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries: Cases, Lessons, Challenges*, ed. Caroline de la Porte et al. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022), 456–72, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192856296.003.0022. This chapter examines the enduring success of Finland's conscription program as a central foundation of national defense. The authors emphasize that conscription ensures the resilience and adaptability of the military system, enabling Finland to sustain a credible force despite limited resources and a precarious geopolitical environment. Since attaining independence in 1917, conscription has been shaped by political and social debates, incorporating civic responsibility, social cohesion, and adherence to national values. The legislative framework has evolved to include women on a voluntary basis and to provide nonmilitary alternatives for conscientious objectors, while ensuring that most of the population contributes to national defense.

jectives, consolidating perceived legitimacy, and embedding strategic culture within education, public communication, and military training. Nicholas H. Vidal emphasizes that strategic behavior is shaped not solely by material capabilities but by collective cognitive frameworks and culturally embedded narratives.[32] Decision-making, resilience, and crisis responses are structured by shared interpretive models defining threats, legitimacy, and appropriate action. Within such perspective, anticipation, social cohesion, and perceived legitimacy operate as stabilizing mechanisms guiding collective behavior under pressure. The historical foundation sets the stage for understanding how these outcomes continue to shape military practices.

National Defense Practices

Contemporary Finnish defense doctrine directly reflects insights from the Winter War, transforming historical experience into strategic practice. Units exploit environmental familiarity, decentralized coordination, and cutting-edge technologies to compensate for numerical and material limitations, applying rigorous training to forests, dispersed terrain, and harsh climatic conditions. For instance, during the Winter War, small Finnish detachments repeatedly used "motti" tactics—encircling and isolating superior Soviet units in forested terrain—to convert limited forces into decisive local advantage. These experiences continue to inform modern maneuver strategies and emphasize the value of initiative at lower command levels. Programs integrate territorial defense, cybersecurity, information security, and coordinated civil-military activities to confront complex threats. Opponents are recognized as multidimensional actors employing military, cyber, informational, economic, and psychological instruments to destabilize society and undermine institutional trust, rather than achieve immediate battlefield gains. Operational effectiveness emerges from collective experience, confidence in leadership, and disciplined cohesion under prolonged and multifaceted pressures, converting limited means into both tactical leverage and cognitive advantage.[33] By fusing institutional design, societal preparedness, and adaptive training, Finland ensures readiness and coordination, demonstrating how strategic culture translates historical insight into enduring resilience.

Recent exercises, including Kajo 2022 and Arrow 2024, operationalize such principles by engaging both professional forces and civilians in territorial

[32] Nicholas H. Vidal, "Enemy at the Gates: A Strategic Cultural Analysis of Russian Approaches to Conflict in the Information Domain," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (2023): 49–76, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402003.

[33] King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*.

defense, cyber operations, and interinstitutional coordination.[34] The Finnish experience provides a model for small and medium states facing hybrid threats, showing that structured civic participation, disciplined training, and confidence in command cultivate the will to fight. Comparable initiatives are visible in Sweden's total defense program and Norway's civil-military resilience exercises, highlighting the transferability of societal and institutional integration in preserving sovereignty.[35] Legal and procedural measures, including the adaptation of the Emergency Powers Act (1991) to hybrid threats, reinforce cohesion and enable competent authorities to maintain operational continuity under extreme pressure.[36] By embedding historical lessons, multisector coordination, and civic engagement into daily practice, states achieve multidimensional resilience that sustains morale, operational adaptability, and strategic autonomy in the face of contemporary security challenges.[37]

Society and Culture Integration

Civil society remains a central pillar in operationalizing Finland's collective resolve, as reflected in voluntary training programs, territorial exercises, and participation in hybrid-threat resilience initiatives that collectively sustain a structured approach to national defense. The reintroduction of voluntary military service in France, targeting 50,000 participants by 2035 alongside 200,000 professional soldiers, illustrates how societal preparedness can effectively complement professional military capacity.[38] The Winter War further suggests that perceived legitimacy, awareness of existential threats, and adherence to national narratives reinforce resilience—an observation notably examined by Jared Di-

[34] The Kajo 2022 exercise, conducted from 15 to 28 March 2022, involved approximately 10,000 participants, including nearly 3,500 Finnish professional military personnel, cyber defense units, and critical civilian staff, alongside territorial units and reservists, to test civil-military coordination, the protection of critical infrastructure, and resilience against hybrid threats. The Arrow 2024 exercise, conducted by the Finnish Armored Brigade from 26 April to 14 May 2024 at the Pohjankangas training area (Niinisalo), mobilized 1,850 Finnish conscripts and approximately 300 allied professional soldiers from the United Kingdom, Latvia, and Estonia, supported by nearly 500 vehicles, including 150 armored vehicles, to train combined-arms cooperation and allied interoperability.

[35] Kristin Ljungkvist, "The Military-Strategic Rationality of Hybrid Warfare: Everyday Total Defence under Strategic Non-Peace in the Case of Sweden," *European Journal of International Security* 9, no. 4 (2024): 533–52, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2024.18.

[36] Tiina Ferm, "Legal Resilience from a Finnish Perspective," in *Hybrid Threats and Grey Zone Conflict: The Challenge to Liberal Democracies, Ethics, National Security, and the Rule of Law*, ed. Mitt Regan and Aurel Sari (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 631–48, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197744772.003.0028.

[37] Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen and Tapio Juntunen, "From 'Spiritual Defence' to Robust Resilience in the Finnish Comprehensive Security Model," in *Nordic Societal Security: Convergence and Divergence*, ed. Sebastian Larsson and Mark Rhinard (London: Routledge, 2020), 154–78.

[38] Laurent Vilaine, "Le Service Militaire Volontaire, un Projet Utile?," *Conversation*, 1 December 2025.

amond, who devoted a chapter to Finland in his analysis of how nations confront and manage crises.[39] Importantly, Finland's success must be understood primarily in terms of *survival* rather than *decisive victory*; despite fierce resistance that prevented full Soviet occupation, the Moscow Peace Treaty ceded significant territory to the Soviet Union while Finland retained its independence and institutions, a dynamic elaborated in Kimmo Rentola's study of Finnish–Soviet relations, which emphasizes Finland's preservation of sovereignty under extreme external pressure.[40]

Finland's defense doctrine demonstrates that resilience relies as much on coordinated civic responsibility and institutional reliability as on conventional military capability. Citizens actively participate in hybrid-threat preparedness, territorial defense drills, and multiagency exercises, deliberately generating fighting spirit while enhancing situational awareness, operational coordination, and collective accountability across civil and military domains. These proactive engagements form the causal foundation for strengthened will to fight, embedding lessons from past conflicts into routine practice and aligning decision-making at all levels with overarching strategic imperatives. Voluntary participation reinforces internalization of defense obligations, complements professional forces, and provides flexibility for rapid and coordinated responses to complex scenarios. Operational effectiveness and enduring fighting spirit thus emerge from the interplay of institutional legitimacy, societal commitment, and disciplined execution, rather than from numerical strength or individual heroism alone. Finland exemplifies a model in which civic engagement and interinstitutional cohesion produce sustainable strategic autonomy, enabling a small state to maintain resilience and operational readiness under existential pressures.

Conclusion

The Winter War reveals that the will to fight arises from the deliberate integration of societal, institutional, and military elements, extending beyond individual psychological traits. Finland's endurance depended on meticulous logistical preparation, disciplined leadership, and broad civic engagement. Civilians actively supported the war effort through fortification construction, infrastructure maintenance, and provision for combat forces, reinforcing cohesion and national resolve. Soldiers internalized narratives emphasizing duty, historical continuity, and collective resilience, which served as a *causal driver of operational motivation*. Decentralized command, flexible units, and adaptation to harsh environmental conditions magnified the impact of this preparation, enabling a

[39] Jared Diamond, *Upheaval: Turning Points for Nations in Crisis* (New York: Little, Brown, 2019).
[40] Kimmo Rentola, *How Finland Survived Stalin: From Winter War to Cold War, 1939–1950* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

numerically and materially inferior force to impose disproportionate costs on the adversary. Resilience thus functions both as a source of fighting spirit and as an outcome that strengthens operational performance. The dynamic interplay among leadership, societal cohesion, and military organization illustrates how the will to fight acts as a force multiplier, sustaining operations under stress, preserving discipline, and enhancing both strategic and tactical effectiveness.

Traditional approaches to evaluating military power often focus on personnel numbers, equipment, and technological superiority, which neglect the central role of collective determination in operational results. The Finnish case underscores that will to fight constitutes a strategic variable that can be deliberately cultivated and institutionalized through training, civic engagement, and organizational design. Rigorous preparation, including environmental adaptation, decentralized logistics, and rehearsed operational plans, enhances psychological resilience and unit effectiveness. Soldiers develop confidence in leadership and supply continuity, enabling rapid, coordinated responses to enemy action despite material inferiority. This systematic integration of human, organizational, and environmental factors produces a multiplier effect, amplifying tactical success and operational endurance. For contemporary military doctrines, this emphasizes the importance of combining traditional combat effectiveness with leadership development, cohesion maintenance, and the human dimension, ensuring that forces remain resilient in prolonged or asymmetric operations.

Despite the clear insights, caution is required when applying the Winter War experience to contemporary contexts. Extreme environmental conditions, deep cultural cohesion, and a specific geopolitical setting shaped Finland's outcomes in ways that cannot be directly replicated. Contemporary societies face altered social dynamics, risk perceptions, and political structures that may limit rapid mobilization or the integration of civilians into defense efforts. Overreliance on historical narratives risks idealization, and planning must be based on evidence, not mythologized heroism. Assessing individual and collective will to fight in modern European societies requires attention to cultural, social, and political variables, as well as realistic analyses of potential threats. A nuanced understanding allows military planners to integrate insights from historical examples while adapting them to current conditions, reinforcing resilience and the capacity to sustain national defense efforts over extended periods without overestimating the ease of social mobilization.

Future research and defense policy should examine how psychological, civic, and cultural factors interact to sustain collective resilience under threat. Comparative studies of conflicts in which smaller or materially inferior forces resisted stronger adversaries can reveal lessons relevant to contemporary force planning. European societies, characterized by prolonged peace, econom-

ic interdependence, and technological reliance, require careful assessment of mobilization potential, civic engagement, and societal cohesion when facing hybrid, conventional, or multidimensional threats. Integrating will-to-fight considerations into doctrine, training, logistics, and joint exercises can strengthen operational and strategic endurance. Scenario-based experimentation and simulations translate historical lessons into practical tools, fostering a culture in which national defense is regarded as a shared responsibility. By aligning historical memory, institutional preparation, and societal commitment, states can cultivate a sustainable will to fight, enhancing sovereignty, resilience, and the capacity to resist coercion by superior adversaries. The Finnish experience should therefore be understood not as a prescriptive model, but as an analytically valuable case illustrating how institutional, societal, and cognitive factors interact to sustain fighting capacity under extreme asymmetry.

Sustaining the Will to Fight in Extreme Isolation

A Comparative Study of Two Japanese Holdouts

Hiroyasu Akutsu, PhD

Abstract: Why were two prominent Japanese World War II holdouts, Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda and Sergeant Shōichi Yokoi, able to sustain their will to fight for nearly three decades after their original units had collapsed? Applying a simplified three-level will-to-fight framework derived from Rand research, this article compares the motivational structures underlying their prolonged resistance. Onoda's persistence reflected guerrilla warfare training and internalized institutional mission logic, whereas Yokoi's endurance rested on social shame and moral duty rooted in civilian ethical norms. The comparison demonstrates how deeply embedded belief systems can function as internal command structures once external authority disappears. By examining these extreme cases of long-term isolation, the study extends the analytical scope of the will-to-fight framework beyond functioning military organizations. The findings offer insights into the durability of combat motivation and suggest implications for modern warfare and professional military education.

Keywords: will to fight, military motivation, Rand framework, Hiroo Onoda, Shōichi Yokoi, professional military education

Introduction

Modern warfare continually demonstrates that material superiority and tactical innovation alone cannot secure victory. Even in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, where new technologies such as drones have transformed battlefield

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tactics since 2022, the fundamental nature of war remains unchanged. The moral dimension, including the capacity of combatants and societies to endure sacrifice, uncertainty, and loss, continues to play a decisive role. The moral component—what Carl von Clausewitz described as the "moral forces" of war—remains decisive.[1]

A striking illustration of this problem appears in extreme historical cases where soldiers continued to fight long after their institutions had ceased to function. This article addresses the puzzle of why two prominent Japanese World War II holdouts, Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda (1922–2014) and Sergeant Shōichi Yokoi (1915–97), were able to sustain their will to fight for decades after Japan's military organization had collapsed.

The will-to-fight program developed by the Rand Corporation in 2016 emphasizes the centrality of this moral dimension. Conducted at the request of Department of the Army operations, plans, and training staff, Rand's research highlights the claim by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps that "the will to fight is the single most important factor in war."[2] Rand defines *will to fight* as "the disposition and decision to fight, to act, or to persevere when needed," framing it not as an intangible mystery but as a measurable and modellable variable of combat effectiveness.[3]

While most applications of the Rand framework analyze active military organizations engaged in contemporary conflict, this article applies a simplified version of the model to the micro-level of isolated individuals whose institutional structures had already collapsed. Whereas recent studies of the Russo-Ukrainian War illustrate how national will and unit cohesion interact within functioning military institutions, the cases of Onoda and Yokoi demonstrate how the will to fight can become self-sustaining once institutional doctrine and social norms are internalized by the individual.[4] Both soldiers continued resisting for decades after Japan's formal surrender in 1945.

Regarding these two holdouts, Beatrice Trefalt's *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975* provides the most influential historical analysis of their postwar reception.[5] Trefalt demonstrates that the

[1] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 89–92.

[2] Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2018), xi–x, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2341; and "Understanding the Will to Fight," Rand Army Research Division, accessed 23 March 2026.

[3] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 6, xiii–xv.

[4] Benjamin A. Okonofua, Nicole Laster-Loucks, and LtCol Andrew Johnson, " 'Will to Fight': Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War," *Military Review* 104, no. 3 (2024): 34–49.

[5] Beatrice Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975* (London: Routledge, 2003).

public images of Yokoi and Onoda as "heroes" or "celebrities" were shaped through complex interactions between the returning soldiers and a Japanese society seeking to reconstruct its national identity in the early 1970s.[6] Her work therefore warns that the holdouts' memoirs must be read critically rather than accepted at face value.

Building on this scholarship, the present study analyzes these cases from a different perspective: the internal architecture of the will to fight. By applying a modified version of Rand's analytical framework to the micro-level experiences of isolated soldiers, this article examines how institutional doctrine, cultural norms, and individual cognition interacted to sustain prolonged resistance even after the physical military organization had ceased to exist.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it explains the original Rand will-to-fight model and introduces a simplified three-layer adaptation used to analyze the two cases. Second, it reviews recent applications of the Rand framework to distinguish the present study from existing research. Third, it presents detailed case studies of Onoda and Yokoi, examining differences in education, rank, and social background. Fourth, it offers a comparative synthesis and discusses the implications of these findings for military education. Finally, it concludes with theoretical and policy reflections on adaptive resilience, which provides the disciplined capacity both to fight and to cease fighting when legitimate authority requires, and discusses the implications of these findings for modern warfare and professional military education (PME).

This article thus contributes to the will-to-fight literature by testing the Rand framework at the micro-level of isolated individuals, an analytical context rarely examined in previous studies focused on functioning military organizations.

A Modified Rand Three-Layered Model of the Will to Fight

Rand's series of research on will to fight emerged from operational failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, where technologically advanced forces faced opponents who fought with remarkable persistence. The resulting analytical framework, articulated in *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, identifies five interacting levels of analysis: individual, unit, organization, state, and society. Each contributes to combat motivation with 29 factors.[7] The companion study *National Will to Fight* extended the model to political leadership and collective legitimacy, while the research brief

[6] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 119.
[7] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, xiii–xv.

Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War distilled key recommendations for integrating moral factors into planning and simulation.[8] Finally, they completed a case study of the U.S. operation in Iraq introduced nine subfactors with case-specific considerations incorporated.[9]

Rand's approach is fundamentally systemic because morale emerges from the interaction of nested structures rather than from purely psychological or purely political sources.[10] Individual cognition shapes and is shaped by unit cohesion; organizational culture translates strategy into meaning; state and society provide ideological and emotional legitimacy. These feedback loops form what Rand calls an "interactive ecosystem of motivation."[11]

The transition from Rand's original five-layer framework to the adapted three-layered model is a deliberate methodological choice necessitated by the condition of extreme isolation. Whereas the original framework is designed to analyze 29 factors and 61 subfactors across five tiers, the functional dissolution of the unit and organization as physical entities in the cases of Onoda and Yokoi requires a more concentrated approach.[12] By condensing these variables into three analytic layers—individual, organizational (as internalized doctrine), and societal (as moral cosmology)—this study captures the motivational ecosystem in its most fundamental form. This approach reflects the principle that while layers are analytically separable, they remain empirically interdependent; even in isolation, individuals cannot be separated from their internalized relationships with the state and the parent institution.

Under conditions of extreme isolation, the layers operate without external reinforcement, forcing motivational structures to survive primarily through internalized doctrine and cultural norms. The resulting structural modification, which concentrates the original variables into these three analytical tiers, is summarized in table 1.

This condensation recognizes that for isolated soldiers, the distinctions between unit, organization, and state blur. Their only surviving referent is the internalized doctrine of the institution. Such compression is consistent with

[8] Michael J. McNerney et al., *National Will to Fight: Why Some States Keep Fighting and Other Don't* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2019), https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2477; and Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2019), https://doi.org/10.7249/RB10040.

[9] Ben Connable, *Iraqi Army Will to Fight: A Will-to-Fight Case Study with Lessons for Western Security Force Assistance* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2022), 11–12, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR-A238-1.

[10] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 92.

[11] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 66–68.

[12] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 6, 41–42.

Table 1. Adapted three-layered model of the will to fight

Rand original level	Adapted layer	Function
Individual	Individual layer	Psychological conviction, perception of duty
Unit/organization	Organizational layer	Doctrine, command norms, internalized command
State/society	Societal layer	Cultural narratives, legitimacy of sacrifice

Source: based on author's adaptation of the Rand framework.

Rand's principle that layers are analytically separable but empirically interdependent. The adapted model therefore preserves fidelity to the original Rand framework while optimizing it for micro-historical analysis. As Rand emphasizes that "individual soldiers and units are the critical nodes in a network of interwoven relationships ranging up and out to the societal level," and each soldier constitutes "a system reflecting cultural influences, motivations, fears, expectations, and other factors."[13] This formulation is particularly conducive to examining isolated cases such as wartime holdouts, where the individual becomes the primary analytical site.

Rand also explicitly cautions against attempts to analytically isolate the individual or unit from higher-level influences. While it may appear methodologically convenient to "eliminate the state and national factors to focus on the unit," thereby treating the unit as a self-contained entity, the report rejects this approach, noting that "the concept of cultural islands is impractical."[14] Culture and knowledge, Rand researchers argue, "are never bounded by artificial constructs like units," and individuals "can rarely, if ever, be separated from their existing relationships with family, the state, the nation, and the organization."[15]

Crucially, Rand's meta-analysis concludes that "all factors, from society to unit, affect will to fight, all the time." Of particular relevance to the present study is the observation that individual ideology remains tightly coupled to

[13] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 37.
[14] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 37.
[15] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 37.

societal and state narratives. As the report notes, "a World War II–era Japanese soldier's dedication to the empire" exemplifies how societal ideology may constitute one of the most decisive determinants of will to fight.[16] This insight directly supports the present article's three-layered adaptation and its application to micro-historical cases, where institutional authority may collapse but ideological and societal linkages persist internally.

Thus, the three layers interact recursively: institutional doctrine channels individual motivation, individual conviction reinforces or reshapes institutional norms, and both are legitimized by societal narratives. When one of the three layers collapses, the others compensate—a phenomenon visible in Onoda and Yokoi's ability to sustain their will to fight in the absence of command or national authority.

Rand's unit-level analysis notes similar compensatory behavior. When leadership and supply falter, cohesive ideology can preserve effectiveness temporarily.[17] In the Japanese wartime context, that ideology was encoded in the *Senjinkun* [The Codes of Conduct in Battle], which forbade surrender and elevated death in duty to moral perfection.[18] Once internalized, this doctrine fused institutional and societal imperatives within the individual psyche, creating a self-reinforcing triad of belief, obedience, and identity.

Adapting Rand's model accomplishes three things. First, it integrates Western systems theory with Japanese moral-psychological traditions to enable cross-cultural comparison. Second, it demonstrates that will to fight can persist not only through organizational cohesion but through ideological self-organization—the mind's capacity to replicate command authority internally. Third, it provides a framework for analyzing the combatants' psychology, where combatants must balance institutional discipline with moral autonomy, within a larger system of the will to fight.

The ensuing sections test this three-layered model empirically through the lived experiences of Onoda and Yokoi—two soldiers shaped by the same state but different social strata, whose endurance illuminates the multicausal architecture of human will in war.

In this article, to analyze the three-layered ecosystem of the will to fight, the primary memoirs of Onoda and Yokoi are used as the central data for reconstructing their subjective mission logic. Discarding these personal narratives as mere "post-war constructions" or "heroic myths" would render a military-psychological case study impossible, as it is precisely this internal belief system that constitutes the individual layer of the framework. However, to ensure a ro-

[16] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 37.
[17] Connable et al., *Will to Fight Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*, 14–15.
[18] *Senjinkun* [The Codes of Conduct in Battle] (Tokyo: Imperial Japanese Army, 1941).

bust stress test of the Rand model, these primary accounts are cross-referenced with secondary sources, including Trefalt's historical context and contemporary critiques, to identify the dissonance between the soldier's internal reality and the external environment. The author's objective is to evaluate how effectively the Rand framework explains the persistence of the will to fight when the feedback loops between these three layers are severed.

If the model is "to serve as a starting point for the Army and, ultimately, the Joint Force, in the development of a universal standard" and more, then it will be useful to include non-American cases beyond those examined by the Rand researchers to test the model in one way or another.[19] Furthermore, the original model was designed to apply to specific historical cases, and the core model-builder and leader of the program conducted a case study on the Iraqi forces in 2022.[20] He notes that the model is an explanatory and exploratory framework that deepens understanding of the will to fight without claiming definitive causal answers, that it requires continuous refinement of assessment methods and is designed to be portable and adaptable to each specific context.

In practice, as demonstrated in studies of the Iraqi Army, the same Rand will-to-fight framework can be applied while adjusting analytical emphasis and research methods according to the availability and nature of information.[21] Whereas Rand's framework focused case studies examined the will to fight of Iraqi forces and were conducted at the organizational and operational levels by Rand researchers, this article analyzes two Japanese cases at the individual level. In this respect, the study offers a non-Rand historical application of the framework.

It is essential to distinguish between the "will to survive"—a biological and psychological drive for self-preservation—and the "will to fight." For Onoda, survival was a strictly functional prerequisite for his ongoing guerrilla mission. For Yokoi, however, the will to survive underwent a transformation: as the military structure evaporated, his persevering will to fight was rechanneled into a will to survive that functioned as his new moral duty. Thus, survival was not a mere instinct but a disciplined extension of the internalized "no surrender" doctrine.

It is also crucial to refine the role of "shame" within this framework. While shame is a universal human regulator, the *Senjinkun* functioned as an institutional accelerator that recoded this cultural substrate into a specific military variable. This document acted as the interface where the societal layer (cultural norms of honor) was fused with the organizational layer (doctrinal impera-

[19] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 162.
[20] Connable, *Iraqi Army Will to Fight.*
[21] Connable, *Iraqi Army Will to Fight*, 11–12.

tives), transforming a latent social regulator into a self-sustaining internal command structure.

While Rand's study observes that "individual ideology linked to the society and the state—for example, a World War II–era Japanese soldier's dedication to the empire—may be one of the most significant factors in will to fight," this article highlights a more differentiated pattern of interaction among individual, societal, and national norms.[22] By doing so, it aims to challenge some of the stereotypical or monolithic portrayals of Japanese soldiers and officers during World War II.

Although Onoda and Yokoi are the most widely recognized, they were not the only soldiers to remain in isolation after 1945. The discovery of Teruo Nakamura on Morotai Island in late 1974, for instance, remains a significant historical event. Nakamura's case involves complex variables of colonial identity as an ethnic Amis from Taiwan, which, as Trefalt argues, led to his marginalization within Japan's ethnic-based national identity.[23] However, this study specifically focuses on Onoda and Yokoi to provide a controlled comparison of rank and education within the Imperial Japanese Army (IJA) structure. While Nakamura's case is fascinating, his background as an ethnic Amis from Taiwan introduces complex variables of colonial identity and dual loyalty that differ from the core institutional socialization of the IJA. Selecting Onoda and Yokoi allows a more controlled comparison within the core institutional culture of the IJA while varying rank, training, and social background.

Returning to the scholarship of Trefalt acutely highlights how the return of Onoda and Yokoi were "consumed" to reconstruct national identity in postwar Japanese society, suggesting that the holdouts may have performed their narratives to align with media expectations and the prevailing zeitgeist. Indeed, an uncritical acceptance of their post-return statements entails significant historiographical risks. However, this article analyzes these narratives not as "social memory" but as the internal mechanism of the "will to fight" as defined by the Rand framework. To explore the internal functioning of a combatant's mission logic and self-command structure under extreme isolation, it is methodologically imperative to rely on the subject's own subjective testimonies and memoirs, even if such accounts were reconstructed post-hoc. Analyzing the individual layer within the Rand framework necessitates data regarding the subjective meanings the actors assigned to their conduct. Consequently, this study complements Trefalt's sociological approach by reinterpreting the cases through a military-psychological lens. By treating these testimonies not as objective his-

[22] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 37.
[23] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 163.

torical facts but as empirical evidence of internal logical structures to validate the Rand model, this research establishes an analytical objectivity distinct from existing historical narratives. In other words, while paying careful attention to and utilizing important findings of the work, this article aims to extend the Rand framework to the micro-level of the individual soldiers during their isolated wartime life, thereby testing its limits under conditions of total institutional extinction rather than focusing on their post-return life.

By concentrating on Onoda and Yokoi through Rand's model, this article isolates how rank and education within the core IJA structure refracted the will to fight. The comparison between Lieutenant Onoda (an elite, trained intelligence officer) and Sergeant Yokoi (a conscripted tailor-turned-soldier) isolates the impact of rank and professional education on the will to fight. By narrowing the focus to these two cases, this article can more precisely test how different levels of military socialization refract the interaction between institutional doctrine and societal norms under extreme conditions.

When revisited through the analytical lens of *will to fight* and within a well-established theoretical framework, Onoda's and Yokoi's cases reveal underexplored dimensions of individual endurance. The prolonged isolation of Onoda and Yokoi demonstrates how *will* can become self-sustaining once cultural, societal, and institutional foundations are internalized and fused within the individual.

For this reason, this study employs Rand's framework to analyze two cases. Rather than merely applying the framework, however, it stress tests its portability at the individual level under conditions of total institutional collapse. It argues that Onoda and Yokoi's prolonged resistance emerged from the interaction of three concentric layers of motivation, namely individual, institutional, and societal, which correspond to, but are analytically condensed from, Rand's original multilayered model. This adaptation enables an analysis that is sensitive to Japanese military doctrine, wartime ideology, and forms of personal moral reasoning.

Although both men survived under extreme and prolonged conditions in which many fellow soldiers did not, this study does not treat survival as a separate analytical category. Instead, survival-related behavior is understood as operating within the broader architecture of the will to fight, which Rand defines as the capacity to endure and persevere under threat. Framing survival in this way preserves analytical consistency while allowing close examination of endurance under extreme isolation.

This article also aims to contribute a controlled test of how rank and education refract *will* across layers. Lieutenant Onoda's officer training at the Futamata Branch of the Nakano Military School (an Imperial Japanese Army

school specialized in guerrilla warfare) cultivated autonomous obedience, that is the ability to exercise independent judgment while remaining loyal to mission intent, whereas Sergeant Yokoi's enlisted formation reinforced embodied obedience through craft, routine, and shame avoidance.[24] Those differences matter analytically because they change the pathways through which belief persists when commands stop arriving. In this adapted framework, officer socialization tends to thicken the institutional layer inside the individual (doctrine becomes self-discipline), while enlisted socialization thickens the societal layer inside the individual (community ethics become self-worth). The comparative design therefore isolates how identical wartime injunction, "no surrender," produced distinct architectures of persistence in two men facing similar material constraints but different educational backgrounds and ranks.[25]

Examples of Model Applications and Historical Research

While the Rand Corporation originally developed the will-to-fight framework for institutional analysis within U.S. defense planning, recent scholarship has applied it to external contexts, most notably the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. A primary example is the work of Benjamin A. Okonofua, Nicole Laster-Loucks, and Andrew Johnson, who utilize the model to analyze the 2022 invasion by

[24] Stephen C. Mercado, *The Shadow Warriors of Nakano : A History of the Imperial Japanese Army's Elite Intelligence School* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's, 2002); and Nakano Kōyū Kai, *Rikugun Nakanogakkō* [The Army Nakano Military School] (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1978). The main school in Nakano specialized in intelligence training, while the Futamata Branch was specialized in guerrilla warfare. See also Mataichi Senshi ed., *Rikugun Nakano Gakkō Futamata Bunkō Daiikkisei No Kiroku* [The Records of the First Graduates of the Futamata Branch of the Army Nakano Military School] (n.p.: Mataichi Kai, 1981). The school had one main school and three branches. See Kiyoyuki Hatakeyama, *Hiroku Rikugun Nakanogakkō* [Secret Records: The Army Nakano Military School], ed. Masayasu (Tokyo; Shinchō Bunko, 2003). Hiroo Onoda and Charles S. Terry, trans., *No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War* (Tokyo/New York: Kōdan Sha, 1974), 28–33, 45–47. This book is the translation of the original Japanese book by Hiroo Onoda, *Waga Rubantō No 30nen Senso* (Tokyo: Kōdan Sha, 1974). Onoda published an expanded version of this book in 1995 to commemorate Norio Suzuki, with whom Onoda met in Luban. Their encounter led Onoda to his return to Japan. See Hiroo Onoda, *Waga Rubantō No 30nen Senso* (Tokyo: Asahi Bunko, 1995). For more on Yokoi, see Omi Hatashin, trans., *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972* (London: Global Oriental/Brill, 2009), 9–12, 245–48. This biography consists of a translation of Yokoi's autobiography originally published in Japanese and Hatashin's own texts, specifically pages xv and 227. Yokoi's original autobiography is Shōichi Yokoi, *Asu Eno Michi: Zenhōkoku Guamu To Kodoku No 28 Nen* (Tokyo: Bungei Shunjū, 1974). This article is largely based on Hatashin's book. Hatashin is Yokoi's nephew by marriage. See Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, xv; and Mike Lanchin, "Shoichi Yokoi, the Japanese Soldier Who Held Out in Guam," BBC News, 24 January 2012.

[25] Onoda, *No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War*, 33, 45–47; Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 9–12, 245–48.

focusing on physical, psychological, and national dimensions.[26] They highlight how ideological and psychological factors at the individual level—specifically leadership—can compensate for material inferiority at the state and unit levels. They argue that military effectiveness is not merely a product of technology or troop numbers but is deeply rooted in the human dimension of warfare. They attribute Ukrainian resolve to a synergistic alignment across the three layers of the military and society, including a clear existential purpose, the adoption of decentralized mission command, and high national unity. Conversely, they identify significant failures in Russian resolve, citing poor organizational cohesion, low individual motivation among conscripts, and a lack of a compelling societal narrative for the conflict. Their research concludes that the will to fight is the ultimate force multiplier in twenty-first-century conflict, recommending that modern militaries prioritize the psychological and institutional foundations of resolve alongside technological modernization.

Their study explicitly utilizes the three-layered Rand framework to categorize the variables of resolve: the societal layer focuses on national identity and the perceived illegitimacy of the invasion as the foundation for macro will; the organizational layer examines the transition to flexible, unit-based initiative that fostered cohesion; and the individual layer analyzes the psychological resilience of soldiers driven by moral conviction.

While their work provides a vital contemporary application of the framework, the present research maintains distinct originality through several analytical distinctions. Unlike existing Rand applications that analyze active military organizations, this article examines the will to fight after the complete disappearance of institutional structures, thereby testing the framework under conditions of extreme isolation. Rather than observing how units maintain cohesion during active conflict, this study investigates how "will" persists after the unit has physically ceased to exist. This identifies the threshold where doctrine transitions from an organizational requirement to a self-perpetuating internal command structure.

Second, this article prioritizes empirical granularity over macro-level observations. While theater-wide analyses focus on broad national narratives, this article reconstructs the internal cognitive architecture of resolve by focusing on the cases of Onoda and Yokoi. This represents a shift from analyzing operational outcomes at the front to understanding psychological processing within the isolated human mind during a three-decade period. Third, this analysis explores the pathology of resolve. Unlike their study, which treats the will to fight primarily as a virtue and a source of effectiveness, this research examines

[26] Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, " 'Will to Fight': Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War," 34–49.

how an internalized mission logic can become detached from societal reality. This runaway resilience—which resulted in civilian casualties on Lubang—adds a critical ethical dimension to the model that contemporary studies often omit. Finally, while the 2024 study analyzes a conflict currently in its third year, this research examines the "residue" of military training and social norms during 28–30 years of isolation. This longitudinal perspective facilitates a deeper investigation into which layer of the Rand model—the organizational or the societal—proves more durable when all external reinforcement is removed. Consequently, this study serves as a necessary extreme case extension that tests the framework's limits in ways that current conflict analysis cannot.

A further application of the will-to-fight framework to the Ukrainian conflict is provided by Carlos Enrique Álvarez-Calderón, who utilizes a multi-level model derived from Connable et al., McNerney et al., and Okonofua et al.[27] Álvarez-Calderón identifies four interrelated levels of analysis: the micro level (individual psychological resilience), the meso level (organizational cohesion and leadership), the macro level (state legitimacy and social cohesion), and the meta level (cultural narratives and ideologies). The study contends that Ukraine's resilience is rooted in a narrative of existential resistance and decentralized leadership, whereas Russia's reliance on historical narratives and internal coercion may limit its long-term endurance. Drawing lessons for the Colombian context, Álvarez-Calderón concludes that Colombia faces moral fatigue and lacks a cohesive national narrative, recommending a strategy that integrates psycho-social resilience training with an inclusive defense narrative.

This article diverges from Álvarez-Calderón's approach in several fundamental respects. First, while Álvarez-Calderón analyzes active, state-level warfare where all layers of the model are functioning and interacting, this study serves as a stress test of the model's limits by examining the will to fight in a state of total isolation. By investigating a scenario where the physical organizational layer has vanished and the societal layer is severed, this research identifies how doctrine can transform into a self-sustaining internal command structure once external authority disappears. Second, whereas the Colombian study focuses on contemporary snapshots of a conflict lasting several years, this research utilizes a three-decade natural experiment. This longitudinal perspective facilitates a deeper analysis of the residue of military training during a lifetime, offering

[27] Carlos Enrique Álvarez-Calderón, "Will to Fight in the Russian-Ukrainian War: Multilevel Analysis and Lessons for Colombia," *Revista Científica* 23, no. 52 (October–December 2025): 883–921, https://doi.org/10.21830/19006586.1562; Connable et al., *Will to Fight Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*; McNerney et al., *National Will to Fight: Why Some States Keep Fighting and Other Don't*; and Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, " 'Will to Fight': Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War."

insight into the individual layer's capacity to override external reality through mechanisms such as cognitive dissonance.

Finally, this article prioritizes empirical granularity through the use of primary data, specifically the autobiographies of Onoda and Yokoi, to reconstruct internal mission logic. In contrast, Álvarez-Calderón acknowledges that his study is limited by a lack of primary evidence from the field, relying instead on the documentary analysis of secondary sources. Furthermore, while the 2025 study examines broad institutional and national patterns—such as general Russian and Ukrainian tactics—it does not trace the internal psychological architecture of specific soldiers. By focusing on deep-dive individual narratives, the present work fills a significant gap in the contemporary application of the Rand framework, providing the direct empirical evidence of individual persistence that theoretical constructions often lack.

A significant historical counterpart that operates independently of the formal Rand framework is found in the work of Eric S. Fowler, who examines the strategic interplay between the Japanese Imperial Institution and United States planning during World War II.[28] Although Fowler uses the specific terminology of "will-to-fight," his analysis is distinct from the three-layered Rand model, offering instead a macro-level strategic perspective on the Japanese state. His research explores how U.S. political and military leaders explicitly distinguished an enemy's "means-to-fight"—physical resources such as factories and weaponry—from their *will to fight*, which he defines as a preference for violent resistance over submission. Fowler details the strategic debate between the "Harsh Peace" faction, which advocated for the total elimination of the Japanese Imperial Institution, and the "Soft Peace" faction, which argued the emperor was the only authority capable of legitimizing a unified national surrender. The eventual Allied decision to safeguard the Imperial Institution identified the emperor as the primary catalyst for the Japanese people's resolve, allowing the United States to subdue the national will without the catastrophic combat anticipated in a full-scale invasion of the mainland.

This macro-strategic context provides a vital theoretical anchor for the individual cases of Onoda and Yokoi, despite Fowler's study not being structured around the Rand variables. If Fowler's distinction between means and will is operationalized, it is possible to analyze how these holdouts maintained their resolve for nearly three decades despite the total loss of their physical means to wage war. For Onoda, the emperor represented the ultimate authoritative "off-switch" within an internalized chain of command; his resolve required a

[28] Eric S. Fowler, "Will-to-Fight: Japan's Imperial Institution and the U.S. Strategy to End World War II," *War & Society* 34, no. 1 (2015): 43–64, https://doi.org/10.1179/0729247314Z.00000000046.

formal order originating from this sovereign source before he could cognitively accept the war's end. Similarly, Fowler's analysis of the Soft Peace logic clarifies the societal context of the era, where the emperor functioned as the living manifestation of the Japanese people. This explains why Yokoi experienced such profound shame, as his inability to fulfill his military duty was perceived as a failure toward the very foundation of his social identity.

This article differentiates itself from Fowler's study by shifting the analytical lens from the perceptions of U.S. planners to the internal psychological reality of the individual soldier. While Fowler views the U.S. strategy as a success that preserved the principal armies, this article investigates the residue of that strategy—the isolated individuals for whom the organizational communication loop was severed. Furthermore, this study serves as a micro-level stress test of the theory that safeguarding the emperor "subdued" the Japanese will. It explores the pathology of resolve that emerges when a soldier is so deeply indoctrinated that they dismiss legitimate peace signals as enemy deception. Ultimately, while Fowler provides the strategic "why" behind the preservation of the Imperial Institution, this article aims to provide the psychological "how" regarding the long-term endurance of the individual soldier under those specific institutional constraints.

Case Study I: Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda

Education and Formation

Lieutenant Hiroo Onoda's endurance cannot be understood without examining his intellectual and institutional formation within the Imperial Japanese Army. Born in Wakayama Prefecture in 1922, Onoda was raised in a family strongly connected to military service. His elder brother studied medicine at Tokyo Imperial University and later served as an army medical officer, while other brothers also entered military service.[29] During his school years, Onoda practiced *kendō*, a martial discipline emphasizing perseverance, mental focus, and moral discipline—values widely promoted in Japanese prewar education.[30]

After graduating from junior high school, Onoda entered a trading company and spent several years working in China. When Japan's war with the United States began in December 1941, he anticipated eventual conscription. Following a medical examination in May 1942, he entered the Imperial Japa-

[29] Onoda, *No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War*, 12–14.

[30] *Kendō*, *judō*, and other martial arts have continued to be taught in postwar Japanese school curricula, although their pedagogical emphasis shifted from militarized discipline to physical education and cultural tradition. For broader discussions of martial culture and wartime ideology in modern Japan, see Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); and John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).

nese Army's *2d Infantry Regiment*.[31] Initially enlisted, he successfully passed the officer examination in 1943 and was subsequently selected for training at the Futamata Branch of the Nakano Military School.

The Nakano School represented a distinctive institutional environment within the Japanese military system. Established to train specialists in intelligence, unconventional warfare, and guerrilla operations, its curriculum emphasized initiative, deception, and survival rather than the conventional emphasis on sacrificial assault that characterized much of the IJA's combat doctrine.[32] While the broader wartime military ethos, reinforced by the *Senjinkun*, stressed absolute loyalty and honorable death in battle, the Nakano program taught officers that survival could constitute a professional duty when necessary for the continuation of intelligence operations.[33]

This training produced what might be termed *autonomous obedience*: the expectation that an officer could exercise tactical discretion while remaining completely faithful to the strategic intent of the mission. Within the analytical framework adopted in this article, the Nakano curriculum strengthened the organizational layer of the will-to-fight ecosystem by internalizing command authority within the individual soldier. The result was a form of self-command capable of persisting even when communication with higher authority was severed.

Deployment to Lubang and the Persistence of Command

In December 1944, Onoda was dispatched to Lubang Island in the Philippines with orders to conduct guerrilla operations and intelligence gathering while disrupting Allied operations. Most importantly, he was instructed not to surrender under any circumstances and to continue operations for as long as possible.[34]

When Japan capitulated in August 1945, Onoda and three other soldiers on Lubang interpreted surrender leaflets dropped by Allied aircraft as enemy propaganda. The small group consisted of Onoda, Corporal Shoichi Shimada, Private First Class Kinshichi Kozuka, and Private First Class Yuichi Akatsu. Akatsu eventually left the group and surrendered in 1950, while Shimada was killed in a firefight with Philippine forces in 1954 and Kozuka in 1972.[35]

During the early years of isolation, the four soldiers reorganized into a small operational unit. As the only officer present, Onoda assumed leadership. Tasks were distributed according to physical capacity and skill: Shimada undertook many physically demanding duties, while the others collected water, firewood,

[31] Onoda, *No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War*, 18–24.
[32] Mercado, *The Shadow Warriors of Nakano*; and Kai, *Rikugun Nakanogakkō*.
[33] *Senjinkun*.
[34] Onoda, *No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War*, 45–47.
[35] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 54–60.

and materials for tools and traps.[36] Leadership within the group relied less on coercion than on pragmatic coordination required for survival.

The environment of Lubang soon transformed their situation from military operations to long-term survival.[37] Jungle conditions required knowledge not provided by formal military training, including the construction of traps, fire management, and concealment techniques. Ammunition scarcity forced the group to hunt livestock raised by local villagers, and careful rationing became essential to their survival.[38]

These routines illustrate how the individual and organizational layers interacted in the persistence of Onoda's will to fight. Even as the external military structure collapsed, the internalized command hierarchy continued to shape behavior.

Cognitive Resistance and the Maintenance of Mission Logic

Throughout the late 1940s and 1950s search parties periodically left behind newspapers and leaflets reporting Japan's surrender and postwar developments. Onoda consistently interpreted such materials as deliberate attempts by the enemy to lure the group out of hiding. References to American military bases or Soviet technological achievements were reinterpreted through the lens of wartime propaganda and the expectation that Japan would eventually achieve victory.[39]

This pattern illustrates cognitive preservation of mission logic, which represents a key psychological mechanism within the will-to-fight framework. Rather than abandoning his operational assumptions when confronted with contradictory information, Onoda reinterpreted that information in ways that preserved internal coherence. His memoir later explained this reasoning succinctly: "Every rumor of peace was another Allied trick to make us reveal our positions."[40]

Such reinterpretations were reinforced by the ideological environment in which Imperial Japanese soldiers had been trained. As military historian Edward Drea has shown, wartime indoctrination emphasized unwavering loyalty to the emperor and portrayed surrender as the ultimate dishonor.[41] These ideological norms constituted the societal layer reinforcing the internalized organizational command structure.

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[36] Onoda, *No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War*, 80–85.
[37] Onoda, *No Surrender*, 80–85; and Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 62–65.
[38] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 62–65.
[39] Onoda, *No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War*, 120–126.
[40] Onoda, *No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War*, 113.
[41] Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853–1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

Violence and the Ethical Consequences of Isolation

During the three decades of their holdout, Onoda and his companions engaged in numerous armed encounters with local inhabitants and Philippine security forces. Japanese and Philippine sources estimate that approximately 30 civilians were killed during these incidents.[42] Onoda's memoirs, however, described these encounters as engagements with guerrillas or enemy agents rather than civilians. The discrepancy illustrates the ethical dangers inherent in a self-sustaining mission logic operating without institutional oversight. When all external contact is interpreted through the lens of hostile warfare, the distinction between combatant and civilian can collapse entirely.

Within the analytical framework employed here, this represents a pathological form of cross-layer reinforcement: the individual layer preserves mission logic, while ideological elements of the societal layer legitimize continued hostility toward perceived enemies.

Institutional Residue and the Final Termination of the Mission

After Kozuka's death in October 1972, Onoda continued his activities alone for nearly 18 months. Despite complete isolation, he maintained routines resembling military patrols, weapons maintenance, and observation of the surrounding terrain. These practices illustrate what organizational theorist Edgar H. Schein describes as institutional residue, the persistence of organizational culture long after the physical organization has disappeared.[43]

Rand researchers describe a similar phenomenon as "legacy cohesion," in which deeply internalized norms continue to guide behavior even when the original institutional framework has collapsed.[44]

Onoda's resistance ended in March 1974 when his former commanding officer, Major Yoshimi Taniguchi, traveled to Lubang and formally relieved him of his mission. Only this direct order from a recognized authority allowed the internal command structure sustaining his will to fight to dissolve.

The episode provides a powerful demonstration of the dominance of the organizational layer in Onoda's motivational architecture. Even when confronted with overwhelming evidence that the war had ended, including personal appeals from Japanese civilians such as the adventurer Norio Suzuki, Onoda required a formal command from his original chain of authority before he could accept the termination of his mission.[45]

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[42] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 56.

[43] Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, an imprint of Wiley, 1985), 54–56.

[44] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 66–68.

[45] Onoda, *No Surrender: My Thirty-Year War*, 240–50.

Postwar Reintegration and Historical Interpretation

Following his return to Japan, Onoda struggled to adapt to a society transformed by three decades of economic growth and social change. Within a year, he emigrated to Brazil, where he became a rancher before later returning to Japan to establish youth education programs emphasizing discipline and independence.

His return generated intense political debate within Japan. As Beatrice Trefalt demonstrates, Onoda quickly became a symbolic figure in the cultural struggles of the 1970s: celebrated by conservative groups as a model of loyalty while criticized by others as a victim of wartime indoctrination.[46]

Regardless of these later interpretations, the persistence of Onoda's will to fight for nearly three decades cannot be explained solely by postwar political narratives. Rather, his experience illustrates how deeply internalized institutional doctrine can function as a durable internal command structure even after the physical military organization has ceased to exist.

Case Study II: Sergeant Shōichi Yokoi

Education and Rank

Shōichi Yokoi was born in 1915 in Aichi Prefecture and entered service as a tailor turned infantryman.[47] Like Onoda, he did not volunteer to join the military and only received a "red paper," an official order to do so when he was 23 years old in 1938 due to the Second Sino-Japanese War that had begun in July 1937.[48] He returned to Japan and demobilized in 1939 and received his red paper again and entered the army in August 1941.[49]

Unlike Onoda, he was neither officer nor graduate of the Nakano School. His worldview reflected the ethics of the artisan class: diligence, modesty, and shame avoidance. These values aligned with the Imperial Japanese Army's emphasis on obedience through moral discipline rather than analytical reasoning.[50]

Recognizing that victory was impossible, the colonel ordered the regimental colors—sacred banners passed down since the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and Russo-Japanese War (1904–5)—to be destroyed by the unit's own hands to prevent their capture.[51] Following this symbolic dissolution and a final farewell from their commander, he was instructed to fight with unwav-

[46] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 148–162.
[47] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 9–12. The present study relies primarily on Hatashin's translation.
[48] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 4.
[49] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 16.
[50] Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 83–90.
[51] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 25.

ering bravery until the last soldier had fallen, ensuring the preservation of their collective honor.[52]

Whereas Onoda internalized command intellectually, Yokoi embodied it physically through habit, routine, and the moral imperative not to disgrace his family. His later remark—"It is with much embarrassment that I return alive"—captures a moral world governed less by state ideology than by communal shame.[53] This cultural framework of shame had been strongly reinforced during wartime through military education involving "indoctrination" and "propaganda" emphasizing loyalty, sacrifice, and the dishonor of surrender.[54]

Survival and the Societal Layer

Yokoi's experience in Guam after 1945 was defined by a form of craft-based survivalism. After his original unit collapsed, two of the original group of five surrendered in 1946, and the other two (Mikio Shichi and Satoru Nakahata) died in 1964.[55] After the group was reduced to three men, Yokoi no longer engaged in combat operations. Using salvaged materials, he constructed looms, traps, and everyday tools, effectively recreating a small-scale version of a prewar artisan household.[56]

Similar patterns of adaptation and survival have been noted in oral histories of Japanese soldiers who endured extreme wartime conditions, where everyday labor became a central means of sustaining morale and identity.[57] This mode of endurance illustrates the societal layer of will to fight, in which survival functioned as a moral obligation to ancestors and village communities rather than as loyalty to the emperor.[58]

Collapse of Organizational Discipline

Yokoi's account identifies a significant degradation within the organizational layer. While Onoda's persistence was anchored in a relatively coherent internalized command hierarchy, Yokoi describes a systemic collapse of discipline driven by extreme deprivation.

The habitual theft of provisions and the silence of superiors indicate that

[52] *Senjinkun*, chap. 2, art. 8.
[53] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 247.
[54] For discussions of Japanese war-time "indoctrination" and military culture, see, for example, John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); and Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor*.
[55] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 16–17.
[56] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 9–12.
[57] See, for example, Haruko Taya Cook and Theodore Cook, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: New Press, 1992).
[58] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 94–98.

the organizational framework had effectively ceased to regulate behavior.[59] In this vacuum, Yokoi's will transitioned from a coordinated military mission to a pragmatic survival ethic within the individual layer. Despite this institutional decay, his continued isolation for nearly three decades was ultimately sustained by the societal layer, specifically the internalized shame of capture.[60]

Solitude and Personal Motivation

After disputes over food management, Yokoi separated from his remaining companions and constructed an underground shelter where he lived alone.[61] During his prolonged solitude, the prospect of seeing his mother again became a critical psychological anchor. Raised by a divorced mother, he later learned that even after receiving official notification of his death she refused to believe he had died.[62] Where Onoda resisted reality through doctrinal belief, Yokoi transcended it through labor. His daily routines of weaving, hunting, and maintaining shelter reproduced a moral economy of diligence rooted in prewar moral education.[63]

Cultural Persistence

Although Yokoi did not adhere to formal religion, he recalled that during periods of despair he quietly recited Buddhist verses memorized in childhood.[64] Such practices reflected broader patterns of wartime Japanese soldiers drawing on cultural and religious traditions to sustain psychological endurance under extreme conditions.[65]

Discovery and Postwar Reception

Discovered by local hunters in January 1972, Yokoi became an "instant celebrity" along with the other stragglers.[66] His statement of shame resonated strongly within a Japanese society negotiating its relationship with wartime memory during a period of rapid economic growth.[67] The discovery and return of Yokoi attracted media attention in Japan. The so-called "Yokoi boo/panic" was created and continued for years.[68]

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[59] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 16–17.
[60] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 94–112.
[61] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 194.
[62] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 173–74.
[63] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 155–60.
[64] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 160.
[65] Cook and Cook, *Japan at War: An Oral History*.
[66] Hatashin, *Private Yokoi's War and Life on Guam, 1944–1972*, 247; and Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 2.
[67] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*,148–62.
[68] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 111.

Comparative Analysis: The Architecture of Endurance

The divergence between the two men reveals different configurations of the model's interactive feedback loops. Onoda's case represents a total dominance of the organizational-societal loop, where he rejected all social signals—even direct evidence of a peaceful Japan—because they conflicted with his internalized organizational mandate. Conversely, Yokoi's persistence reveals a weakening of the individual-organizational loop. While his unit and its disciplinary structure collapsed into pragmatic survival, his individual resolve was sustained by the residual pressure of the societal layer. Framing the comparison through these contrasting feedback configurations demonstrates that the will to fight is not a monolithic trait but a dynamic outcome of which motivational layer remains most resilient.

Layer Interaction

Viewed through the adapted Rand framework, Onoda and Yokoi embody two distinct constellations of the will to fight. For Onoda, the individual–organizational feedback loop dominated, and professional identity became self-replicating. For Yokoi, by contrast, the individual–societal loop prevailed, and cultural virtue displaced doctrine as the primary moral compass.[69]

Both trajectories illustrate that sustained combat motivation emerges not from ideology alone but from layer redundancy in which each motivational layer can compensate when the others weaken or collapse. The capacity of soldiers to reconstruct purpose under conditions of institutional disintegration is precisely what the Rand framework identifies as the resilience of will to fight under extreme stress.[70]

Psychological Continuities and Divergences

Despite differences in education and rank, both men internalized a moral cosmology of duty that framed suffering as evidence of personal worth. Onoda's persistence derived largely from cognitive rigidity reinforced by doctrinal training, while Yokoi's endurance rested on adaptive craftsmanship and disciplined routine.

Using the language of the Rand framework, the former approximates a form of fixed conviction, whereas the latter represents dynamic perseverance.[71]

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[69] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 6–9.
[70] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 37–45.
[71] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, 66–68.

Their contrasting temperaments reinforce the model's central claim that morale is multicausal and rooted in identity as much as belief. Comparable patterns have been observed in broader studies of soldier motivation. Sociological research on wartime combat units demonstrates that endurance often arises from deeply internalized identities and social norms rather than from ideological indoctrination alone.[72]

Education, Rank, and Cognitive Framing

Education strongly influenced how each man interpreted authority. The Nakano Military School's curriculum cultivated a form of autonomous obedience, encouraging officers to exercise independent judgment while remaining loyal to strategic intent.[73]

By contrast, the training of enlisted soldiers emphasized routine discipline and collective honor rather than analytical reasoning. Consequently, Onoda's endurance took the form of ideological and strategic persistence, whereas Yokoi's manifested as pragmatic and ethical perseverance.

Both outcomes were products of the Imperial Japanese Army's broader moral pedagogy, which fused loyalty, sacrifice, and spiritual duty into a unified wartime ethos.[74] At the same time, the survival of both men also depended on their own individual decision-making in extreme isolation, demonstrating that doctrine alone cannot explain the persistence of combat motivation.

Cultural Logic and Organizational Afterlife

In both cases, the culture of the Imperial Japanese Army continued to function as a mental organization long after the physical institution had collapsed. The interaction of organizational doctrine and societal values sustained their will to fight even in the absence of direct command.

These cases therefore affirm that the will to fight is an emergent property of interlayer communication. When command authority disappears, soldiers may reconstruct hierarchy internally. When ideological certainty weakens, personal ethics may re-encode social meaning.

The three-layered model proposed in this article thus offers a conceptual framework for understanding how motivational systems adapt when institutional structures disintegrate in the military dimension. Although derived from Japanese cases, the mechanism may apply more broadly to extreme forms of

[72] Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1948): 280–315, https://doi.org/10.1086/265951.
[73] Mercado, *The Shadow Warriors of Nakano*.
[74] Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*.

Table 2. Comparative architecture of the will to fight: Onoda and Yokoi

Analytical dimension	Lt Hiroo Onoda	Sgt Shōichi Yokoi	Dominant layer (Rand framework)
Rank and status	Commissioned officer (second lieutenant)	Noncommissioned officer (sergeant)	Organizational
Education/ training	Elite Nakano School training in intelligence and guerrilla warfare	Limited formal education; artisan background as tailor	Organizational/ individual
Primary motivation	Institutional mission logic and loyalty to military command	Avoidance of social shame and moral obligation to family/community	Organizational (Onoda)/societal (Yokoi)
Survival doctrine	Explicit operational order: continue mission and avoid surrender until relieved	Implicit ethic: survive without capture through concealment and endurance	Organizational (Onoda)/societal (Yokoi)
Attitude toward POW status	Absolute refusal until formally relieved by superior officer	Refusal primarily motivated by shame of capture	Societal/ individual
Information processing	Active rejection of contradictory information (leaflets, newspapers interpreted as enemy deception)	Gradual recognition of changing circumstances but persistence due to social stigma of capture	Individual
Mechanism of persistence	External command authority internalized as an internal command structure	Internalized social norms functioning as disciplined survival practices	Cross-layer interaction
Mode of endurance	Autonomous initiative and operational reasoning	Ritualized routines: weaving, trapping, and concealment	Cross-layer interaction
Source of moral authority	Imperial military hierarchy and command structure	Family honor, communal expectations, and cultural norms of perseverance	Organizational (Onoda)/societal (Yokoi)
Termination trigger	Formal relief of mission by direct superior officer	Discovery and internal reconciliation of shame with postwar reality	Organizational versus societal
Nature of conclusion	Institutional termination: mission ends only through command authority	Societal termination: endurance ends through reintegration into society	Analytical synthesis
Type of will to fight	Institutionalized doctrinal persistence	Culturalized moral endurance	Organizational versus societal

Source: compiled by author.

military endurance in which internalized doctrine, cultural identity, and individual cognition interact to sustain adaptive persistence even after formal command structures collapse.[75]

[75] Jonathan Fennell, *Combat and Morale in the North African Campaign: The Eighth Army and the Path to El Alamein* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4–15, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511921513.

Ethical Reflections

Both men illustrate the moral ambivalence of obedience. Their endurance was simultaneously admirable and troubling, revealing the dangers that arise when institutional duty becomes detached from legitimate authority. In Onoda's case, the self-sustaining mission logic led to the deaths of approximately 30 Filipino civilians and police officers. Because his internalized command structure interpreted most encounters as hostile combat situations, the moral distinction between combatants and noncombatants effectively collapsed.[76]

This episode illustrates the darker side of internalized doctrine: when mission logic becomes detached from external authority, persistent obedience may devolve into uncontrolled violence. Modern military ethics therefore require not only resilience but also mechanisms of termination authority—institutional signals that clearly define when combat should cease.[77]

Methodological Reflection on Sources

By using the memoirs and post-return testimonies of Onoda and Yokoi, this study acknowledges that these accounts were shaped by the social and political environment of postwar Japan. As Trefalt demonstrates, the narratives of returning holdouts were often mediated by a 1970s public eager to reinterpret wartime experience within a rapidly changing national identity.[78]

Nevertheless, memoirs remain indispensable sources for analyzing the individual layer of the will to fight. External archival records reveal the physical consequences of actions, but only personal testimony provides insight into the cognitive frameworks through which soldiers interpreted their circumstances. Accordingly, this study treats such memoirs not as unfiltered historical truth but as empirical evidence of the internal logical structures that sustained resilience under conditions of extreme isolation.

This methodological choice reflects a broader approach in military sociology and historical psychology, where retrospective narratives are treated as evidence of cognitive frameworks rather than as direct factual reconstructions of events. What matters analytically in the present study is not whether every detail in the memoirs is historically exact, but whether the narratives reveal the internal logic through which the actors themselves interpreted their circumstances. Because the Rand framework conceptualizes the will to fight primarily as a system of beliefs, motivations, and perceived obligations, the subjective reasoning preserved in memoirs constitutes a uniquely valuable dataset for reconstructing the individual layer of the model. When combined with secondary

[76] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 56–60.
[77] *Law of War Manual* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2016), chap. 2.
[78] Trefalt, *Japanese Army Stragglers and Memories of the War in Japan, 1950–1975*, 148–62.

historical scholarship and external documentation, these narratives provide a sufficiently robust basis for analyzing how internalized doctrine and cultural norms sustained long-term behavioral persistence.

Implications for Modern Warfare and Professional Military Education

Applying these historical insights to contemporary conflict requires distinguishing between a military's means to fight and its will to fight. As the cases of Onoda and Yokoi demonstrate, the destruction of physical resources or the collapse of formal command structures does not automatically terminate armed resistance when the psychological and institutional foundations of resolve remain intact. Even under conditions where the original military organization has disappeared, internalized doctrine and cultural norms may continue to guide behavior.

This insight carries particular relevance for modern doctrines of mission command in which small units and individual operators are deliberately granted high levels of autonomy to increase operational flexibility. While such decentralization enhances battlefield adaptability, the holdout cases examined here demonstrate that autonomy without clearly recognized termination authority can generate persistent action even after strategic objectives have changed. Contemporary doctrines therefore require institutional mechanisms capable of signaling the legitimate end of combat operations as clearly as they signal the initiation of combat missions. Historical experience suggests that when such signals are absent or ambiguous, soldiers may continue to act according to internally reconstructed mission logic rather than updated strategic realities.[79]

The Pathology of Resolve and the Off Switch

While resilience remains a core military virtue, the experiences of Onoda and Yokoi reveal that extreme persistence may evolve into a form of doctrinal pathology when detached from strategic oversight. PME must therefore cultivate not only the "on switch" of resolve but also the "off switch" of strategic judgment. Soldiers operating under decentralized command must be able to evaluate their mission against evolving political and ethical contexts rather than relying solely on mechanical obedience to initial instructions.

This requirement reflects broader debates in contemporary military ethics, which emphasize that professional soldiers must exercise disciplined judgment rather than unconditional obedience when operating within complex and de-

[79] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*, 9–12.

centralized operational environments.[80] Under conditions involving cyber operations, artificial intelligence, and autonomous systems, the individual soldier increasingly functions as the final arbiter of morally consequential decisions. In such contexts, resilience must be understood not as indefinite persistence but as the ability to remain both effective and ethically grounded under extreme uncertainty.

Institutionalizing Termination Logic

The analysis presented here suggests that modern military organizations must explicitly institutionalize what may be termed *termination logic*, or clear doctrinal mechanisms that identify when combat should cease. If technological capability substitutes for manpower without corresponding moral modernization, military organizations risk accumulating operational capacity without sufficient normative control. Therefore, long-term defense effectiveness depends on maintaining a stable alignment between the individual, organizational, and societal layers of military motivation.

In contemporary professional forces, this alignment depends on robust command responsibility and communication structures capable of sustaining the legitimacy of military action even in highly decentralized operational environments.[81] The enduring lesson of the holdout cases is therefore not that soldiers must fight indefinitely, but that persistence must remain anchored within a legitimate institutional framework. By examining the long-term "residue" of resolve in the cases of Onoda and Yokoi, modern planners can better understand that the ultimate force multiplier is not simply the persistence of the individual soldier, but the alignment of that persistence with the legitimate goals of the state and the society it serves.

Ultimately, the jungle of Lubang and the caves of Guam prefigure the psychological terrain of modern warfare: dispersed, information-saturated, and morally ambiguous. In such environments the soldier's endurance depends less on continuous command transmission than on the internal integration of institutional purpose and ethical judgment. As Rand researchers emphasize, "war's human fundamentals remain constant even as technology evolves."[82]

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Hiroo Onoda and Shōichi Yokoi provides an extreme empirical test of the Rand will-to-fight framework under conditions of

[80] Peter Olsthoorn, *Military Ethics and Virtues: An Interdisciplinary Approach for the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2011), 112–18.
[81] Anthony King, *Command: The Twenty-First-Century General* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 215–23.
[82] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*, 15.

total institutional collapse. By examining two soldiers who continued resisting for nearly three decades after the formal end of World War II, this study demonstrates that the architecture of military motivation can persist even when the physical structures that originally generated it have disappeared.

More specifically, this study contributes to the literature on military motivation in three ways. First, it demonstrates that the Rand will-to-fight framework remains analytically valid even when the physical organizational structure of the military has ceased to exist. Second, it identifies how different forms of military socialization—elite officer training in the case of Onoda and enlisted social discipline in the case of Yokoi—produce distinct architectures of persistence within the same institutional culture. Third, it highlights the ethical risks that arise when internalized mission logic becomes detached from institutional oversight and external command authority.

Viewed through the adapted three-layer framework developed in this study, Onoda represents the extreme internalization of the organizational layer, where institutional doctrine became a self-sustaining internal command structure. Yokoi, by contrast, illustrates the enduring strength of the societal layer, where deeply embedded cultural norms of shame and perseverance sustained survival long after military discipline had collapsed. Together, the two cases demonstrate how different pathways of persistence may emerge from the interaction of institutional doctrine, cultural norms, and individual cognition.

For modern military institutions, the central implication lies in balancing resilience with strategic judgment. As contemporary warfare increasingly emphasizes decentralized operations, technological autonomy, and distributed decision-making, the will to fight must be cultivated not as mechanical obedience but as reflective moral agency. PME must therefore educate soldiers not only to endure hardship but also to recognize when the continuation of violence no longer serves legitimate strategic or political objectives.

Understanding the mechanisms that sustained the endurance of Onoda and Yokoi ultimately allows modern military institutions to approach the concept of will to fight with greater precision. Properly understood, the will to fight should function not as a self-perpetuating doctrinal impulse but as a disciplined instrument of legitimate national policy. Future research may extend this framework by examining additional historical holdout cases or by applying the model to contemporary irregular warfare environments where institutional control is similarly fragmented.

Geoeconomic Analysis of Price of Persistence in the Fight against Terrorism

Financial Flows and the Psychology of Warfare

Vipul V. Tamhane

Abstract: The article investigates how financial systems impact the willingness to engage in combat during counterterrorism operations by studying financial systems as psychological forces that impact both state and nonstate entities. The research uses evidence from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Somalia to show that financial disruption operates as a primary element in unconventional warfare by weakening enemy forces while strengthening allied military power. The bidirectional analytical framework evaluates the financial warfare tactics used by U.S. Marine Corps and Coalition forces to weaken terrorist capabilities and the funding methods terrorists use to maintain their operations. The argument states that systemic geoeconomic pressure results in adversaries losing their psychological strength and their ability to conduct military operations. Geoeconomic pressure produces combined effects that connect financial strategy to Marine Corps doctrine through a unified theoretical framework.

Keywords: geoeconomics, will to fight, terrorism financing, counterterrorism, CT, U.S. Marine Corps, financial disruption, irregular warfare, combat psychology

Introduction

Since Clausewitz observed that warfare is a clash of opposing wills rather

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than simply a matter of destroying something, the concept of "will to fight" has been the driving force behind military strategic thought.[1] However, a contemporary understanding of this phenomenon in counterterrorism (CT) operations has primarily been based on ideological, cultural, and leadership aspects with little probing into the material basis for psychological resilience in the fight. Such understanding is a significant shortcoming in understanding modern irregular warfare, in which nonstate actors show impressive tenacity and resilience despite tactical and material disadvantages in a conventional military context.

As a dimension of will to fight, the financial dimension has a role as both a material enabler and a psychological multiplier. When opponents have stable rooting and access to funds, they demonstrate increased morale, continuity in operations, and confidence in the theatre. However, systematic financial disruption leads to observable contraction in enemy unity, recruitment, and tempo of operations. The relationship between funding and will to fight, suggests that a will to fight is possible in a geoeconomic context and strategic use of economic means may amount to a decisive center of gravity during protracted irregular warfare.

Research Problem and Significance

The continued existence of terrorist organizations, despite regular military pressure, creates fundamental questions about the relationships between physical resources and the psychological will to fight in warfare. Current CT operations are focused on kinetic operations, information warfare, and capacity building, and view financial disruption as a supporting effort rather than a primary effort. This does not take advantage of the weaknesses that exist within illicit networks of financing or connect with the psychological factor of economic pressure on operational decision-making.

From the perspective of U.S. Marine Corps CT operations, this represents both a strategic opportunity and an operational need. Marines deployed to a complex security environment routinely face enemies whose persistence outweighs the appearance of their material capabilities. Understanding the financial flows that support or undermine the enemy's will and ability to conduct operations can have a major impact on force protection and mission success. During CT operations, the very nature of the mission brings it in contact with these funding flows, and it is important to manage and structure these financial flows, especially through the banking system. There is also a clear bridge

[1] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 77.

between the financial decisions of the enemy and the long-term preservation of combat effectiveness for the Marine Corps as they conduct extended operations with high-turnover personnel and while preserving overtime change in capability.

The author's intent here is to show how financial flows serve as the vital connection between materiel capability and psychological resilience in the current era of counterterrorism warfare. Systematic geoeconomic pressure, exercised through coordinated financial disruption operations, has a direct relationship with a diminished adversary's will to fight, which in turn will strengthen allied will to fight by increasing resource security. For the Marine Corps, the integration of geoeconomic warfare into operational doctrine represents a force multiplier that can reduce the material costs and psychological burdens associated with prolonged CT campaigns.

Scope and Methodology

This analysis employs a mixed methods approach, including theoretical framework development, comparative case study analysis, and operations assessment. The study analyzes three main areas: how financial flows sustain terrorists' will to fight; the reverse dynamic that financial security provides to counterterrorism; and operational implications for Marine Corps doctrine and training. Case studies include Taliban financing networks in Afghanistan (2001–21), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria's (ISIS, a.k.a. ISIL) resource mobilization in Iraq and Syria (2013–19), and al-Shabaab's economic adaptation in Somalia (2008–present).

Article Structure

The article is organized into seven substantive sections. Section two frames the linkage between geoeconomics and combat psychology. Section three surveys the literature on will to fight and terrorist financing. Section four explores how financial flows sustain adversary persistence. Section five examines the reverse order of those motions of CT financing and allied will. Section six provides comparative case studies elucidating those dynamics. Finally, section seven will advance operational implications for Marine Corps CT doctrine. The article concludes with a synthesis of the findings and suggestions for future research.

Theoretical Framework: Linking Geoeconomics to Combat Psychology

Defining Core Concepts

The term *will to fight* refers to both individual determination and organizational

staying power in times of adversity.[2] From an individual perspective, will to fight embodies a soldier's will, or motivation, to continue fighting despite casualties, misery, and doubt. In an organizational sense, it reflects an organization's ability to maintain operational tempo, replace personnel, and continue pursuing a strategy no matter the setback. *Geoeconomics* (as coined by Edward N. Luttwak) refers to the logic of conflict conducted through economic means.[3] Geoeconomic warfare, or the use of geoeconomics in the context of counterterrorism, is the strategic manipulation of financing, trade relationships, and economic incentives to military and political ends. *Geoeconomic warfare* encompasses killing the financing of adversaries and providing economic incentives to fighters, allies, and civilian populations. The *price of persistence* is the economic price to maintain the will to fight during extended periods. In the case of terrorist organizations, this includes a series of resources to pay fighters, buy weapons, maintain communications, provide social services, and support propaganda campaigns. In the case of CT forces, it includes finances for sustained operations, force protection, partner capacity building, and stabilization efforts.

Theoretical Mechanisms

The interplay between financial flows and will to fight operates through several interconnected ways. First, financial well-being affects morale by providing reliable pay, individuals receive the equipment they require, and the funding stream provides sufficient resources to carry out operations. Research on military effectiveness shows that subordinate units with reliable systems of logistics and pay enjoy higher morale rates and a lower desertion rate than those units who are ambiguous about future resources.[4]

Second, the provision of funding can help embody an organization's legitimacy as it undertakes social services, infrastructure, and governance of various types. When terrorist organizations institute systems of taxation, offer public goods, and maintain an administrative structure, they create state-like authority an aspect that is important for recruitment and augmentation of public support.[5] Legitimacy of this kind translates into a significant will to fight because it provides the political ends of military action.

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[2] Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2010), 23–45.

[3] Edward N. Luttwak, "From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce," *National Interest*, no. 20 (Summer 1990): 17–23.

[4] Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 178–203.

[5] Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 145–67, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511818462.

Third, financial networks induce psychological anchoring effects as a result of sunk cost dynamics and network dependencies. When individuals are invested in financial relationships with terrorist organizations, they then incur switching costs when contemplating defection or desertion. Moreover, communities reliant on economic opportunities provided by terrorist organizations also have vested interests in their organizational survival.[6]

Fourth, financial disruption functions as a force multiplier through its cascading psychological effects. When adversaries strive to conserve material resources, they are necessitated to devote additional attention to survival rather than offensive operations. As a result, adversaries at the tactical level, are driven to defend themselves, which diminishes operational tempo, constrains strategic time horizons, and produces internal stresses related to such resource allocation decisions.

Bidirectional Analytical Model

The article uses a bidirectional framework to investigate financial flows from adversary and ally perspectives. The adversary financing model offers an analysis of how adversary actors (i.e., terrorist organizations) create, move, and utilize resources to sufficiently fund operations and/or maintain morale. Variables include revenue diversification, network resilience, ability to adapt, and the psychological impact on fighter morale.

The allied financing model offers an analysis of how counterterrorism actors utilize financial tools to undermine the adversary's capability while at the same time improving their effectiveness as an operational actor. Variables include funding sustainability, interagency coordination, partner capacity building, and strengthening the protection of forces.

The overlap between these two perspectives introduces an element of dynamic competition, where each side is attempting to simultaneously maximize their financial security while undermining their opponent's financial security to achieve its respective objectives. Success in laying the groundwork for the competition is tightly coupled with an adversary's relative will to engage in combat and eventual operational outcomes.

Measurement Framework

Evaluating the effect of financial flows on fighting will involves using both quantitative measures and qualitative assessments. Quantitative measures include fighter retention rates, recruitment rates, operational tempo, territorial control, and revenue flows. Qualitative assessments include a measure of mo-

[6] Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 87–112, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7881.001.0001.

rale, an assessment of leadership stability, an analysis of internal communications, and tests of civilian population sentiments on conflict.

The proposed Financial Resilience Index (FRI) incorporates these measures so that it can be used to provide a comparative assessment of fighting will. The FRI uses revenue diversification, network redundancy, speed of adaptation, and operational sustainability to create numerical scores that can be compared across cases and over time.

Literature Review: Will to Fight and Terrorism Financing

Will to Fight Literature

The scholarly examination of will to fight has its origins in theoretical work from classical militarists, but the topic received renewed scholarly interest in contemporary contexts of irregular warfare. Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long's pioneering research, in their book *Democracy and Military Effectiveness*, suggests that will to fight is a significant explanatory variable for battlefield outcomes, independent of material capabilities.[7] They illustrate that combat forces with greater levels of will to fight and morale are more effective than stronger competitors that lack a sufficient mental conception of victory.

Biddle builds on his study with Long, with further contemporary studies joined by Jeffrey A. Friedman to extend this direct line of examination by considering will to fight in contexts of combat operations.[8] In a study of Soviet combat operations during the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–89), Jason Lyall considers the relationship between tactical adaptation, population-centric counterinsurgency operations, and insurgent will to fight over time.[9] Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher have contributed to the study of will to fight in Vietnam by examining the relationship between territorial control, civilian attitudes, and persistence in the wartime efforts of both insurgents and counterinsurgents.[10]

The Marine Corps has made a notable contribution to the literature through agency studies on unit cohesion, leadership performance, and sustainability of operations. The Marine Corps Combat Development Command's

[7] Stephen Biddle and Stephen Long, "Democracy and Military Effectiveness: A Deeper Look," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 4 (2004): 525–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002704266118.
[8] Stephen D. Biddle and Jeffrey A. Friedman, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Army War College Press, 2008), 34–56.
[9] Jason Lyall, "Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents?: Reassessing Democracy's Impact on War Outcomes and Duration," *International Organization* 64, no. 1 (2010): 167–92, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818309990208.
[10] Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, "How 'Free' is Free-Riding in Civil Wars?: Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem," *World Politics* 59, no. 2 (2007): 177–216, https://doi.org/10.1353/wp.2007.0023.

study of small unit cohesion operationally in Iraq and Afghanistan determined that reliability of resources is very important to sustaining unit effectiveness over long deployments.[11]

Despite this contribution, the existing literature on will to fight has several limitations. First, many studies examine only one side of the state/nonstate actor type of dimension and do not have an eye toward understanding how competitive engagement with an opposing force draws from and determines opposing forces respective will to fight. Second, the role of material factors is treated as being less prominent in will to fight literature than ideological and cultural factors. Finally, the literature on will to fight ignores financial constructs, despite their obvious importance to sustained period of operations, as we see in many case studies.

Terrorism Financing Literature

Research on financing terrorism has developed radically since the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001 (9/11). Scholars and practitioners have established a sophisticated understanding of how the terrorist organization generates, moves, and spends its resources. Michael Freeman and Moyara Ruehsen's early work provided the first taxonomy of financing of terrorism methods, including state sponsorship, charitable donations, crime, and legitimate businesses.[12]

Other scholarship has uncovered the complexity of terrorist financial networks and, thus, the adaptability of terrorist financing systems. Nikos Passas shows how informal value transfer systems, including hawala, allow terrorists to move resources across borders without conforming to regulations or supervisory financial institutions.[13] Michael Levi and Peter Reuter show how an increase in antimoney laundering regulation, related to increased criminally derived illicit funds, forced innovation in financing of terrorism methods, with recent data showing the increased use of cash couriers, trade-based money laundering, and cryptocurrencies.[14]

In recent years, researchers have focused on the connections between funding mechanisms and organization behavior. Using al-Qaeda as an example,

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[11] Col Dandridge M. Malone, *Small Unit Leadership: A Commonsense Approach* (New York: Presidio Press, 1983), 45–67.

[12] Michael Freeman and Moyara Ruehsen, "Terrorism Financing Methods: An Overview," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 7, no. 4 (2013): 5–26.

[13] *Hawala* refers to an informal, trust-based money transfer system that takes place outside of traditional banking. Nikos Passas, "Hawala and Other Informal Value Transfer Systems: How to Regulate Them?," *Risk Management* 5, no. 2 (April 2003): 49–59, https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.rm.8240148.

[14] Michael Levi and Peter Reuter, "Money Laundering," *Crime and Justice* 34, no. 1 (2006): 289–375, https://doi.org/10.1086/501508.

Shapiro highlights how funding constraints can influence operational planning, target selection, and organization structure.[15] By same extension, Colin P. Clarke and Assaf Moghadam demonstrated that ISIS's territorial control gave rise to taxation as a funding mechanism, which disrupted the organization's strategic aims and operational behavior.[16]

The operational work ongoing for CT financing has focused more on technical actions (e.g., sanctions, asset seizures, and intelligence gathering) to document and include these actions into an operational decision-making process. By doing so, this work has focused on the technical disruption of capability and avoided a focus on psychological effects of that case on the adversaries will to fight.

Foundational Literature on Terrorist Financing

The study of terrorist financing as a strategic vulnerability traces first to James Adams' seminal work *The Financing of Terror*, which articulated the principle that attacking financial structures constitutes one of the most effective means of undermining terrorist networks.[17] Adams' taxonomy of state sponsorship, criminal enterprise, and charitable fronts established the analytical scaffolding on which subsequent scholarship was built. Juan Zarate's *Treasury's War* provides the definitive account of how financial warfare evolved from a supporting activity into a central pillar of U.S. counterterrorism strategy, documenting the creation of the Department of the Treasury's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence and the operationalization of financial sanctions as a weapon of statecraft.[18] Critically, Zarate reveals that financial warfare success hinges on interagency integration, a finding directly relevant to the Marine Corps tactical-level focus of this article. Bard O'Neill's *Insurgency and Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare* situates financial resources within a broader framework of insurgent external support, demonstrating that financial flows correlate directly with organizational sustainability, recruitment, and morale, providing theoretical grounding for the will-to-fight linkage this article further develops.[19]

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[15] Jacob N. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 156–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2014.914841.

[16] Colin P. Clarke and Assaf Moghadam, "Mapping Today's Jihadi Landscape and Threat," *Orbis* 62, no. 3 (2018): 347–71, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2018.05.006.

[17] James Adams, *The Financing of Terror* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986), 78–112.

[18] Juan C. Zarate, *Treasury's War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), 156-201.

[19] Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare*, 2d ed. (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2005), 123–45, https://doi.org/10.2307/1964102.

Rebel Governance and the Political Economy of Jihadist Insurgency

The political economy of insurgent governance has emerged as a distinct scholarly field with direct relevance to this paper's geoeconomic framework. Aisha Ahmad's *Jihad and Co.: Black Markets and Islamist Power* provides the most comprehensive analysis of how Islamist insurgent groups, including al-Shabaab, the Taliban, and ISIS, construct economic systems that generate revenue, legitimacy, and popular support through business-Islamist alliances.[20] Ahmad's subsequent article "The Long Jihad" introduces a boom-bust cycle framework, arguing that jihadists have learned to adapt their economic strategies in response to external military pressure, shifting between territorial governance and leaner insurgent modes as conditions dictate.[21] This framework is directly applicable to the cross-case analysis in section six below. The edited volume *Rebel Governance in Civil War* establishes theoretical foundations for understanding how nonstate actors provide public goods, administer territory, and construct state-like authority, governance functions that require sustained financial capacity and generate the psychological anchoring effects this article identifies.[22] Zachariah Cherian Mampilly's *Rebel Rulers* further develops this framework, demonstrating that insurgent organizations must balance coercion with consent, replicating state functions to achieve legitimacy, a process wholly dependent on financial flows.[23] The synthesis of these literatures positions this paper at the intersection of rebel governance studies, terrorist financing analysis, and Marine Corps doctrine.

Research Gaps and Contributions

There are some significant gaps in the published literature this article attempts to fill. First, although the will to fight and the financing of terrorism have both attracted considerable attention from scholars, the intersection of these areas remains understudied. No comprehensive framework currently exists that analyzes how financial flows affect combat psychology in irregular conflict.

Second, the majority of terrorism financing research focuses on organizational capabilities as opposed to the psychological effects on fighters collectively and individually. There is a need to systematically examine the relationship be-

[20] Aisha Ahmad, *Jihad and Co.: Black Markets and Islamist Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–30, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719000628.
[21] Aisha Ahmad, "The Long Jihad: The Boom-Bust Cycle behind Jihadist Durability," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (2021): 1–17, https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogaa048.
[22] Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly, eds., *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1–25, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316182468.
[23] Zachariah Cherian Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 55–80.

tween resource security and fighter morale, recruitment efficacy, and operational sustainability.

Third, counterterrorism literature approaches financial disruption as a technical problem rather than a psychological operation. There has been insufficient theorizing and operationalization of geoeconomic warfare as a center of gravity in irregular conflict.

Last, military doctrine and academic analysis remain largely separate on these issues. While practitioners understand the significance of financial factors in CT operations, the doctrine does not offer much helpful direction for operational planning to incorporate geoeconomic strategies.

This article seeks to bridge these gaps by advancing a comprehensive theoretical framework, examining the psychological aspects of financial flows and providing operational recommendations for military practitioners. The bidirectional analytical framework is a novel contribution in so far as it examines competitive dynamics between opposing sides, rather than either side in isolation.

How Financial Flows Sustain Adversary Will to Fight

Revenue Generation Mechanisms

Terrorist groups display an extraordinary capacity for creativity in establishing various channels of revenue to achieve material capacity and psychological reinforcement. While state sponsorship has been decreasing since the Cold War era, state-sponsored funding continues to provide essential early stage and operational support for various organizations. For example, Iran's backing of Hamas, Pakistan's longstanding histories of aiding elements of the Taliban, or Gulf state support for varying factions of opposition and jihadist groups operating within Syria, all demonstrate how state resources bolster both organization capacity and legitimacy.[24]

Diaspora and charitable donations create emotional bonds between terrorist organizations and broader global support networks. These emotional ties extend beyond the mere transfer of financial support to include identity building, ideology reinforcement, and belonging to a community. For example, the Irish Republican Army demonstrates how this form of diaspora and financial support, in particular, provided sustained downstream material support and political legitimacy during decades of organized conflict.[25]

Different types of illegal economic activity, such as drug trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, and smuggling, create substantive short- and long-term revenue streams, and create self-perpetuating cycles of violence and criminality. The

[24] Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 234–67.

[25] Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), 289–312.

Taliban's evolutionary change from an ideological movement to drug-financed insurgent demonstrated that a criminal revenue model can change the fundamental character of the organization while still maintaining some operational capacity and capability.[26]

Territorial control allows for taxation, resource extraction, and administrative revenue, which provides legitimacy similar to a state. The caliphate period of ISIS is a showcase of how territorial governance creates positive feedback loops of financial capacity, popular support, and a militant base. The organization's provision of public services, maintenance of infrastructure, and administrative responsibilities all reinforced claims to political legitimacy while raising large financial revenue.[27]

Psychological Functions of Terrorist Financing

Financial flows enable many types of psychological functions beyond simply operational capacity. Paying fighters regularly creates a relationship between reciprocal obligation that builds up loyalty to the organization, while at the same time, minimizing a fighter's incentive to defect. Research into insurgent payment systems demonstrates how wage certainty directly impacts unit cohesion and operational ability.[28]

Resource availability allows organizations to provide social services, emergency assistance, and economic opportunity, which foster political support and advantages for recruitment. Hezbollah's vast social service network in Lebanon demonstrates how financial capability can translate into political legitimacy and military recruitment.[29] Financial capability allows for propaganda operations, communications infrastructure, and indoctrination programs to promote motivation and commitment. Al-Qaeda's sophisticated media operations took financial investment, but allow for benefits in recruitment and retention that significantly exceed startup costs.[30]

The ability to deliver religious or ideological educational opportunities, to conduct cultural activities, and to reinforce social identity creates psychological ties that transcend transactional relationships. The Taliban's madrassas, and training camps operated by ISIS and other terrorist organizations, use funding

[26] Gretchen Peters, *Seeds of Terror: How Heroin Is Bankrolling the Taliban and al Qaeda* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, an imprint of St. Martin's Press, 2009), 123–45.
[27] Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Evolution in Islamic State Administration: The Documentary Evidence," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (2015): 117–29.
[28] Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 167–89, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808654.017.
[29] Judith Palmer Harik, *Hezbollah: The Changing Face of Terrorism* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 145–67.
[30] Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York, Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 2017), 234–56, https://doi.org/10.7312/hoff17476-001.

to construct wholly institutional environments in which individuals' identity and commitment are reconstructed.[31]

Adaptation and Resilience Strategies

Terrorist organizations have shown sophisticated capabilities to respond to financial stress through adaptation to economic pressures. Revenue diversification is an approach to reducing reliance on a single funding mechanism while creating redundant systems to operationalize efforts despite disruption strategies. Al-Qaeda's development from an organization primarily funded through donors to a diversified criminal-commercial enterprise demonstrates this adaptive capacity.[32]

Geographic dispersal of financial networks fosters resilience from disruption in a local space while remaining operational through base security. An example of geographic dispersal is the Taliban's exclusive use of Pakistan-based hawala networks to keep funds flowing, even while NATO, Coalition, and Afghan government forces occupied and controlled territory and the Afghan banking system.[33]

Organizational learning inside terrorist groups enables them to assess counterterrorism financing measures and craft countermotivations. Thus, competitive adaptation cycles arise where each side is developing increasingly sophisticated tools to achieve their ends while countermotivating the strategies of their opponents.

Network Effects and Psychological Multipliers

Financial networks generate psychological multipliers through several mechanisms. The denser a network is the greater the commitment is individuals develop by having numerous relationships that share designated financial interests. Each alternative embarkation for individuals tied to dense networks involves potentially greater costs associated with defection and greater incentives of continued participation.

Sunk cost effects arise when individuals become committed to investments of time, resources and reputation in financial relationships with terrorist organizations. The sunk costs individuals incur create barriers to defection from a financial relationship with a terrorist organization even when alternative opportunities become readily available.

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[31] Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins, 2003), 189–212.

[32] Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 178–201, https://doi.org/10.7312/guna12692.

[33] Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 123–45.

Social identity formation occurs when financial relationships become welded to personal identify, platform of community, and security for the family. This weld makes financial disruption participation is the equivalent of disruption of self-identity or community identity, which tends to strengthen rather than weaken commitments.

Network externalities create conditions where the value of participation increase based on the number of other participants. Large and well-financed terrorist organizations represent larger opportunities, security and status than smaller groups with fewer resources.

Financial Factors and Ideological Factors: A Synthesis

This article does not argue that ideology and social networks are unimportant to adversary will to fight. Extensive scholarship, including Bruce Hoffman, Jessica Stern, and Eli Berman, demonstrates that religious ideology, social identity, and network embeddedness create resilience that financial resources alone cannot fully explain. The argument, rather, is that ideology and finance are not substitutes but complements. Ideological commitment sustains fighters through periods of financial stress; financial capacity sustains the organizational infrastructure that ideological indoctrination requires. As Berman demonstrates, religious organizations require material resources to provide the social services, educational institutions, and community networks that produce and sustain ideological commitment.[34] Aisha Ahmad's empirical analysis reinforces this point: ideology alone cannot explain variation in jihadist group strategy and behavior over time, because the capacity to fund returns to power after territorial losses is rooted in financial adaptation, not ideological constancy.[35] The relationship is bidirectional. Financial resources enable indoctrination infrastructure, social service provision, community embeddedness, and recruitment capacity. When financial capacity declines, each of these ideological and social mechanisms degrades in turn. The policy implication is not to replace ideological or kinetic analysis with financial analysis, but to integrate these factors: financial warfare degrades the material infrastructure that ideology and social networks require for organizational persistence. This article therefore does not argue that financial targeting should supplant kinetic or information efforts, but rather that it must be elevated to a coequal operational line in campaign design.

[34] Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 87–112.

[35] Ahmad, "The Long Jihad," 10–12; and see Ahmad, *Jihad and Co.*, 134–42, for parallel dynamics in Somalia and Afghanistan.

The Reverse Angle: Financing the Will to Fight against Terrorism

Sources of Counterterrorism Finance

Counterterrorism financing operates through multiple channels, which deliver capability and positive psychological capital to allied forces. National defense appropriations are the primary source of funding and convert congressional priority and public support into operational capability. The size and sustainability of national defense appropriations directly impact force morale, equipment quality, and operational tempo.[36]

Coalition burden-sharing arrangements transfer a share of the financial contribution while simultaneously generating shared ownership of the operational success. NATO Article 5 following the 9/11 attacks and subsequent formation of the Coalition is just one example demonstrating that burden-sharing for financial support adds both capability and political legitimacy.[37]

Congressional emergency authorities and contingency funds provide the ability to respond quickly to emergent threats to operational flexibility. The Overseas Contingency Operations fund has provided more than $2 trillion for CT operations since 2001 with a sustained national commitment while enabling flexible operational planning.[38]

When stabilization and development assistance is combined with tactical activities, positive feedback loops develop by addressing root causes of terrorism while assisting partner capabilities. The commander's emergency response program in Iraq and Afghanistan provided tactical level leaders the ability to provide immediate economic benefit that improved force protection and mission success.[39]

Functions of Counterterrorism Finance

Sustained operations are possible through financial resources that support logistics, equipment maintenance, and personnel support mechanisms. Marine expeditionary units (MEUs) must engage in some pretty sophisticated financial

[36] Linda J. Bilmes, *The Financial Legacy of Iraq and Afghanistan: How Wartime Spending Decisions Will Constrain Future National Security Budgets*, M-RCBG Faculty Working Paper No. 2013-01 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Kennedy School, 2013), 34–56.

[37] Ryan C. Hendrickson, "The Miscalculation of NATO's Death," *Parameters* 37, no. 2 (2017): 89–102.

[38] Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2014), 12–34.

[39] Christopher J. Lamb with Megan Franco, "National-level Coordination and Implementation: How System Attributes Trumped Leadership," in *Lessons Encountered: Learning from the Long War*, ed. Richard D. Hooker Jr. and Joseph J. Collins (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2015), 78–102.

planning to sustain operational capability while maintaining the effectiveness of the force during long deployments.[40]

Intelligence and special operations capabilities require sustained financial investment in technology, training, and support; Marine Special Operations Command effectiveness depends on such funding to maintain advanced capabilities and qualitative advantages against peer competitors.[41]

Partner capacity building programs magnify force effectiveness by enabling militaries and security forces of the host nation to assume primary responsibility for CT operations. Security Force Assistance programs require a continued financial investment to realize their full potential, but they create force multiplication effects that reduce the long-term burden on Marine Corps forces.[42]

Civil affairs and stabilization operations mitigate the root causes of terrorism, in addition to generating popular support for government forces. The financial investment for civil affairs and stabilization, while massive, leads to feedback loops that build operational security and improve strategic legitimacy.

Political Will and Funding Flows

Democratic political processes build direct connections between popular support, legislative appropriations, and capability for operational execution. The relationship between political priorities and operational requirements becomes complicated, as the congressional oversight process, public opinion polling, and electoral politics either to ascertain the level of funding and operational constraints and/or articulate a preference for the future.[43]

Legislative earmarks and programmatic requirements represent and prioritize constituent (political stakeholders) or institutional (military) needs that may not reflect and/or represent military needs. Based on the requirement to serve overlapping constituencies, the relationship between political necessities and operational requirements generates complexity for financial management and stakeholder engagement.[44]

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[40] *Infantry Company Operations*, MCWP 3-11.1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2014), 7-18, 9-10, 13-2, 13-21.

[41] See Maj Devin D. Fultz, "A Worthy Investment in the Stand-In Force," *Marine Corps Gazette* (January 2025) for Marine Forces Special Operations Command's official statements on mission and capabilities.

[42] *MAGTF Ground Operations*, MCWP 3-10 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2019), 3-12–3-28.

[43] Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 167–89, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400841455.

[44] Gordon Adams, *The Politics of Defense Contracting: The Iron Triangle* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 234–56, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429338304.

Psychological Effects on Allied Forces

The provision of financial security directly affects morale for individuals and units by assuring proper compensation, equipment, and support capabilities. Research on effectiveness in military settings indicates units with financial security have higher morale and lower attrition rates than units with uncertainty in resource procurement.[45]

Legitimacy of mission is partly derived from financial commitments that sustain the manifestation of national and international legitimacy toward operational ends. Congressional appropriations, Coalition contributions, and public support create psychological support for financial security that adds interest in advancement and reinforces legitimacy for the mission.

Opportunities for professional development, advanced training, and career growth for servicemembers rely on financial commitment to existent personnel systems. The Marine Corps' focus on professional military education and leadership development requires sustained financial investment, however, it creates a long-term benefit to effectiveness.

Family support programs, medical care, and quality of life enhancements create a positive feedback loop better suited for retention, and recruitment for operational effectiveness. Investments in military families create returns through increased stability of force, and less turbulence of personnel.

Force Multiplication Effects

Integrated financial planning creates synergies because the sum of investments can create higher returns than if treated independently. Integrating intelligence, operations, logistics, and civil affairs requires sophisticated resource allocation, but produces a distinct advantage over adversaries or competitors that do not integrate all functions.

Investments in technology such as communications, intelligence systems, and precision weapons systems require advanced financial investment but create asymmetric advantage that produces higher effectiveness with less collateral damage. Training and educational programs produce long-term capability advantages that compound over time. Initiatives in professional military education, language training, and cultural awareness create returns throughout a personnel's career while developing institutional knowledge. Interagency coordination mechanisms create financial investments to develop and maintain; however, they enable whole-of-government approaches that create multiplied effectiveness for singular agencies.

[45] Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, 1971), 178–201.

Comparative Case Studies

Case Study 1: Taliban Financial Resilience in Afghanistan, 2001–2021

The financial evolution of the Taliban illustrates how diversifying resources and adapting to emerging threats can facilitate sustained insurgent resistance, even when experiencing a severe disadvantage in conventional military capacity. The Taliban funded its operations during the initial post-2001 era through external donations, criminal activity (e.g., narcotics trafficking), and some taxation of service and limited territory. The initial funding structure created vulnerabilities the Coalition forces used to their advantage during their operations using banking restrictions and asset freezes and interdiction operations.[46]

Nonetheless, the Taliban leadership used adaptation strategies to eventually overcome initial vulnerabilities from their financial structure. Eventually, the Taliban integrated narcotics trafficking that provided a stable stream of revenue while creating self-reinforcing cycles that linked drug cultivation, local economic dependency, and funding for the insurgency. Revenue from narcotics trafficking eventually created vested interests in sustaining instability and exceeded $100 million (USD) a year by 2010.[47]

Having more territory permitted the Taliban to establish taxation regimes that achieved state-like legitimacy while also creating a sustainable flow of revenue. Taliban taxation of transportation, agriculture, and commercial activity developed administrative structures that enabled the Taliban to enhance its political claims while simultaneously funding its military operations.[48]

Support networks developed from simple donation frameworks to sophisticated financial infrastructure permitting resource flows with some independence from international counterterrorist financing measures. Networks like hawala operating in Pakistan offered critical support in funding their insurgent operations. The destination countries of Gulf states also allowed Taliban operations through structured donations. Additionally, trade-based money laundering likely provided further resilience to the financing. The financial architecture established permitted the Taliban operations to sustain even in bad circumstances during the conflict.[49]

The psychological impacts of the Taliban's financial resiliency resulted in sustained recruitment, lower defection rates, and an increased operational tempo. Coalition intelligence assessments routinely noted a link between financial

[46] Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 234–67.
[47] Peters, *Seeds of Terror*, 167–89.
[48] Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 201–23.
[49] Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop*, 145–67.

capacity and fighter morale while adequately resourced units tended to be more effective than less funded units.[50]

Counter-Taliban financial measures operated effectively to achieve tactical outcomes, but they did not create a strategic outcome on the will to fight. Asset freezes or banking restrictions or interdiction operations may have disrupted a certain financial flow but did not hinder adaptation to alternate means of funding. The Taliban's financial resiliency contributed directly to their sustained resistance capability that produced the eventual course of the conflict.

Case Study 2: ISIS Resource Mobilization and Financial Collapse, 2013–2019

ISIS showed that whenever rapid resource mobilization contributed to territorial extension and state-building, this also created vulnerabilities that ultimately contributed to organizational decline. Initial funding relied on bank robberies, extortion, and donations from foreign sources for "seed" capital to fund the extension of territory.[51] Territory allowed for taxation, oil revenue, and fees that enabled positive feedback loops between revenue streams and political legitimacy. At its height, ISIS's various revenue streams, or resource mobilizations (i.e. taxation, oil sales, antiquities trafficking, and administrative fees), generated as much as $1 billion per year.[52]

Revenue streams enabled public services, infrastructure maintenance, and social benefits that generated support and legitimacy typical of state-like behavior. ISIS also funded health care, education, and municipal services that created some level of vested interest in its survival among the local civilian population.[53] Nonetheless, the dependency on territory created strategic weaknesses that Coalition forces capitalized on. Intentional targeting of oil assets, financial networks, and administrative points of authority reduced revenue streams while creating greater costs for territory defense.[54]

The psychological effects of decreased finances were reflected in attrition, reduced recruiting and overall effectiveness. Intelligence assessments noted

[50] *Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2010), 78–92.
[51] Jessica Lewis McFate, "The ISIS Defense in Iraq and Syria: Countering an Adaptive Enemy," *Middle East Security Report* 27 (2015): 23–45.
[52] *Terrorist Financing and the Islamic State*, House Financial Services Committee (testimony of Matthew Levitt, director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 13 November 2014), 12–18.
[53] Mara Revkin, *The Legal Foundations of the Islamic State* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 2016), 34–56.
[54] Benjamin Bahney et al., *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2010), 67–89.

that decreased finance directly correlated to morale degradation, with finance-constrained units experiencing reduced combat effect.[55]

The relationship between financial disruption and ISIS's organizational collapse is, however, complex and contested. Scholars such as Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss have emphasized that ISIS's strategic overreach, particularly its decision to simultaneously attack other rebel groups, the Syrian regime, Kurdish forces, and the Iraqi government, spread its manpower and resources to unsustainable levels.[56] This "enemy of everyone" strategy created a unified opposition that might have eroded ISIS even without comprehensive financial warfare. The evidence presented here does not claim financial disruption as the sole or primary cause of ISIS's decline. Rather, the argument is that financial warfare was a necessary complement to military operations: the Coalition's systematic targeting of oil infrastructure, taxation systems, and payment networks created resource starvation that made ISIS's strategic overstretch irrecoverable. Without financial disruption, ISIS might have weathered its overreach through revenue diversification; with financial disruption, overstretch became organizational collapse. This qualification strengthens rather than weakens the article's thesis: financial warfare is most effective when integrated with kinetic and information operations, producing cumulative pressure that no single domain can achieve alone.

Coalition-sponsored financial warfare strategies were critical in degrading extremism and the resolve of extremists to fight. Systematic targeting of funding sources, financial networks, and payment systems had second, or cascading, effects that coincided with military defeat while weakening public support.

Case Study 3: Al-Shabaab Economic Adaptation in Somalia, 2008–Present

The development of al-Shabaab shows how terrorist organizations change financing tactics to remain operational despite long-term counterterrorism pressure. Initially, the organization's revenue came from diaspora donations, criminal activity, and limited territory-based taxation that enabled basic operations.[57]

With more territory, al-Shabaab was able to monopolize the charcoal trade; as well as implement port taxation and agricultural taxation that created sus-

[55] Patrick B. Johnston et al., *Foundations of the Islamic State: Management, Money, and Terror in Iraq, 2005–2010* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2016), 123–45, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR1192.
[56] Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015).
[57] Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The History and Ideology of a Militant Islamist Group* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 156–78, https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199327874.001.0001.

tainable revenue sources and formed economic dependency relations with civilian populations. Al-Shabaab's charcoal trade to Gulf markets generated an estimated $50 million a year in revenue, while further incentivizing local communities to maintain al-Shabaab's political control.[58]

Al-Shabaab created taxation and civil-revenue systems that constituted state-like structures of governance that contributed to both political legitimacy and revenue generation. Al-Shabaab control of taxation of transportation and telecommunications, and its involvement in commercial activity, demonstrated its governmental capacity and ability to fund military operations.[59]

External support networks have developed in ways that include sophisticated trade-based money laundering, credited usage of cryptocurrency, and informal value transfer systems as means to keep financial flows operating away from international sanctions. The ability to adapt to CT financing regulations demonstrates organizational learning and strategic flexibility.[60]

Counter-al-Shabaab financial measures have been only moderately successful because of organizational adaptation and diversifying revenue streams. Although specific financial flows have been disrupted, alternative revenue streams continue to proliferate, and the networks have demonstrated resilience, keeping the organization's capabilities intact.

Aisha Ahmad's boom-bust cycle framework provides crucial analytical depth for understanding al-Shabaab's global resilience. Ahmad demonstrates that following the loss of Kismayo and Afgooye, Somalia, in 2012, al-Shabaab shed foot soldiers it could no longer pay, withdrew from cities into the countryside, and pivoted from proto-state administration to leaner insurgent tactics, while simultaneously investing accumulated cash assets in clandestine business ventures in Nairobi's Eastleigh area to generate revenue during the "bust" period.[61] By 2018, al-Shabaab had further adapted by extracting taxes without necessarily holding territory, calling businesses and individuals in government-controlled Mogadishu by phone to demand payment. This remote taxation capacity illustrates the limits of territory-centric counterterrorism financial measures: disrupting al-Shabaab's physical presence does not sever its revenue streams when the organization maintains diversified economic portfolios operating across formal and shadow economies. The Marine Corps, together with Joint military doctrine, requires continuous pressure

[58] *Somalia Report of the Monitoring Group on Somalia and Eritrea Submitted in Accordance with Resolution 2317*, S/2017/924 (New York: United Nations Security Council, 2017), 67–89.
[59] Ken Menkhaus, "Al-Shabaab and Social Media: A Double-Edged Sword," *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 20, no. 2 (2014): 309–27.
[60] Matthew Bryden, *The Decline and Fall of Al-Shabaab?: Think Again* (Nairobi: Sahan Research, 2015).
[61] Aisha Ahmad, "The Long Jihad," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 2 (March/April 2021): 152–63.

across multiple combat domains to achieve success against enemy systems that will disable their ability to adapt and maintain their operational edge. Disrupting higher-level financial flows without tactical-level financial intelligence (FININT) to target local revenue streams, charcoal traders, telecommunications networks, and informal remittance brokers allows al-Shabaab to reconstitute its financial base during each bust period, as observed repeatedly since 2008.[62]

The psychological impact of an organizationally sustained financial capability is evident in the group's ability to maintain levels of recruitment, operational tempo, and their level of territorial control. The resilience in al-Shabaab's financial system is linked directly to the group's persistence despite sustained military pressure from the African Union and Somali National Army.

Cross-Case Analysis

These case studies illustrate several consistent patterns with respect to financial flows and will to fight. Revenue diversification helps build organizational resilience against counterterrorism financing measures and cultivates various sources of legitimacy and support. More diverse revenue generating organizations demonstrate greater adaptability and persistence than organizations reliant singularly on limited sources.

Territorial control creates positive feedback loops amplifying financial capacity, political legitimacy, and popular support, enhancing both will and capability to fight. However, dependence on territory creates vulnerabilities that could be effectively exploited through a sustained strategy of coordinated financial warfare.

Adaptation capacity enables terrorist organizations to overcome initial financial disruptions through innovative and learning contrasts and extended opportunities found in network evolution. However, sustained pressure across multiple revenue sources can impose cumulative impacts that weaken both an organization's capability and morale.

The pattern of correlation between financial security and psychological resilience appears to hold constant across different types of organizations, environments in which they operate, and time depending on distance to the organization involved. Well-funded organizations systematically demonstrate a higher recruitment potential, slower defection and attrition rates, and better operational effectiveness than poorly financed organizations.

[62] *Intelligence Operations*, MCWP 2-10 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2003), 1-3.

Operational Implications for Marine Corps Counterterrorism Doctrine

Intelligence and Targeting Integration

The philosophy of intelligence supporting decision-making, when viewed alongside FININT integration, exposes a critical capability gap in Marine Corps counterterrorism as it is not structurally embedded; conventional Joint intelligence preparation of the operational environment (JIPOE) emphasizes enemy capabilities and intent but underexamines financial networks and economic vulnerabilities. Bridging this gap enables the translation of financial and network intelligence into actionable insights, linking JIPOE analysis to target development and execution, implied by doctrine focusing on traditional intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance domains (human intelligence, signals intelligence, geospatial intelligence). Financial network analysis addresses doctrinal gaps, linking intelligence to targeting per *Intelligence Operations*, MCWP 2-10, and enabling execution at company level within Marine Air-Ground Task Force operations, this ensures identified nodes and high-value targets are effectively operationalized within tactical missions.[63]

By establishing organic FININT capabilities within MEUs, commanders will systematically target adversary financial networks while gaining additional insight into the adversary's sustainability and will to fight. Organic FININT capability will require specific personnel, analytical tools, and coordination mechanisms.[64]

Feasibility Analysis: Organic versus Reachback FININT Capabilities

The recommendation for organic FININT capabilities at the MEU and battalion level requires careful assessment of three dimensions. First, regarding manpower and military occupational specialty (MOS) implications: establishing a dedicated FININT specialty within existing intelligence MOS structures would require approximately 15–20 billets per Marine expeditionary force (MEF), with smaller detachments (2–3 personnel) at the MEU level, approximately 0.5 percent of total MEF personnel, a marginal increase justified by the force protection and operational effectiveness returns documented in this study. Training pipelines would add 8–10 weeks of specialized instruction in financial analysis, money laundering detection, and interagency coordination to existing intelligence MOS curricula. Second, three alternatives to organic capability exist: reliance on higher headquarters reachback; interagency liaison officers embedded in Marine units; and augmentation by national-level FININT agencies. Each alternative offers cost advantages but creates response time gaps, typically

[63] *Intelligence Operations*, 2-10, 4-7, 4-22, 5-3.
[64] *Intelligence Operations*, 2-2, 4-1, 4-7.

48–72 hours for reachback support, that render tactical-level financial targeting infeasible in the operational timeframe. The cases of Afghanistan (2009–11) and Somalia (2008–present) demonstrate that financial targeting opportunities emerge and close within hours, not days.[65] Third, regarding specific tools: commercially available platforms suited to tactical-level FININT include Palantir Gotham for network analysis and entity resolution (currently used by U.S. Southern Command), i2 Analyst's Notebook for financial link analysis (Marine Corps-licensed but underutilized at tactical echelons), and Chainalysis for cryptocurrency transaction tracking, increasingly relevant as VEOs adopt digital currencies.[66] The argument for organic capability is not that interagency support is inadequate at the strategic level, but that the operational tempo of CT missions requires real-time financial intelligence that reach-back cannot consistently provide.

Target development processes must weave together financial network analysis and traditional intelligence preparation, giving a "holistic view of the operational environment" integrating systems and geospatial perspectives, to identify high-value targets, critical nodes, and entire system vulnerabilities in adversary financing. Financial network mapping may reveal organizational structure, decision nodes, and operational priorities that would remain opaque through conventional intelligence collection.[67] JIPOE doctrine enables holistic, multidomain analysis through political, military, social, information, and infrastructure (PMESII) frameworks and node-link mapping, identifying critical nodes and vulnerabilities to inform target development across financial and operational networks.[68]

The tactical intelligence requirement must broaden to include adversary financial flows, resource dependencies, and formulating economic relationships that enable adversary operations. Intelligence collection at the squad and platoon level should include financial indicators along-side existing tactical intelligence priorities.

Operational Planning and Resource Allocation

Geoeconomic objectives should be integrated into campaign design alongside

[65] *Report of the Panel of Experts on Somalia Submitted in Accordance with Resolution 2444*, S/2019/858 (New York: United Nations, 2019).

[66] Miles Torrington, "What Does Palantir Actually Do?: A Deep Dive into Gotham, Foundry, Apollo, & the Company's Unbelievable Valuation Growth," Financhle, 1 October 2024; Joab Jackson, "Army Employs Visualization Software to Uncover Procurement Fraud," Government Computer News, 14 July 2009; and "Terrorist Financing in the Age of Cryptocurrency: Ep. 112," *Chainalysis* (blog), 23 May 2024.

[67] *Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment*, JP 2-01.3 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2014), I-1–I-20, II-1–II-7.

[68] *Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment*, I-2, I-20, III-33.

traditional military objectives to produce synergistic effects between kinetic operations and financial warfare. Targeting financial networks requires sustained, coordinated effort that may not produce tactical results immediately but is additive to strategic effects over time.[69]

Resourcing procedures may need to consider the long-term cognitive effort required during financial warfare while also enabling rapid response as appropriate to emerging opportunities. Countering terrorism finance can be costly in time and commitment to a sustainable level of capital that may not match the short-term operational pace.

Civil affairs and stabilization call for coherence with financial warfare that creates positive inducements with negative pressures. Providing economic opportunities, the employment program, and development assistance can be opportunities to increase positive financial pressure on our adversary networks.

Interagency coordination efforts need to be established to ensure that military operations synchronize with Treasury, Justice, and State Department financial initiatives. Marine Corps commanders need clarity with authorities, processes, and goals with the civilian agencies that continue financial operations in parallel.

Training and Professional Development

To adequately prepare Marines for modern operational contexts, professional military education (PME) curricula should include both geoeconomic concepts and financial analysis skills, as well as principles of economic warfare. First, understanding financial networks and economic relationships is necessary knowledge for modern CT functions.[70]

Second, specialized training programs should develop FININT abilities in intelligence specialties while also providing all Marines participating in CT functions a general understanding of financial literacy. Marines should have at least a basic understanding of financial systems, money laundering methods, and how to assess economic instability as core competencies.

Third, civilian leader development programs should reinforce the connections between financial well-being, unit morale, and should provide tools to assess and maintain the effectiveness of the force on long missions. Financial awareness is also a critical consideration for force protection, operational success, and retention of personnel.

Finally, language and culture training should include language, terms, and customs of economics, commerce, and finance relative to operational areas.

[69] *Joint Planning*, JP 5-0 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2020), II-10–II-13, III-3–III-75, V-5–V-9.

[70] *Marine Corps Order 1553.3B, Unit Training Management (UTM) Program* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 23 November 2011), 2-1–2-7, 4-1.

Understanding how local economies function and how financial transactions happen contributes to targeting effectiveness and minimizes unintended consequences.

Technology and Capabilities Development

The Marine Corps' ability to understand and target adversary financial systems would be enhanced through investments in financial analytical tools, data visualization systems, and network analysis capabilities. Tailored commercial software for military use can provide advanced analytical capabilities for a reasonable cost.[71]

Commercial software is only one part of the dilemma. Communications systems and data sharing platforms need to be developed to provide secure coordination with interagency partners. Operational security must also be maintained to protect and secure sensitive financial intelligence. There will also be integration challenges between military and civilian systems which will require technology and procedures to address issues.

Mobile, analytical capabilities should provide basic financial network analysis by Marines in the forward deployed environment while maintaining connectivity and access back to higher level analytic capability. Tactical level financial intelligence can provide immediate operational benefit while informing strategic level analysis.

Financial warfare training scenarios should be developed, simulated and exercised to prepare Marines for complex operational environments during which military and economic objectives are balanced. Realistic training and exercises will require advanced scenario development capabilities and analytical capabilities.

Doctrine and Policy Development

Marine Corps doctrinal publications ought to incorporate geoeconomic methodologies and financial warfare concepts to assist all commanders and staff officers in their assigned tasks, under the set command, the organization structure with the requisite establishment support. Presently, there is little doctrinal guidance for how to understand or target an adversary's financial networks.[72]

Rules of engagement and legal constructs should address the authorities and constraints for financial warfare operations along with compliance with domestic law and applicable international law. Legal review procedures should factor financial operations against traditional military operations.

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[71] *DOD Directive 8000.01, Management of the Department of Defense Information Enterprise (DOD IE)* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 17 march 2016), 23–34.

[72] *Operations*, MCDP 1-0 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2017), 1-15–1-21.

Performance management and assessment frameworks should account for financial indicators along with traditional effectiveness measures to provide a more complete assessment of successful operations. Financial metrics could provide leading indicators for adversary capability and will to engage.

International cooperation agreements should facilitate procedures for coordinating financial operations with allied and partner militaries in a manner that supports operational security and compliance with international law. It is essential to seek international coordination to achieve the maximum effect in financial warfare.

Operations, MCDP 1-0, presents its operational concept through system-level military operations that combine combat efforts with information and civil and interagency operational activities. The system enables adversaries to develop their capabilities and determine their willingness to fight. It treats financial networks as operational systems because the system focuses on decision-making processes and operational area control. Financial targeting exists as an essential function that derives from these principles, but the doctrine fails to acknowledge it because it has not been established as an official function.

The existing operational procedures of the Marine Corps offer insufficient detailed instructions about financial networks. *Intelligence*, MCDP 2, establishes that intelligence must analyze the adversary as an interconnected system of capabilities, resources and supporting structures within a broader political and economic environment.[73] This systemic approach provides a doctrinal basis for incorporating financial flows into operational analysis because such networks underpin both adversary capacity and decision-making. The process of integrating geoeconomic methodologies together with financial targeting methods represents an evolution of current intelligence rules which allow commanders to detect and use vital weaknesses that exist outside their combat area.

Force Protection and Sustainment Implications

Identifying adversary's financial vulnerabilities can improve force protection by anticipating operational patterns, resource limitations and strategic prioritization. Adversaries with financial constraints may take unique operational measures and, therefore, require adaptive defensive measures.[74]

The financial consequences of counterterrorism operations must be considered in sustainment planning to guarantee proper resource allocation for military operations and civil activities. The integrated approach to operations that *Operations*, MCDP 1-0, describes needs military and civilian organizations to work together on this mission.

[73] *Intelligence*, MCDP 2 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2018).
[74] *Force Protection*, MCWP 3-31 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2016).

The financial warfare functions that require specialized expertise need to be acknowledged through personnel policies that provide proper career development paths and retention mechanisms. The Marine Corps needs specialized expertise because its operational requirements need to be supported by personnel who possess specific skills (i.e., *Warfighting*, MCDP 1).[75]

Decision-making processes for procurement and sustainment operations need to include both lifecycle financial assessment and evaluation of operational performance. The approach enables defense planning principles from Marine Corps and Joint doctrine to guide effective resource management.

Discussion: Strategic Implications and Limitations

Strategic Implications for Counterterrorism

Integrating geoeconomic strategies into counter-terrorism efforts is a shift away from primarily kinetic strategies to comprehensive campaigns that comprise the economic effort with military effort. The change reflects the fact that today's terrorist organizations operate in complex adaptive systems that no longer can be defeated using traditional military operations alone.[76]

The strategic considerations go beyond tactical efficacy to address fundamental issues of what defines modern warfare and what constitutes an acceptable means to achieve national security objectives. Geoeconomic options require skill sets, time frames, and coordination beyond traditional military operations.

Ultimately, successful operations in financial warfare rely on sustained effort and a developing sophistication of one's understanding of the global economic system that may extend beyond skills typically enacted by military operators. Integrating economic and military knowledge presents a significant challenge to institutions normed on the historic military paradigm of warfare and national security.

Liabilities with financial warfare will, likely, be unintended consequences and second and third order effects on global civilian populations, allied relationships, and global economic stability. Financial weapons may create collateral damage with a human toll above and beyond traditional military operations.

Operational Limitations and Constraints

Present-day legal frameworks offer only soft, ambiguous guidance for military financial operations while possibly creating friction between military aims and civilian agency authorities. The intersection of military operations and finan-

[75] *Warfighting*, MCDP 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997).
[76] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 234–67.

cial regulations requires new legal and procedural frameworks.[77] Organizational culture in the Marine Corps is predicated on swift, decisive actions that may go against the sustained, measured approach that is necessary for successful financial warfare. Adaptation of culture is a major obstacle to the successful implementation of geoeconomic operations.

The availability of resources limits the Marine Corps capacity to establish and maintain financial warfare capabilities while at the same time retaining traditional military capabilities. The fact that financial capabilities require investment comes at an opportunity cost that must be assessed. Limitations on sharing intelligence and classifications of information may work against optimal effectiveness of financial operations, as well as create coordination challenges with civilian agencies and alliances with international partners.

Adversary Adaptation and Counterstrategies

Terrorist organizations showcase complex adaptabilities that can negate any initial advantage created by financial warfare. The competitive structure of adaptation cycles requires continuous innovation and investment to remain effective.

Alternative financing mechanisms allow terrorist organizations to reduce the effectiveness of traditional financial controls while creating additional CT operational challenges.[78] These include cryptocurrency, informal value transfer systems (e.g., hawala systems), bartering, and nonsystemic value creation (e.g., drug and human trafficking). State sponsorship and external support networks provide financial resiliency that enable terrorist organizations to sustain themselves through the disruption of domestic revenue streams. Effective financial warfare requires international collaboration. Criminal integration allows terrorist organizations to access alternative revenue sources as well as create additional law enforcement challenges that could exceed the capabilities of military/authorities.

Policy and Ethical Considerations

The growth of armed forces into the financial realm raises questions about appropriate roles and missions and potentially puts at odds civilian agencies and democratic oversight processes.[79] There are human rights concerns when financial warfare actions impact civilian populations, legitimate businesses, or vital services in ways that fall outside of what has been considered traditional actions

[77] *Department of Defense Law of War Manual* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2023), 789–812.
[78] Sarah Meiklejohn et al., "A Fistful of Bitcoins: Characterizing Payments among Men with No Names," *Communications of the ACM* 59, no. 4 (2016): 86–93, https://doi.org/10.1145/2896384.
[79] Eliot A. Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, 2002), 178–201.

of war. There are international law and sovereignty issues when financial warfare activities transcend national borders or affect foreign industries and commercial activities that potentially violate existing treaty obligations and or diplomatic understandings. Oversight and accountability protocols must adapt to the unique aspects of financial warfare while keeping the appropriate amount of transparency and democratic control of military action in the economic realm.

Measurement and Assessment Challenges

The complex and indirect effects of financial warfare generally make it difficult to assess operational effectiveness and strategic advancement. Traditional military metrics focused on the monitoring of territory, casualties, and troop placements provide little information about operational effectiveness of economic pressure on an adversary's will to fight.[80]

Attribution frameworks and the ability to associate the use of financial pressure as a cause of change in an adversary's behavior, morale, or operational effectiveness was problematic. The performance of terrorist organizations is not isolated to one variable influences, making distinguishing concrete effects of financial disruption unmanageable. Effects may take time to achieve the desired measurable outcome from financial warfare operations that may require months or years to have meaningful effects to measure, hence the evaluation of effectiveness operationally and use of those insights for resources can be problematic. The short-term military planning cycles are unlikely to capture the temporal requirements of effective financial operations. The restrictions of contested environments in data collection limit reliable information about adversary financial networks, resource flows, and organizational responses to financial pressure.

Recommendations for Integration into Marine Corps Doctrine

Organizational Structure Recommendations

The Marine Corps should set up financial intelligence fusion cells at the MEF level to build dedicated analytical expertise on how to understand and target an adversary's financial networks. These cells should combine personnel with financial analytical, intelligence, and operational planning skills.[81] MEUs should develop organic capabilities in financial intelligence through specialized training for their current intelligence personnel and direct access to national level financial intelligence agencies, and officials.

The addition of a financial warfare MOS would allow for career progression

[80] Ben Connable, *Embracing the Fog of War: Assessment and Metrics in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2012), 45–67.
[81] *Intelligence*, MCDP 2 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2018), 3-10–3-27.

for Marines specializing in economic analysis, while retaining institutional expertise in financial operations. Finally, civil affairs groups should broaden their capabilities in relation to, and for the purposes of, economic development, financial system analysis, and commercial activity assessments, to provide a more complete understanding of local economic environments.

Training and Education Programs

The Marine Corps Command and Staff College should incorporate geoeconomic considerations and financial warfare into the core curriculum requirements for field-grade officers, as an understanding of financial networks and economic relationships is critical knowledge base for modern operational environments.[82] The Basic School and Infantry Officers Course should include an introduction to financial intelligence tenets, economic vulnerabilities, and interagency coordination efforts in order to prepare company-grade officers for the complexities of operational environments.

In addition, enlisted professional military education should incorporate financial literacy, money laundering identifications, and economic indicator analysis to better prepare tactical-level intelligence collection. Finally, advanced individual training programs should develop a Marine's subject-matter expertise on financial analysis, network analysis, and techniques of economic warfare for Marines that are assigned to intelligence and civil affairs occupational specialties.

Technology and Equipment Requirements

Investing in commercially available analytical software for military applications will improve the analysis of financial networks and resource flow monitoring and economic vulnerability assessment. This method follows Department of Defense acquisition procedures that require the use of commercial off-the-shelf products as a means to enhance operational capabilities while keeping costs and development times under control, as demonstrated in analytical applications used in counterterrorism finance and network analysis (e.g., Rand studies on al-Qaeda in Iraq's financial records).[83] Secure communications to coordinate with the Treasury, the Department of Justice, and other relevant civilian agencies will be considerable operational infrastructure needed for integrating effective financial warfare capabilities beyond overt military force. Finally, mobile analytic platforms should be designed to allow Marines who are forward

[82] *Command and Staff College Curriculum Guide* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University, 2019), 23–45.

[83] *Defense Acquisition Guidebook* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2017), chap. 4, 78–92; and Benjamin Bahney et al., *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2010).

deployed to conduct simple financial network analyses while staying connected with higher-level analytic tools and repositories. The data visualization and network analyses will further increase the commander's comprehension of financial relationships related to complex operations while facilitating operational planning and targets.

Doctrine Development Priorities

Operations, MCDP 1-0, should feature geoeconomic considerations as an element of operational design and campaign planning along with traditional military considerations.[84] *Intelligence Operations*, MCWP 2-1, should integrate financial intelligence collection requirements, analytical procedures, and coordination procedures with existing intelligence doctrine. Marine Corps tactics, techniques, and procedures publications should provide specific guidance on conducting financial network analysis, targeting economic infrastructure, and coordinating with civilian agencies. Rules of engagement templates should indicate authorities and restrictions for operations impacting financial systems, commercial activities, and economic infrastructure, as well as legal considerations.

Interagency Coordination Mechanisms

The Marine Corps intelligence units need to create formal partnerships with U.S. government agencies, which include financial intelligence organizations, to improve their information sharing and coordinated operations. The Joint doctrine states that interagency coordination needs structured systems of collaboration that include liaison operations to achieve unified military and civilian mission efforts.[85] Joint task force structures should incorporate financial warfare specialists from multiple agencies to provide full-spectrum capabilities for understanding and targeting adversary economic networks.

Training exchanges should facilitate the ability for Marine Corps personnel to develop proficiency in civilian financial analysis and provides civilian analysts with the military operational context. Shared databases and analytical platforms will improve coordination between military and civilian entities while ensuring the appropriate security classification and access controls for sensitive data.

Performance Metrics and Assessment

The creation of standardized metrics for assessing financial warfare operations will provide organized methods to measure effectiveness and guide resource

[84] *Operations*, MCDP 1-0, 2-15–2-34.

[85] *Interorganizational Coordination during Joint Operations*, JP 3-08 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2011), I-2–I-5, II-13–II-17.

distribution. *Interorganizational Coordination during Joint Operations*, JP 3-08, requires interagency groups to work together through coordinated planning, while Joint doctrine shows that assessment frameworks must be used to evaluate operational results and guide decision-making processes, using measures of effectiveness and performance to assess outcomes and guide decision-making.[86] Indicators of adversary financial pressure should be defined and tracked for precursory signals to alterations in operational environment and for opportunities.

Correlational analyses between adversary financial pressure and changes in behavior of the adversary would contribute to discerning the causal relationships and thereby enhance future prediction capabilities. Periodic assessment briefs should couple financial indicators with traditional military indicators of effectiveness in order to measure operational effectiveness more comprehensively and support learning objectives.

Conclusion

The analysis has shown that financial flows are crucially important factors of will to fight in modern counterterrorism campaigns, acting by facilitating resources and time and space to strengthen assessment and resolve. In all cases examined from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and Somalia, there is a correlation between financial security and organizational continuity, and financial disruption results in quantitatively observable capabilities and morale declines in CT opponents.

Synthesis of Key Findings

The analysis framework demonstrates that financial warfare is a zone of competition, as both parties are seeking to maximize their own financial safety and operational ability, while degrading those of the enemy. Financial security is a variable in determining will to fight and operational outcomes.

Terrorist organizations have shown they can adapt, survive, and even thrive despite tremendous financial hardship, but sustainable coordinated disruption in multiple funding streams can create compounding effects that gradually erode both capability and culture of resilience. The Marine Corps has considerable untapped potential to support the integration of geoeconomic dimensions into CT operations, however, delivering on that potential necessitates doctrinal development, organizational adaption, and persistent investment in specific capacities.

Theoretical Contributions

This study advances the current body of scholarship by mapping the first itera-

[86] *Joint Operations*, JP 3-0, IV-30–IV-33.

tive framework that connects financial flows to the styles of combat psychology used in irregular warfare contexts. The price of persistence model provides analytical tools for assessing how economical factors affect military effectiveness across organizational types and operational contexts.

The bidirectional analytic approach, that is both innovative and anticipatory, examines the competitive dynamics between opposing sides rather than simply focusing on each side of warfare. The iterative framework provides the groundwork to develop a more nuanced understanding of the action-reaction cycles of financial warfare. The development of measurable indicators of financial security to will to fight provide a foundation for future empirical research, while also allowing for practical measurement of operational effectiveness in military and national security planners.

Practical Implications

This analysis offers Marine Corps commanders conceptual frameworks and practical tools for understanding the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of opponents and for increasing effectiveness of the forces through integrated financial/military planning. The targeted and systematic approach to targeting financial networks has the potential to both reduce the material burden and psychological burden of sustained counterterrorism operations.

Policymakers may benefit from a more nuanced understanding of CT that seeks to integrate military and economic instruments of national power without being encumbered by traditional purely kinetic approaches. Academic researchers now can have new theoretical frameworks and robust empirical indicators that allow for more developed analysis of irregular warfare dynamics and military effectiveness in complex and constrained security environments.

Limitations and Future Research

The analysis is constrained by the lack of trustworthy data on classified military operations and sensitive financial intelligence. In the future, research should focus on developing a stronger empirical basis through additional case studies and quantitative analysis as information becomes available.

Although this article has focused on Marine Corps applications, the findings may not be generalized to other military Services or multinational forces that operate in different legal and organizational environments. A comparative analysis across different military organizations would advance understanding how institutional factors may affect the success of financial warfare. The focus on counterterrorism operations may not fully address the relevance of financial warfare terms, concepts and theories to other forms of irregular conflict, particularly forms of conflict such as organized crime, insurgency and hybrid warfare activities.

Avenues for Future Research

Quantitative studies of the connection between financial disruption and observable changes in adversary behavior would enhance the empirical underpinnings of financial warfare theory and enhance predictive capabilities for operational planning. Comparative institutional studies of various military organizations and how they are incorporating economic and financial considerations into operational planning would reveal best practices and key shared challenges across various security contexts.

Technology assessments should research emerging financial technologies like cryptocurrency, digital payment systems, and artificial intelligence applications, that may reshape the means of financing violent extremism or state-sponsored terrorism or CT financing capabilities. Legal and ethical analysis of financial warfare operations would evaluate increasing demands for appropriate authorities, oversight mechanisms, and compliance with U.S. domestic law and international law in an increasingly complex operational context.

Final Implications

The incorporation of geoeconomic theory into Marine Corps counterterrorism doctrine has exceptional opportunity and necessity in present-day security environments. Terrorist organizations have shown surprisingly sophisticated understanding of the financial networks and economic relationships that provide advantage in asymmetric and enduring conflicts.

Military effectiveness in the twenty-first century will not come from simply relying on kinetic solutions to complex security problems, but from approaches that more holistically integrate economic, military, and political instruments. The Marine Corps' institutional focus on developing adaptability, innovation, and combined arms warfare offers unique advantages/integrating financial warfare. However, success entails serious commitment to sustained, iterative doctrinal development, organizational inertia, and investment in capability that could detract from operational priorities and legacy military culture. The consequence of persistence, financial warfare, entails the institutions costs for much fundamental change in military thinking and practice.

The highest standard of success will be improved efficacy in safeguarding U.S. interests and realizing national security aims through more advanced, adaptive, and sustainable methods of irregular warfare. For example, the most cost-efficient round fired could be one that disrupts the adversary's financial networks rather than physical assets.

The nature of warfare continues to blur the lines between military and civilian environments, while also creating new opportunities and dilemmas for

military professionals. Understanding and exploiting the link between financial flows and will to fight is an important capability for Marine Corps leaders operating within an increasingly complex and interconnected global security environment.

The Will to Fight
The Most Overused Phrase and Misunderstood Aspect of Warfare

Captain Christian Bills, USAF

Abstract: The concept of a combatant's "will to fight" is frequently invoked during military discourse yet remains poorly defined and inconsistently applied in analysis. This article argues that the will to fight is most effectively sustained when military leaders connect combatants to clearly defined, credible, and enduring goals. Drawing on Rand's research of will to fight and its national-level analytical framework, the article examines how training, ideology and purpose, and leadership and trust influence a force's willingness to continue fighting across different conflict environments. The article employs comparative historical case studies representing three conflict types: peer-to-peer warfare, advantaged versus disadvantaged state conflict, and nation-state versus nonstate actor conflict. Each case illustrates how the interaction of leadership, institutional preparation, and ideological coherence shapes will to fight at the macro level of whole-of-society mobilization and the micro level of individual and unit behavior. The article concludes by considering the implications of will-to-fight dynamics for contemporary military leadership in the context of great power competition and Joint all-domain operations, emphasizing the continued centrality of human factors in future warfare.

Keywords: will to fight, military leadership, readiness, peer-to-peer warfare, state conflict, nonstate conflict, Joint all-domain operations, societal mobilization

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Is the will to fight really that important? Every strategist and historian references a combatant's will to fight or lack thereof. There is no quantitative method to effectively analyze a force's willingness to fight. Any commander worth their salt concerns themselves with their force's readiness, morale, and equipment. But the most prepared or well-armed force does not always prevail. The will to fight is not a stagnant object that exists in perpetuity. The will to fight is a reactive or dependent feature that can change during the course of a conflict or engagement. Historical examples show us that one combatant may possess the stronger will to fight for months or years, then crumble due to the result of a single engagement. This leads us to try to make sense of this ghost we call the will to fight. This article asserts that one of the keystones of affecting a combatant's will to fight is evaluating a commander's ability to connect forces to clearly defined goals. To support this, the following research will address leadership and the impact of the will to fight on militaries or nonstate actors and how it affects a combatant's ability to achieve victory.

This study first defines the term *will to fight* and establishes a common conceptual framework for its use in military analysis. It then identifies and analyzes selected case studies to evaluate their effects on a combatant's will to fight, with particular emphasis on training as an enabler of readiness, ideology and purpose, and leadership and trust. These case studies are measured to determine the root causes and indicators that most strongly influence a combatant's willingness to continue fighting. Finally, the analysis examines these cases across a range of conflict scenarios, including peer-to-peer competition, disadvantaged versus advantaged nations, and engagements between nation-state and nonstate actors.

For the purposes of this analysis, the terms *advantaged* and *disadvantaged* combatants are author-defined constructs, developed to enable comparative evaluation across disparate conflict scenarios. The distinction between advantaged and disadvantaged combatants refers to relative material, institutional, and strategic capacity rather than moral legitimacy or battlefield competence. An *advantaged combatant* is defined as one possessing superior access to industrial production, manpower, technological capability, alliance support, and strategic depth at the outset of a conflict. A *disadvantaged combatant* lacks one or more of these structural advantages and must compensate through alternative means, such as ideological cohesion, effective leadership, or the mobilization of whole-of-society resistance. This distinction provides a consistent analytical framework for comparing how will-to-fight dynamics manifest across different conflict environments.

For this research to remain within the length and scope of this article, the analysis will select specific events to evaluate the impact of the case studies on the will to fight (e.g., the battle of Gettysburg versus the entire Civil War).

Additionally, this article will not address political policy that does, or did not, have a clear and obvious impact on a conflict. An acceptable example would be the impact of Jim Crow laws/segregation on Black U.S. servicemembers during World War II or the Korean War. Finally, this article will focus on combatants' national militaries (e.g., the Red Army) or U.S. State Department or Department of Defense defined nonstate actor combatants (e.g., the Taliban, the Irish Republican Army, or Chechen military forces).

Defining the Will to Fight

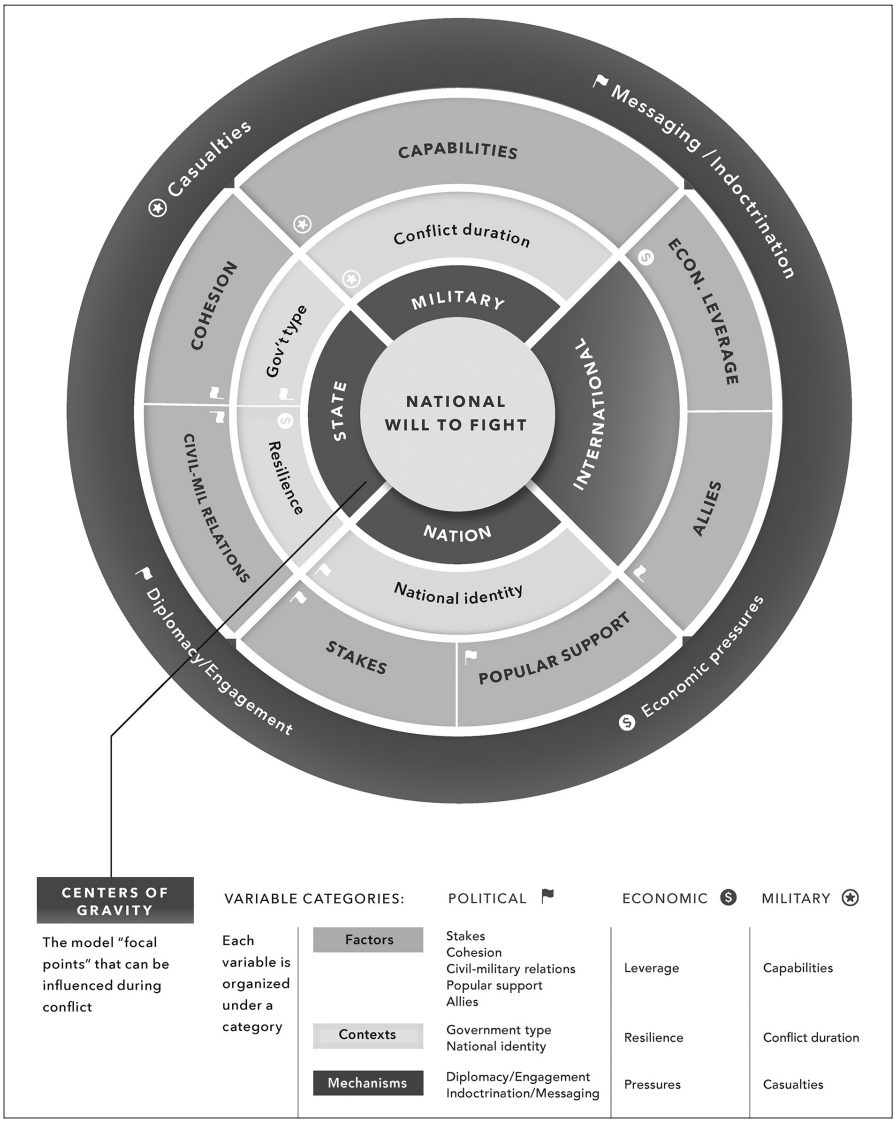
It is assumed that combatants do not go to war without purpose or intent. As a result, these combatants must constantly evaluate strategic, operational, and tactical factors such as supply chains, terrain, military industrial output, weather, etc., all of which affect a combatant's will to fight. To address this wide array of factors, a broad definition must be applied with the acknowledgment that there is not a universally accepted answer. The definition used for this article was produced by Rand's Army Research Division, which states,"In general terms, the will to fight is the disposition and decision to fight, to keep fighting, and to win."[1] The most critical element of the will to fight is the decision to keep fighting. This disposition overcomes doubt and fear of failure, especially in moments when an outcome is uncertain. But why do troops make that decision? The analysis examines training, ideology, and faith in leadership. Analyzing these factors allows the reader to assess the accuracy of the assertion that the will to fight is directly tied to a commander's ability to connect their forces to clearly defined goals.

To maintain analytical discipline and avoid overextension, this article employs one primary historical case study for each conflict type. Peer-to-peer warfare is examined through the First World War, which illustrates endurance and will to fight in the absence of decisive technological, strategic, or ideological advantage. Advantaged versus disadvantaged state conflict is analyzed through the Russo–Ukrainian War, highlighting how ideology and whole-of-society mobilization can offset material inferiority. Nation-state versus nonstate actor conflict is assessed through the Taliban's campaign against the U.S.-backed Afghan government, demonstrating the centrality of leadership, ideology, and societal integration in sustaining will to fight. Additional historical examples are referenced only to illustrate specific mechanisms within these categories, not as independent case studies.

To achieve this, the analysis applies the Rand national model that evaluates "fifteen variables [that] can be applied to a wide range of historical and future conflict scenarios. Some variables will be more relevant than others, depending

[1] "Will to Fight," Rand Army Research Division, accessed 7 November 2025.

Figure 1. Rand national model



Source: Ben Connable et al., *Will Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2019), https://doi.org/10.7249/RB10040, adapted by MCUP.

on the particular scenario, and how the variables are tailored for the circumstances . . . but this model provides a useful starting point for discussion and can drive a much-needed dialogue among analysts conducting threat assessments, contingency plans, wargames, and other efforts requiring conflict evaluation."[2] The Rand model also "analyzes the following questions: what are the political,

[2] Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2019), https://doi.org/10.7249/RB10040.

economic, and military variables that may strengthen or weaken national will to fight, and which are most important?"[3] This is the only practical method that applies the contributing factors for a large combatant forces willingness to fight. Additional considerations for evaluating the national model are an actor's perspective on the probability of conflict and the likelihood of victory. This process evaluates the willingness to resist an aggressor and affirm the validity of their own position while preparing plans to operationalize the cause to motivate the whole of society.

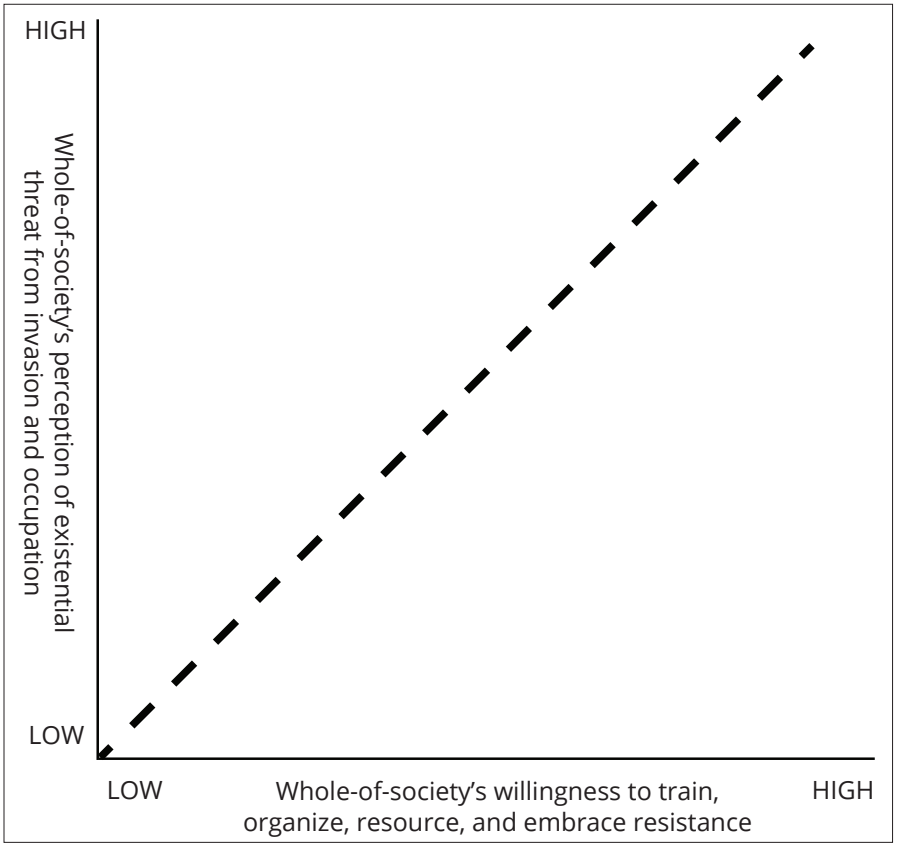
This concept is addressed by Dr. Jeremiah Lumbaca in his analysis of whole-of-society in conflict. Dr. Lumbaca asserts that it is nearly impossible to determine a true or comprehensive resistance capability. To operationalize the whole-of-society resistance acceptance scale shown in figure 2, a set of metrics enables a more objective assessment of a nation's propensity to resist. These measures evaluate two primary dimensions: societal perceptions of existential threat posed by invasion or occupation, and societal willingness to train, organize, resource, and participate in resistance. Drawing on political, social, economic, and cultural indicators, states can be more accurately positioned along the scale, with higher aggregate values reflecting greater cohesion and preparedness (e.g., Ukraine), while lower values indicate fragmentation or ambivalence, as seen in the United States. No formal weighting is applied here, though such refinements could be incorporated if required.[4]

For the purposes of this analysis, the will to fight is examined at two interrelated levels. The first being the macro level, which evaluates national consciousness and whole-of-society mobilization, and the second being micro level, which analyzes individual and unit decision-making. The macro level is shaped by whole-of-society factors such as political legitimacy, shared narratives, institutional capacity, and perceived stakes of the conflict. At the micro level, will to fight is manifested in the behavior of individual combatants and units, where cohesion, trust in leadership, training, and perceived purpose influence the decision to continue fighting under conditions of risk and loss. Training, ideology, and faith in leadership operate across both levels: they contribute to societal cohesion and legitimacy at the macro level while simultaneously shaping morale, resilience, and motivation at the micro level. Understanding how these levels interact is essential to explaining why some forces sustain their will to fight over time while others collapse despite apparent material advantages.

[3] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*.

[4] Jeremiah "Lumpy" Lumbaca, "Resistance Is Futile . . . until It's Not: Assessing a Nation's Willingness to Build Resistance Capability Prior to Invasion," *Small Wars Journal*, 11 November 2025.

Figure 2. Resistance acceptor scale



Source: courtesy of the author, adapted by MCUP.

Training as an Enabler of Readiness

When reviewing a large fighting force, training serves as the universal shared experience. Frontline soldiers and noncombat troops all have shared experience of the angry drill sergeant or the first thoughts of chaos when arriving at Basic Military Training (BMT). Training contributes to the will to fight in numerous ways beyond that of shared experience. "The integration of [these] will to fight concepts into military education, training, planning, assessments, international engagement," and operational analysis will almost certainly have an impact on active battlegrounds.[5] However, it has been proven that not all training is equal, and this may detract from the will to fight, regardless of prestige or reputation.

Two twentieth-century case studies—Egyptian and Israeli preparation for war from 1967 to 1973 and the French experience during World War I

[5] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*.

(1914–18)—demonstrate the significant impact training can have on military readiness, while reinforcing that training alone does not sustain a nation's will to fight. The immediate aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War dealt a crushing blow to the Egyptian armed forces, particularly the Egyptian Air Force (EAF). After being nearly destroyed by the Israeli Air Force (IAF) while still on the ground, the EAF was left demoralized and shrouded in disgrace and blame. Yet within six years, Egypt not only reconstituted as a fighting force but also regained confidence across its military and broader society. As Navy commander Youssef H. Aboul-Enein observes, "There morale like that of the general population required reconstruction. This segment of society was under tremendous pressure as their reconstruction directly related to the morale of the overall population."[6]

In a nation where nearly every adult male possessed military service or training, recovery within the armed forces played an important role in restoring confidence at the national level. Shared experience and renewed emphasis on training contributed to institutional cohesion, while a shift in military philosophy encouraged accountability rather than excuse-making. As Aboul-Enein further notes, "The recovery of the morale of the armed forces was quicker than that of the general population because mistakes that led to the 1967 War were openly discussed in an effort toward reform."[7] Early postwar efforts focused on replacing lost equipment and training new recruits; as confidence increased, the Egyptian military sought further improvement and "expanded their ground force holdings and put their ground troops through intense and nearly continuous training."[8] Israeli leaders, though aware of these reforms and increases in Egyptian morale and ground-force proficiency, evaluated their own position differently after 1967. From the Israeli perspective, the war had unfolded largely according to plan, reinforcing the belief that limited institutional change was required. Consequently, Israeli activity from 1967 to 1973 focused on maintaining acceptable equipment ratios with Arab forces and continuing training to preserve qualitative superiority. This disparity was particularly evident in the air domain, where "the main reasons for the disparity in performance between Arab and Israeli pilots are the exacting training of IAF air and ground crews."[9]

Taken together, these cases illustrate that training plays a critical role in restoring and sustaining readiness, enabling forces to adapt, endure losses, and perform effectively under pressure. Egypt successfully used training to recover military confidence and surprised Israeli planners with its discipline and resil-

[6] Youssef H. Aboul-Enein, review of *The Quranic Concept of War*, by Brigadier S. K. Malik, *Air & Space Power Journal*, 15 July 2005.
[7] Aboul-Enein, review of *The Quranic Concept of War*.
[8] *The 1973 Arab-Israeli War: Overview and Analysis of the Conflict* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency 1975), 14.
[9] *The 1973 Arab-Israeli War*, 22–45.

ience in 1973. Israel, meanwhile, relied on superior training—particularly in the air domain—to offset early setbacks and maintain operational effectiveness. These outcomes reinforce the conclusion that training is an enabler rather than a root cause of will to fight. Well-trained forces perform better and are better prepared to endure hardship, but training alone does not explain a society's willingness to sustain sacrifice. As Rand's national-level model emphasizes, will to fight is shaped by broader conditions of leadership, legitimacy, and purpose, of which training is a necessary—but insufficient—component.

The French experience during the First World War further reinforces this distinction. Keen to avoid repeating the failures of the 1870 Franco-German War, French military leaders applied hard-won lessons drawn from that defeat. As one contemporary assessment notes,

> It had been a major weakness of the army in 1870: the new Republic undertook from the beginning the task of elevating technical ability, skills and leadership of officers and of banning the past "improvisation culture" of the officers' corps. The multiplicity of schools, training centres and journals dedicated to officers' technical or scientific education, gave rise in the 1880s and 1890s to innumerable articles, studies, courses, books, and conferences. This permitted the republican professional officers to cope with the growing complexity of their function. After 1900, most of them were not expecting war passively but were trying to contribute to war preparation.[10]

In contrast to cases where training deficiencies undermined battlefield effectiveness, the French and German armies entered the First World War as peer adversaries, each possessing professionalized forces shaped by sustained training and doctrinal development. Neither side was able to secure and maintain decisive technological, strategic, or ideological advantage, and even as the Treaty of Versailles was being signed on 28 June 1919, German troops maintained they had not been beaten. This outcome underscores that training enhances battlefield performance but does not determine a nation's will to fight. As Canadian lieutenant colonel Dominic M. Beharrysingh argues, "Doctrine and training lay the groundwork for the professional development of soldiers, significantly enhancing their ability to execute their duties effectively. Soldiers perform better when they are well-resourced through training and the provision of the latest weaponry and protective equipment. . . . Soldiers are expected to go beyond

[10] Olivier Cosson, "Pre-War Military Planning (France)," International Encyclopedia of the First World War, 8 October 2014.

their training and what comes naturally when deployed into a conflict zone."[11] Training alone cannot sustain a fighting force, and inadequate training significantly increases the likelihood of defeat. It remains an enabler—not the root cause—of a nation's ability to maintain its will to fight.

During the initial phase of a conflict a force with adequate training is likely to outperform an ill-prepared one, even if the less prepared is superior in numbers and weaponry. However, during a protracted conflict, regardless of peer-versus-peer, advantaged-versus-disadvantaged, or nonstate, the will to fight amongst the combatants will certainly look for a purpose to continue to make sacrifices. Effective leaders understand the necessity to connect the fighting apparatus to the purpose of the conflict. Even well-trained forces can fail when leadership and purpose are unclear, as illustrated by the French experience in 1950s Vietnam. The French recovering from a diminished role in global affairs aimed to utilize its highly trained military force to crush the rising Communist elements. However, the purpose of this campaign was bundled both at home and abroad due to lack of interest, poor diplomatic strategy, ineffective logistical planning, and ill-defined military objectives resulting in the loss of its far east colony. Some nations have sought to address this challenge directly via political officers, or commissars to ensure its fighting members understand both military and political objectives of the conflict. In the People's Republic of China (PRC), "political commissars are assigned to all organizations at the regimental level and above, while political directors are assigned to all battalion-level organizations, and political instructors are assigned to all company-level organizations."[12] Looking beyond the Hollywood depiction of the foxlike Communist commissar reporting on officers and noncommissioned officers to the politburo, it is likely that commissars may elevate the effectiveness of a military force: "Its principle mission is to insure the PLA's loyalty to support of the Party. To do this, the General Political Department [GPD] has been given broad powers in the fields of Party organization within the PLA personnel actions, propaganda, education, cultural activities, political loyalty, internal security, morale, [training] and military justice."[13] Military theorists may be quick to dismiss this type of "continuation training" as a force detractor. However, when analyzing military forces of an authoritarian government this style of training may be an effective means to ensure its forces maintain a strong will to fight while maintaining a connectedness to the mission. Authoritarian

[11] D. M. Beharrysingh, *The Will to Fight: An Enduring Term or Endearing Sentiment* (Toronto: Canadian Forces College, 2025).
[12] Kenneth W. Allen et al., *Personnel f the People's Liberation Army* (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Blue Path Labs, 2022), 17–18.
[13] *Post-Mao Party-Military Relations: The Role of the General Political Department* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 1976), 1.

systems have employed similar mechanisms, such as political commissars, to reinforce ideological cohesion, an example is the Sino-India War in 1962. The "PLA [People's Liberation Army], records show that some 160 small unit leaders were cited for heroism while the much-maligned commissar system did not seem to adversely affect leadership hierarchy or overall morale."[14] For a nation such as China, where the state is the highest priority, it is necessary that all troops, whether party members or not, be constantly reminded and encourage to continue to carry on their will to fight. While training restores a force's capacity to fight, it does not explain why combatants choose to endure prolonged sacrifice—an outcome more directly shaped by ideology and perceived purpose.

Ideology and Purpose

The mindset and spirit behind a conflict is just as important as the people, aircraft, and tanks fighting in it. Commanders are burdened with connecting their subordinates to their objectives and tying it directly to the sacrifices they may endure. Ideology and purpose are not as simple as right or wrong, good, or bad, but rather represents the driving force for how a combatant will prepare and motivate their forces to win. For peer adversaries, this aspect is more stagnate as the strengths and weakness of their forces are unlikely to change significantly. Rather, they will be subject to the combatant's warfighting capabilities, political strategies, and industrial capacity. Peer adversaries' ideology is often driven by calculated (yet often misguided) decisions that seek a specific political or tangible outcome. One such example is the Iraq-Iran War (1980–88), which saw two nations of equal power and will clash over a contrasting ideology and purpose. Saddam Hussein, then dictator of Iraq, sought to crush the idea of revolution in the Middle East. Meanwhile, Iran, fresh from its 1979 revolution and led by Ruhollah Khomeini, was no less determined to usurp further American, British, and French influence and defeat Iraq. When assessing Iraq's perceived strategic opportunity during the early stages of the Iran–Iraq War, one contemporary analysis observed that "[w]ith Iran threatening to export Shia revolution to overthrow the monarchies of the Arab Gulf states, Saddam was well positioned figuratively and geographically to lead the Arab riposte." Furthermore, as Dilip Hiro indicated, "If the Iraqi army could cross the Iranian border and liberate the Arabs of Arabistan/Khuzistan . . . then it would entitle Iraq to a leading role in the Arab councils."[15] Leadership of the Pan-Arab movement might also help vault Hussein into the leading position of the so-called Non-Aligned Move-

[14] Larry M. Wortzel, "Concentrating Forces and Audacious Action: PLA Lessons from the Sino-Indian War," in *The Lessons of History: The Chinese People's Liberation Army at 75*, ed. Laurie Burkitt, Andrew Scobell, and Larry M. Wortzel (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2003), 327–52.
[15] Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 38.

ment, whose worldwide summit the Iraqi dictator was slated to host in 1982.[16] This example highlights several critical aspects of ideology that are necessary for the will to fight to enduring through a protracted campaign. Understanding that neither Iraq nor Iran were "politically" free states raises the question as to why they would continue to fight for almost 10 years. Throughout history, armies of nations that are controlled by dictators or oppressive regimes often have success on the battlefield. Examples such as Nazi Germany (1939–42), Imperial Japan (1936–42), the Mongol Empire (1279–1309 at its peak), and the Roman Empire (117 CE at its peak) prove this as a fact. These regimes were not established overnight, rather they were methodically built by conquering smaller and much less organized actors that were incapable of overcoming the disparity in weapons and troops (i.e., Imperial Japan conquering Korea during the Three Kingdoms period, or Rome overwhelming the nonaligned barbarian tribes of Europe). This blueprint led to the creation of an ideology founded on victory and superiority to any potential adversary.

When analyzing the likelihood of success in conflict between nonfree states versus free states it is critical to define what makes a state free. According to World Population Review, this is based on analysis of 82 indicators across 12 categories that make up the Human Freedom Index. Human freedom is commonly conceptualized in the literature as an inherently valuable social construct, defined as follows:

> Human freedom is an inherently valuable social concept that recognizes the dignity of individuals. Human freedom enables and empowers people to do as they please, free from constraints or punishments, so long as it does not impinge upon one's freedom of another. [12 categories are:] Rule of Law, Security, Safety, Movement, Religion, Association/Assembly/Civil Society, Expression and Information, Relationships, Size of Government, Legal System, Property Rights, Access to Sound Money, Freedom to Trade Internationally, & Regulation.[17]

The will to fight likely decreases in national actors that do not score well on the Human Freedom Index, which in turn will result in battlefield shortcomings. One example is the inferior performance by the Austro-Hungarian Army during WWI. Though the army was comparable in size and arms to

[16] LtCol Mark Bucknam and Frank Esquivel, *Saddam Hussein and the Iran-Iraq War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, National War College, 2001), 7. The Non-Aligned Movement is an international organization of 120 member states that represent the interests of developing nations. The summit was forced to relocate due to the war.

[17] "Freedom Index by Country 2025," World Population Review, accessed 13 November 2025.

their adversaries on the western front, they suffered significantly.[18] Reasons for this included a lack of representation in the government or military leadership, as only the Austrians and Hungarians held any power, in a multinational army composed of at least 17 nationalities. This was despite a large portion of its civilian and military population being of Slavic or minority descent, leading to the commonly used phrase "shackled to a corpse" when referencing the Austro-Hungarian Army.[19]

In 2026, we continue to observe the Russo-Ukrainian War, furthering the analysis on the impact that freedom has on ideology during a peer conflict and a combatant's will to fight. According to Global Firepower, the military advantages clearly lie with Russia (figure 3), while Human Freedom Index advantages are with Ukraine (figure 4).[20] With these data points in mind, we are reminded of the mantra that it is not the weapons that win wars, but the will of the person who wields it. Russia has not performed as well as initially predicted, while Ukraine outperformed their assessed abilities, despite being dependent on external support to maintain its defense. However, both nations regardless of tactical outcomes on the battlefield have a shared history of struggle and endurance which have now collided.

Russia and Ukraine are unlike Western powers in that their ideology and concept of freedom are starkly different. Sacrifice and struggle are to be expected and seen as a strength, meaning that they will outlast any possible adversary. Both countries demonstrated this during WWII as member states of the Soviet Union. One battlefield commander that both sides have been encouraged to emulate is a common legend of the Great Patriotic War, General Georgy Zhukov.[21] Zhukov's approach to command reflected both individual temperament and the broader institutional culture of the Soviet system: "What distinguished Zhukov was his exceptional will to win. . . . Zhukov's reliance more on energy and vigor than on imagination to achieve his goals was consonant with the prevailing ethos of the Soviet system."[22] However, despite this common history, both nations have long and divergent memories that shape their current perception of reality. Russian soldiers maintain that they are fighting against the invasion of alleged Nazism left over from the Ukrainian "assimilation" to the German takeover in WWII. While Ukrainian soldiers often point to the de-

[18] *Western front* for the Austria-Hungarian empire refers to campaigns against the British or French forces, which were limited. However, Austro-Hungarian forces performed better on the Italian and Russian fronts. For further insight, see Hew Strachan, *The First World War* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

[19] John J. Tierney Jr., "Shackled to a Corpse," Institute of World Politics, 9 June 2008.

[20] "Comparison of Russia and Ukraine Military Strengths (2025)," Global Fire Power, accessed 2025; and "Freedom Index by Country 2025."

[21] *Great Patriotic War* refers to a Soviet term describing the Eastern front during WWII.

[22] Henrik Bering, "Zhukov: The Soviet General," Hoover Institution, 1 December 2012.

Figure 3. Country comparison: Russia versus Ukraine military strengths, 2026

Source: "Comparison of Russia and Ukraine Military Strengths (2026)," Global Fire Power, accessed 2025.

Figure 4. Country comparison: Human Freedom Index, 2019–22

COUNTRY	HUMAN FREEDOM INDEX 2022	HUMAN FREEDOM INDEX 2021	HUMAN FREEDOM INDEX 2020	HUMAN FREEDOM INDEX 2019
Russia	5.35	5.78	5.92	6.02
Ukraine	5.84	6.68	6.73	6.80

Source: "Freedom Index by Country 2025," World Population Review, accessed 13 November 2025.

cades of oppression and tragic historical events imposed on them by their Russian (Soviet) rulers, such as the Ukrainian famine (Holodomor) in 1932–33.

The traits that are associated with Zhukov are that he was uncompromising, cold, calculated, heartless, and unflappable. Additionally, Zhukov has been perceived as emotionally detached from his troops' suffering, simply wielding mass human attacks and meat-grinder tactics to achieve military objectives. This perception is inaccurate, as Zhukov was described by his closest confidants to truly care about the lives of his troops.[23] However, this did not cloud his ability to be realistic. To defeat the mass mechanized army of Germany, sacrifices would be needed. This Russian and Soviet way of war can be highly effective when well executed, as in the closing years of WWII. The Russian military continues to draw on the Soviet experience as an aspirational model of effective conventional maneuver warfare. The deeply ingrained popular idea of the "Soviet steamroller"—and by extension modern Russia—wins wars by

[23] Bering, "Zhukov: The Soviet General."

simply outlasting its opponents is inaccurate.[24] However, it continues to shape flawed perceptions of contemporary Russian capabilities. Three primary factors enabled the Soviet Union to leverage its enormous army to achieve operational and strategic objectives.

- First, the Red Army developed excellent operational art over time and concentrated on effectiveness at the operational level over skill at the tactical level of war.
- Second, the Red Army was not simply a large but highly effective mechanized force by the end of the war—the Soviets fielded high-quality breakthrough and exploitation formations in addition to large numbers of line rifle divisions.
- Third, the Soviet Union fully mobilized a truly massive base of manpower and material to fight an existential total war (unlike the mobilization in support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as much as the Kremlin tries to portray its unprovoked invasion of Ukraine as an existential war) and received substantial international support through the Lend-Lease program.[25]

What is often overshadowed by the mythology left by the Eastern Front of WWII onto the current battlefield today is the strategic mindset and ideology of the leaders and operational plans. During large-scale protracted conflicts, failure on the tactical level is the most easily remedied by leaders and does not affect the large-scale ideological purpose of the conflict. On the operational and strategic level, lack of success or repeated defeat can shatter a forces' will to fight. Commanders often seek to overcome this by maintaining an aggressive mindset that promotes "their cause." This creates the risk that, to be accepted by the forces at the sharp end, they must achieve success, or perceived success. Failure to do so will result in a breakdown in morale and result in a loss of faith in their cause. Additional considerations necessary for leaders to ensure that men maintain a positive will to fight are the: belief that leadership cares about their wellbeing, they have the support of the home front, what they are doing is morally right, and trust in leadership as competent warfighters.

As we return to the modern battlefield, the will to fight again is brought to the surface as new threats ranging from long-range ballistic missiles and lethal and stealthy one-way attack drones continue to inflict significant casualties. Neither side (Russia or Ukraine) is willing to give in as the number of casualties continues to rise: "Nearly one million Russian troops have been killed or

[24] Bering, "Zhukov: The Soviet General."
[25] Mason Clark, *The Russian Military: Forecasting the Threat* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2025), 10.

wounded in the country's war against Ukraine, according to a new study by CSIS. The study also said that close to 400,000 Ukrainian troops have also been killed or wounded since the war began. That would put the overall casualty figure, for Russian and Ukrainian troops combined, at almost 1.4 million, as the [*New York Times*] NYT reports."[26] From a U.S. analytical perspective, the Ukrainian position is a logical one. Ukraine is the victim of aggression trying to hold off an authoritarian regime without ceding any further territory; their will to fight makes sense. The Russian position is much more difficult to comprehend. The Russian mindset dating back to the Bolshevik revolution in 1917 has always embraced struggle and adapted to loss and sacrifice to endure. From an ideological perspective, it has been crucial that the current regime present the "special military operation" as a way of protecting the Russian people through offensive means. Despite the battlefield short comings and the international pressure, the Russian government seems to have executed a formidable grassroots campaign to maintain support for the operation (figure 5).[27]

For nation states, the ability to maintain a collective ideology of winning, operationalize popular support, and connect clear directives during a prolonged period is easier than that of a nonstate group. As introduced by Dr. Lumbaca, the whole-of-society (WOS) model rests on a society's readiness to train, organize, resource, and accept resistance. This dimension measures the collective commitment—through policy, action, and community involvement—to establishing an effective resistance structure.[28] The WOS metrics include:

- Volunteerism and participation rates
- Legislative and policy initiatives
- Community and organizational resilience
- Availability of resources and infrastructure[29]

Once combined across the spectrum, the intent is to mobilize preparedness and willingness to join the unified cause of defending against a perceived aggression. Unlike nation-states, which can rally to a national identity or flag, nonstate groups must maintain their collective ideology without the benefit of established institutions. Though it is common for nonstate groups to fracture after initial success, those that maintain cohesion can leverage their cause into

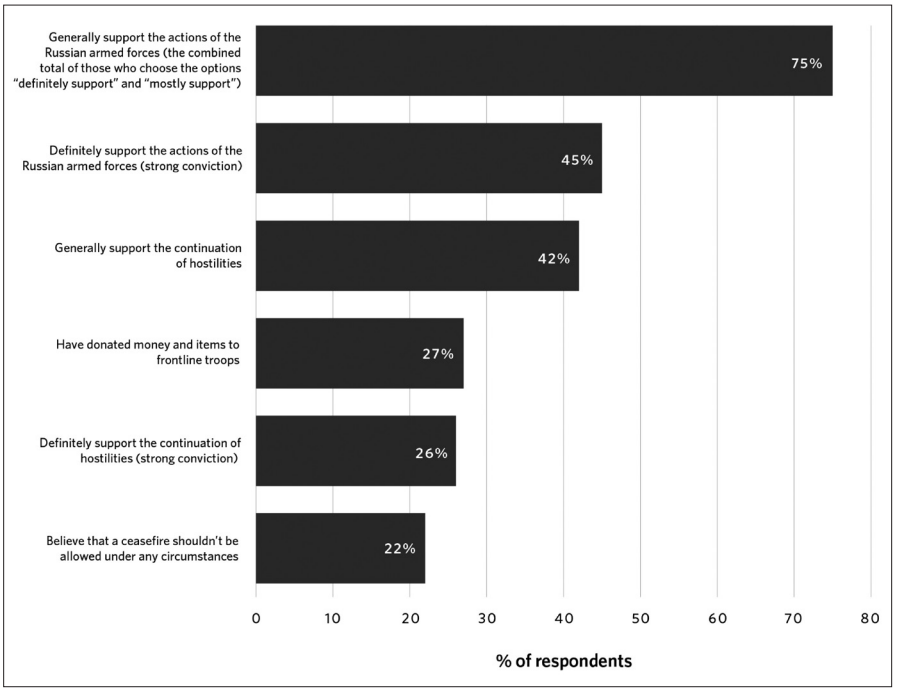
[26] H. Andrew Schwartz, "The Evening: One Million Russian Casualties, U.S. to Have Slower Growth, Truckin', and More," CSIS, 3 June 2025.

[27] Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov, *Alternate Reality: How Russian Society Learned to Stop Worrying about the War* (Washington, DC: Russia Eurasia Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023).

[28] Lumbaca, "Resistance Is Futile . . . until It's Not: Assessing a Nation's Willingness to Build Resistance Capability Prior to Invasion."

[29] Lumbaca, "Resistance Is Futile . . . until It's Not: Assessing a Nation's Willingness to Build Resistance Capability Prior to Invasion."

Figure 5. Russian support for the special military operation



Source: Denis Volkov and Andrei Kolesnikov, *Alternate Reality: How Russian Society Learned to Stop Worrying about the War* (Washington, DC: Russia Eurasia Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2023).

an effective will to fight. The Taliban's ability to leverage the WOS and apply it to an ideology with a high probability of success led to the eventual overthrow of the American-backed government. Illustrating how organizational adaptation and information dominance reinforced the Taliban's operational effectiveness, one assessment notes that "the Taliban evolved from a rural insurgent network into a complex force of roughly 80,000 fighters, integrating information operations and decentralized command structures to enable local initiative and sustain momentum."[30]

For nonstate groups to maintain the required unifying ideology they must ensure, or enforce, continued assistance from the local communities. Underscoring the role of civilian perceptions in sustaining armed group support, one analysis argues that "civilians are more likely to support combatants they believe can meet basic needs, as subjective assessments of resolve and capacity—shaped by limited information and cognitive bias—often outweigh concerns

[30] Benjamin Jensen, "How the Taliban Did It: Inside the 'Operational Art' of Its Military Victory," *New Atlanticist* (blog), Atlantic Council, 15 August 2021.

about violence."[31] For all parties involved in a conflict, ideology is a keystone of success. However, the foundation of ideology must tie back to the purpose of an accepted unified goal. Ideology of a combatant can be molded over time for the betterment (or detriment) of fighting forces. Effective ideology of nonstate actors must be promoted by leadership at all levels and be clearly connected to the success of their cause. This in turn will support the successful operation of a fighting force and enable those engaged to maintain connectedness to the accepted objectives. Otherwise, the ideological aspect of warfare will fracture into self-interested items that do not necessarily support the unified/winning cause. If this occurs the will to fight will disintegrate across the force and will be dependent on individuals dedicated to their specific cause.

Leadership and Trust

The conception of military leadership as a moral and just guardian has become eroded during the last several decades. This is in part due to the expansion of the general and flag officer (GO and FO) corps and the increased frequency of change at the top for civilian leadership (i.e., secretary of defense, chief of staff of the Army, etc.). Many American citizens do not know who these high-ranking individuals are, as result the faith is naturally degraded. This contrasts the historical narrative of the U.S. and Western European nations who all but worshiped its wartime GO and FOs (i.e., General Douglas MacArthur, General George S. Patton, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery, General Ulysses S. Grant, etc.). Despite these factors, effective leadership for any entity engaged in conflict is a must have. However, to ensure that will to fight does not diminish, it demands faith in leadership and trust at all levels. For every successful army or fighting force, the belief that the one who is leading them is making decisions for the betterment or conclusion of their cause. There is also faith that their leader is concerned about their wellbeing. Finally, there must be confidence that their leader will lead them to victory. When combined, these characteristics will ensure a positive will to fight during prolonged campaigns and will afford the combatant to overcome temporary shortcomings or small tactical defeats. Faith in leadership and overall trust is the glue that holds armies together. Doubt in leadership leads to the eventual defeat and the crumbling of the will to fight.

Faith in a leader is something that is hard to gain and can be easily lost. The traits that are associated with developing this faith or trust in leadership are difficult to define. However, numerous recognized leaders highlight core princi-

[31] Karl Kaltenthaler, Arie W. Kruglanski, and Austin J. Knuppe, "The Paradox of the Heavy-Handed Insurgent: Public Support for the Taliban Among Afghan Pashtuns," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 47, no. 12 (2024): 1699–1723, https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2022.2055008.

ples that are often associated with good leadership and the subsequent faith that will be derived from implementing these traits:

> **39th chief of staff of the Army, Gen. Mark A. Milley (Ret):** "[T]raits we seek in today's Army leaders include agility, adaptability, flexibility, mental and physical resilience, competence, and most importantly character."[32]
>
> **Norwich University's Master of Science in Leadership**: "Military leadership involves making critical decisions, often in high-pressure situations with consequential risks. Effective military leaders ask the right questions and think strategically in making well-informed conclusions upon which they can act. Military leaders also build and motivate teams. This responsibility involves looking out for their welfare, developing individual talents, recognizing successes to create a unified team confident to accomplish assigned missions"[33]
>
> **41st chief of staff of the Army General Randy A. George:** "First, good leaders immerse themselves in their craft. They understand the importance of self-development and spend the effort necessary to properly prepare themselves before they train their units. . . . Second, good leaders focus on the here and now. In other words, they play the positions they're assigned. They are laser focused on the jobs they're in and aren't consumed worrying about their ratings or their next jobs. . . . Third, good leaders are phenomenal teammates. They're always professional and prepared. They are ambitious for their teams, not for themselves. And, even more important, they are trustworthy. They genuinely want to do whatever they can to help their team and teammates succeed."[34]

Though aspects of tactical expertise, dedicated work ethic, and care for subordinates may seem simple, they are invaluable to establishing the faith of those in deployed roles. In a peacetime or garrison environment, these are easier for a leader to adhere to. However, for those who are in a deployed or combat environment, these traits may be diminished due to the nature of quick action or unfavorable decisions being made by a leader. Tough decisions can be understood by informed troops but still may not be perceived as the best option. Still,

[32] Quoted in LtGen Robert S. Ferrell, "What Makes a Good Leader?," Army.mil, 4 January 2016.
[33] "What Is Military Leadership? Learn More about This Career Path," Norwich University Online, accessed 2025.
[34] Gen Randy George, "Three Qualities of Good Leaders: A Message for New Lieutenants from the Chief of Staff of the Army," Modern War Institute, 23 May 2025.

their unpopular decisions do not degrade the will to fight. Uninformed or bad decisions coupled with lack of clarity and a failure to understand why a decision was made will almost certainly lead to a degraded will to fight.

For nonstate actors, faith in leadership is essential for any chance of success. The leader of a nonstate actor is the rallying point for all aspects of their cause. They provide the objective, inspiration, and operational plan to achieve victory. Though these are not always successful, these leaders are dependent on the faith of their subordinates. The reason is simple: without the backing of their subordinates, nonstate actors divulge into an ununified mob that will inevitably disintegrate or, they (the former leader) are left to carry on the struggle alone. If either were to occur, the prospects of maintaining any will to fight are impossible and failure is assured. Any successful nonstate actor that has either contended with or defeated a nation's state is led by either a singular or group of well-established and trusted leaders. This leadership dynamic can also be observed in the American Civil War from a little-known anti-Confederate group established in Jones County, Mississippi. Its leader, Newtown Knight, following his defection from the Confederate Army, returned to his home in Mississippi to find his family and land had been destroyed for the needs of the Confederate Army. Newton Knight rapidly assembled a force of roughly 125 men drawn from Jones, Jasper, Covington, and Smith counties to resist Confederate authorities. Known as the Knight Company, the group elected Knight as its leader, and he quickly earned a reputation as a formidable and resourceful guerrilla commander. Physically imposing and highly skilled with his shotgun, Knight led his men in evading capture by operating from concealed swamp strongholds such as Devil's Den and Panther Creek. The group maintained communication through coded horn signals and relied heavily on assistance from sympathetic local civilians, both White and Black, including an enslaved woman named Rachel who provided food and intelligence. [35]

Knight serves as a perfect case study for leadership and trust, fostering an enduring will to fight. Not only did Knight demonstrate excellent military skills, but his ability to unify a conflicting group (White and Black people) under a singular banner proved that clear objectives and goals of protecting themselves from aggression of an invading force. Knight applied the WOS aspect of warfare perfectly and, as a result, his nonstate actors effectively achieved their objective. In the twenty-first century, however, it is unlikely that Knight would have the same level of success. The Information Age prevents any leader from completely hiding their past. For nonstate actor leaders, this can end a movement before it even begins. Much like rising politicians' faith in nonstate

[35] James R. Jelly, "Newton Knight and the Legend of the Free State of Jones," *Smithsonian Associates Civil War E-Mail Newsletter* 10, no. 3, 2014.

military leaders is built on trust, that the leader embodies the collective cause. In the case of Knight, he was able to rally both White and Black people in Mississippi to him. It is possible that the Black people he recruited were unaware that Knight had once been a Confederate soldier. This information may have discouraged them from joining his cause as they would associate him with White slave owners who were looking to continue their abuse.

To avoid this kind of response today, nonstate actor leaders must remain dynamic and be ready to justify their actions. This requires an active campaign plan that can explain how their past still aligns them with the collective goal. A clear example of this is the current President of Syria Ahmed al-Sharaa. As Syria's de facto leader, al-Sharaa oversaw the rebel campaign that ousted Bashar al-Assad and subsequently emphasized to military commanders the gravity of the responsibilities facing the new leadership. He identified restoring legitimacy through lawful governance as the immediate priority, followed by maintaining civil peace through transitional justice and the prevention of reprisals. Al-Sharaa also called for the reconstruction of core state institutions, including the military, security services, police, and economic infrastructure. Support for these initiatives have largely mitigated internal concerns for al-Sharaa's connection to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham—a former al-Qaeda affiliate designated as a terrorist organization by the UN, United States, European Union, and United Kingdom.[36] President al-Sharaa serves as a unique example for the modern nonstate actor leader turned statesman. He was able to unify a myriad of conflicting parties under a single goal despite a murky and complicated past. He also achieved what many Western military strategists believed to be an impossibility: maintaining the will to fight after more than a decade of civil war and broken trust in leadership. As indicated by his statements, al-Sharaa has mobilized the people of Syria behind his cause by offering what they have lacked for more than 40 years—an alternative to a violent dictatorship. Though it is still early in his term, al-Sharaa has taken his nonstate actor mentality and applied it well across the now controlling government. He has built faith between factions, though they are still fragile, and has begun to build relationships that affirm his objectives. Though all of Syria is not united under the al-Sharaa government, pockets are controlled by ISIS and other terror networks, his delivery and clear aims have ensured the will to fight across his former cells, but also in the Syrian armed forces.

For peer competitors and advantaged versus disadvantaged combatants, leadership is not solely reliant on a figurehead. Rather, these state-controlled militaries are the embodiment of the government, military service, or nation

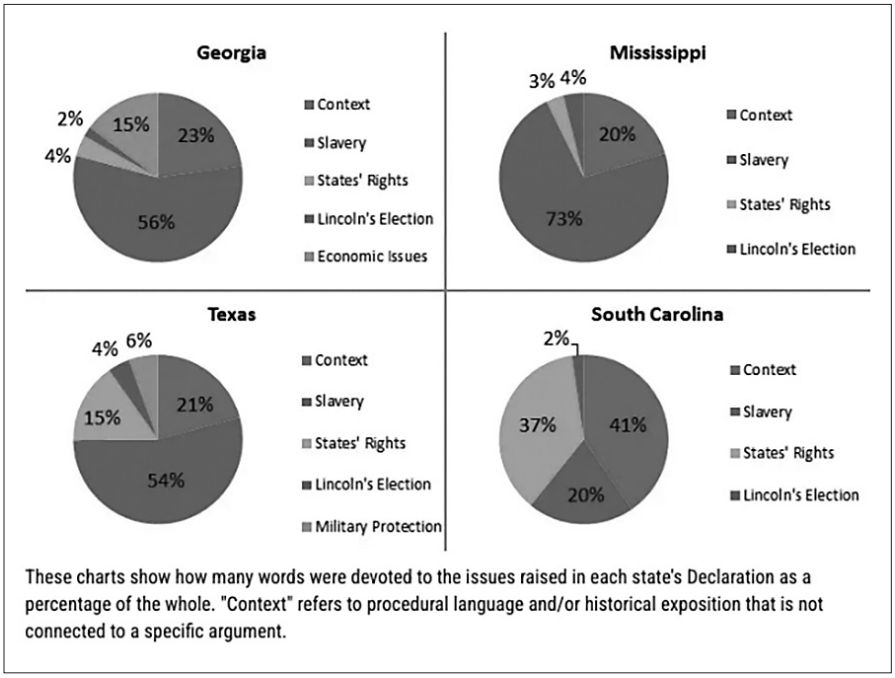
[36] David Gritten, "Ahmed Al-Sharaa Named Syria's Transitional President," BBC News, 31 January 2025.

they represent. Leaders of these forces are bound by laws and regulations, and they are shaped by doctrine and training developed by institutions. Furthermore, their objectives and goals are tied to a strategy that has been approved by governmental institutions. Because of this, commanders are burdened with maintaining the militaries and political arms will to fight while also continuing to earn the trust of the fighting men and women. To execute effectively, one needs strategic knowledge, emotional intelligence, political skill, risk tolerance, confidence, and composure. Each of these skills has been proven to not only aid military leaders but also support the will to fight in combat forces and political institutions. In modern militaries, especially in a peer versus peer or advantaged versus disadvantaged conflict, mastery of these is critical. This is due to the scale on which conflicts are now waged. Prior to the turn of the nineteenth century, wars could be won or lost in a single or small series of battles. The American Civil War is the first modern conflict as it incorporates the WOS model and prepares combatants for the future scale and scope of conflict.

The Union undoubtedly held all the resource advantages, including industry, manpower, financial resources, and established political institutions. The South, however, was armed with two distinct capabilities. First, they had an aligned mindset of oppression via the North and were unified to defend what they saw as their "country." Second, they had unquestionable faith in their military leadership, especially under the command of General Robert E. Lee. These two factors enabled an outgunned and outnumbered force to maintain its position as a formidable threat for four years. In contrast, the Union struggled despite all its apparent advantages. Early Union commanders, such as General George B. McClellan, struggled to rally behind a unified cause. McClellan, like so many other Union commanders, did not possess the traits needed to win a bloody and costly war. As a result, the will to fight and faith in leadership nearly disappeared from the Union cause. This changed when General Ulysses S. Grant was promoted to commander of all Union forces. Grant commanded the respect of his forces due to his battlefield success. Additionally, he presented a clear plan for success and chose to maintain aggressive offensive action. Grant, unlike McClellan, instilled a fighting spirit into the Union army. He did not allow for tactical failures to inhibit the Union grand strategy. As result Grant was able to overcome a checkered past, assaults on his character, and at times popular calls for his removal from leadership due to him being labeled a butcher. However, Grant understood that to overcome the collective goal of the South this aggressive leadership strategy was the only way to ensure Union victory.[37]

[37] Maj Mark E. Scott, *McClellan and Grant: The Importance of Personal Trust for Effective Command at the Operational Level of War*, Report no. ADA422705 (Newport, RI: Naval War College, 2003).

Figure 6. Confederate reasons for secession



Source: John Pierce, "The Reasons for Secession: A Documentary Study," American Battlefield Trust, updated 3 October 2023.

When Lee was named commander of the Confederate Army, the Southern WOS supported the belief in the right of secession and, in general, support for the continued practice of slavery (figure 6).[38] However, contrary to popular belief, Lee did not immediately inherit the blind faith of the Southern government. Rather, faith in him was earned based on the merit of his brilliant command of forces and repeated victory against larger Union armies. Additionally, Lee had established a strong support network among his officer corps, which eventually fostered loyalty throughout the entire army. Lee earned the faith from his army via his consistent and clear strategy of victory. He understood that, given the stormy nature of Southern politics, his army needed a unified cause to maintain a will to fight. Lee built this faith politically and militarily by maintaining a fearless resolve and by not accepting complacency. This provided strong evidence of Lee's superior capacity to recognize, develop, and effectively employ talented leaders, a skill he exercised decisively by reshaping his command team early in his tenure and removing division commanders who failed to meet his expectations.

[38] John Pierce, "The Reasons for Secession: A Documentary Study," American Battlefield Trust, updated 3 October 2023.

Because of his respected past and success on the battlefield, he was able to establish a successful command network that set him up as the hero of the South. Lee was also armed with the WOS aspect to fuel his campaign, which was fought overwhelmingly on his "nation's" soil. Those supporting his army were directly impacted by battlefield results. Many Southern apologists later claimed that those who fought for the South did not do so in the name of slavery but rather states' rights; however, they overlook the fact that the "aggression" being imposed on their way of life was directly tied to slavery. Lee used this to ensure his army was supported to the extreme ends of the Confederate capacity. Lee also succeeded early on where the Union failed in providing a clear objective for his army's cause. Defending the South from Northern invasion was the singular goal that was repeated and echoed across its staff. From his headquarters to the lieutenant in charge of the volunteer companies, every man knew their objective and duty. Simply put, forces under the direction of Lee believed that he was going to lead them to victory and that he cared for them, meaning any sacrifice would not be in vain.[39]

Unfortunately, McClellan did not have the same success as Lee. His failures were not due to malign intent or lack of intelligence. Prior to stepping onto the battlefield, the Union suffered from a lack of clear objectives and vision. The internal conflict of what the war was being fought for inhibited the cohesion and effectiveness of the Union Army. The opportunity for McClellan to fill this gap was missed and, as a result, his forces were left to fight on assumption rather than on solidified military objectives. McClellan is not without fault for his failings on the battlefield. Throughout his command, McClellan consistently overestimated enemy strength and favored excessive caution, prioritizing the preservation of his forces over decisive action. He repeatedly delayed offensives, demanded unrealistic reinforcements despite numerical superiority, tolerated enemy escapes, and withdrew even in the absence of defeat. Although intellectually capable, his lack of originality and reluctance to act decisively ultimately constrained his effectiveness as a military leader. McClellan's failure to seize the initiative and the inability to rally his forces, even after victory, nearly destroyed the Union war effort. After the war, veterans and historians credit McClellan for training and equipping the army. However, his failure to execute core leadership principles that required him to rally the army to a collective cause led to his eventual dismissal.[40]

Leadership-driven will-to-fight dynamics are also evident in figures such as Napoléon Bonaparte and Horatio Nelson. Napoléon forever changed the un-

[39] Mike Hennelly, "Lee's Lieutenants: Leadership Lessons from the Civil War for the Battlefield and the Boardroom," *War on the Rocks*, 8 May 2017.
[40] Stephen K. R. Howarth, "George McClellan: Problematic U.S. Civil War Commander," *History Is Now Magazine* (blog), 10 October 2023.

derstanding of large-scale warfare and need for motivating the WOS to ensure the will to fight. Napoléon operationalized French pride and used his superb logistical and tactical skills to crush weaker rivals. As a result, Napoléon was able to impose his own will and desires onto the army. The combination of battlefield success and individual gain experienced by his subordinate's propelled him into a god-like status among his army, ensuring the utmost faith in him. Nelson was no less capable of establishing his own cult of personality. However, unlike Napoléon he was bound by that of his king and country. Nelson also was provided with an advantage for maintaining the will to fight. This advantage was provided by no one other than Napoléon. Britain, in this case being the disadvantaged nation in the conflict, was able to use the threat of invasion from Napoléon as their cause. Britain's WOS did not need to look further than the headlines of the daily newspapers, though biased and factually liberal, to see the threat of aggression. Nelson and Napoléon both demonstrated the impact of a singular national military leader can have on the will to fight. The unimpeachable faith in their status and belief in victory could empower an army beyond its perceived limitations. Napoléon demonstrated this by conquering all of Western and Central Europe, North Africa, and large parts of Eurasia (now Russia and Eastern Europe). Napoléon asserted that he was the current Caesar and that his will was directly tied to that of France. Nelson became the first man of England's finest hour, responsible for holding off the hordes at the gate. His burden was offset by his fame to carry the weight of his nation, which subsequently saved Britain from invasion. He made the world aware of his ability and effectively built the global empire via naval power that dominated the seas for more than 120 years. Both men commanded the uncompromising faith from all those who served under them and demonstrated that faith in leadership and trust at all levels can lead to a near limitless will to fight.[41]

Conclusion

The will to fight is something that will continue to evolve just as warfare has. There will never be a prescribed method for motivating forces to continue to fight. The root cause for ensuring the will to fight will be dependent on how military leaders choose to use the resources at their disposal. As discussed, training, ideology, and leadership are key components to measuring a force's willingness to fight. This article argues that combatants maintain their will to fight when commanders connect forces to clearly defined goals. Without it, these combatants are at risk of failing and eventually being defeated by a lesser or

[41] James Davey, "Napoleon & Nelson: The Parallel Lives of Rivals," Sotheby's, 9 July 2020; and "Napoleon, Emperor of France vs Nelson, Britannia's 'God of War'," Old Royal Naval College, 18 August 2023.

equal force. Training alone will not suffice as forces may become disillusioned during a prolonged period of combat and will then refuse to place themselves at risk. However, without training forces will descend into undisciplined mobs destined for disaster. Ideology can be a massive force enabler and driver of the will to fight. The belief in victory, the acceptance of the righteous cause, and historic understanding of conflict and sacrifice all fuel the will to fight. This is clear in the aftermath of the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban, the clash of ideology between Iran and Iraq, and in 2025 the shared historic past of sacrifice and victory through sheer will in Ukraine and Russia. However, as seen in conflicts such as WWI, Korea, and Iran-Iraq, simply relying on ideology often results in stagnation and negative peace (or peace simply due to the lack of violence). Additionally, ideology regarding prolonged conflicts often is subject to political freedom that may negate the ability to maintain the will to fight. Leadership is the most dynamic and adjustable aspect for a combatant's ability to maintain or elevate its forces' will to fight. Crucial is the faith that the leaders of the combatants' forces are capable, intelligent, and care for their force. Additional aspects are the cult of personality that make the soldiers under their command believe that they will succeed. The analysis presented here engages with the central concepts surrounding will to fight. Although it is open to debate as to what will make forces increase or maintain their will to fight, one thing is certain. Future great conflicts will shatter all previous understandings of front lines, strategy, mission execution, WOS, and loss. Any future combatant will need to be flexible if they seek to win as warfare has changed drastically since the end of the last great disaster known as WWII. The will to fight will affect everyone, not just those wearing a uniform or those in a city that has been bombed. The WOS will be affected and the will to fight will be determined by the grit of the nation and its ability to come together for the ultimate cause of achieving peace as quickly as possible.

Preventing an Unacknowledged Assumption
Inexhaustible American Will to Fight

Major Molly McIntyre, USA

Abstract: Despite general agreement from theorists and historians on its importance, the military will to fight does not have an accepted doctrinal definition. This, combined with doctrine, theory, and practice that focuses exclusively on destruction of enemy will to fight without mention of preserving U.S. will to fight, cultivates an environment where the presence of American will to fight becomes an unacknowledged planning assumption. Remedying this through doctrinal revisions (and corresponding discussion and assessment) facilitates an operational planner's ability to incorporate efforts into planning specifically to preserve the U.S. will to fight, using objective, risk, tempo, narrative, and the interplay between national and military will to fight.

Keywords: will to fight, planning assumption, doctrinal definition, combat motivation

> The apparent belief that the will to fight is inherent in society at large is a deadly dangerous assumption, one that could lead us to a tragedy of terrible proportions. . . . Our Army's inability to measure its own moral-psychological readiness appears to be matched by an inability to take the measures necessary to improve its situation.
>
> ~ William L. Hauser[1]

[1] William L. Hauser, "The Will to Fight," in Sam Sarkesian, ed., *Combat Effectiveness: Cohesion, Stress, and the Volunteer Military (Beverly Hills, CA/London: Sage, 1980).*

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Introduction

The concept of the American will to fight and the imagery that dramatizes it predates the founding of the nation and continues to occupy a prominent place in contemporary media and military culture. Emmanuel Leutze's iconic painting *Washington Crosses the Delaware* depicts General George Washington standing resolute at the bow of a small boat as 13 men prepare to strike the Hessian garrison at Trenton during the Revolutionary War. The national anthem memorializes the defense of Fort McHenry during the War of 1812. Joe Rosenthal's photograph of U.S. Marines raising the American flag on Iwo Jima is emblematic of sacrifice and grit during World War II and the battles in the Pacific. Images from the Chosin Reservoir capture endurance under extreme conditions during the Korean War. More recent depictions of small-unit actions during the Global War on Terrorism in major motion pictures reinforce a narrative of enduring American military resolve. Collectively, these images suggest a persistent and inexhaustible American will to fight. However, despite the extent to will to fight is mythologized, military planners (and the public) should not conflate the persistence of these images with permanence of the U.S. military will to fight. Unfortunately, limited clarity and minimal explicit discussion on the U.S. military will to fight cultivates an institutional environment where the permanence of the will to fight becomes an unacknowledged planned assumption. To mitigate this, U.S. military doctrine should jointly define the will to fight, incorporate the requirement to protect it into planning, and examine methods for doing so.

While military planners may already make implicit efforts to acknowledge and assess assumptions regarding the U.S. military will to fight, the current disconnect between doctrine, theory, and practice makes this challenging. Military doctrine focuses exclusively on the destruction of enemy will to fight. Rooted in Carl von Clausewitz's theory of war as a contest of wills, military thought frames the destruction of adversary will to fight as a necessary precursor to victory but fails to recognize a corresponding requirement to protect friendly will.[2] *Joint Campaigns and Operations*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, describes the destruction of enemy capability and the will to fight as a prerequisite for achieving strategic objectives.[3] The Army's *Operations*, Field Manual (FM) 3-0, goes further, asserting that "leaders do everything possible in the physical and information dimensions to reduce the enemy's will to fight."[4] Yet, neither document addresses the protection, or even assessment, of the U.S. will to fight. Instead, Joint doctrine's discussion of the protection function focuses primarily on tan-

[2] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 75.
[3] *Joint Planning*, Joint Publication (JP) 3-0 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2022), A-1.
[4] *Operations*, Field Manual (FM) 3-0 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2022), 6-6.

gible equipment and infrastructure without addressing the human element of the will to fight.[5]

Military theory perpetuates this imbalance and the fallible assumption that U.S. military will to fight is permanent and can be relied on when needed. Like doctrine, military theory overwhelmingly emphasizes how to destroy an adversary's will or the importance doing so without offering a corresponding opinion on how to protect or cultivate will to fight within an organization. In practice, many wargames highlight unacknowledged assumptions about the will to fight when simulated formations respond to all orders without hesitation or deviation.[6] History further reinforces propagation of this assumption, with an all-volunteer American force performing admirably in recent conflicts. Combined, these institutionalized elements predispose the presence of U.S. military will to fight to persist as an unacknowledged planning assumption that is rarely defined, seldom assessed, and hinders protection efforts in military planning.

Joint Planning acknowledges that assumptions are unavoidable, but it also warns that "using assumptions incurs risk."[7] While planners may implicitly recognize the potential for degradation in military will to fight, this should be explicit and incorporated in planning. Treating the U.S. will to fight as an assumed constant invites risk to both mission and force, especially as future conflicts may transition to near-peer engagements with potentially higher casualty rates and more direct threats to forces. Overall, misjudging combat motivation may lead to war expansion, faulty predictions about duration or intensity, and miscalculations about feasibility. When the will to fight declines unexpectedly, military effectiveness suffers and civil-military tensions often follow and reciprocally reduce military will to fight. Failure to acknowledge the military will to fight as an assumption reduces planners' ability to understand or accommodate its fluctuations. During planning and execution, collection occurs to validate assumptions, but the current institutional treatment of the will to fight prevents this from occurring.[8]

When the institution recognizes the U.S. will to fight as an assumption rather than a fact, planning considerations around it necessarily change. The will to fight should be treated as a friendly capability, one that commanders and planners should never assume will always be available.[9] This reframing is neither pessimistic nor a political statement. Rather, it provides planners with a frame-

[5] *Joint Planning*, xiv.
[6] Ben Connable and Michael McNerney, "The Will to Fight and the Fate of Nations," *War on the Rocks*, 20 December 2018.
[7] *Joint Planning*, JP 5-0 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2025), I–6.
[8] *Joint Planning*, IV–16.
[9] *Joint Planning*, IV–15.

work for understanding the will to fight *and* designing operations that protect it. Achievable and legitimate objectives, acceptance of prudent risk, deliberate manipulation of tempo, and coherent narrative construction offer planners leverage points to sustain and strengthen American combat motivation. Such an approach, however, requires confronting the unacknowledged assumption that the U.S. will to fight will always be present when needed.

An Undefined but Important Assumption

While Clausewitz is perhaps the most frequently cited (and misquoted) theorist on human will in war, he is not alone in recognizing the significance of combat motivation. There is broad consensus among military theorists and professionals that the will to fight is a critical, if not decisive, factor in warfare. When Army general Scott D. Berrier, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, was asked about combat motivation in the context of the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War, he observed, "I think it has been everything."[10] Despite this acknowledged importance, United States defense institutions have repeatedly struggled to assess, predict, or influence the will to fight. A 2018 Rand study, *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units*, concluded that U.S. military and political leaders have "misjudged, discounted, or purposefully ignored the will to fight, even as they were presented with convincing evidence that will to fight might be their undoing."[11] During a 2022 Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, Senator Angus King (D-ME) noted that within a single year, the United States underestimated Ukrainian combat motivation while overestimating the will of the U.S.-trained Afghan National Army.[12] Similar miscalculations occurred in Korea and Vietnam. In each case, incorrect assumptions about the military will to fight distorted both strategic and operational planning.

Meaningful discussion of any multifaceted concept requires definitional clarity. Yet, U.S. doctrine has never defined "will to fight." Although Clausewitzian language referencing will appears throughout Joint and service doctrine, no consistent definition or component framework exists.[13] Rand defines the *military will to fight* as the "disposition and decision to fight, to act, or to persevere when needed."[14] By framing will as an decision, Rand implicitly acknowledges

[10] *Open Hearing: 2022 Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Committee*, U.S. Congress, Senate, Armed Services Committee, 117th Cong., 2d Sess. (10 March 2022), 79, hereafter *2022 Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment*.
[11] Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2018), 18, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2341.
[12] *2022 Annual Worldwide Threat Assessment*, 77.
[13] Clausewitz, *On War*, 86.
[14] Connable et al., *Will to Fight*, xi.

its impermanence, uncertainty, and overall status as an assumption. To capture its operational relevance, this article defines the military will to fight as the cognitive capability to engage in and sustain combat operations as required to achieve the unit's mission. Absent a shared definition, planners cannot accurately identify the will to fight as a potential assumption, assess its durability, or design operations to preserve it.

Doctrine

If military will to fight is treated as an assumption rather than a capability, that assumption should be visible in doctrine. This does not occur. Since doctrine reflects institutional values, priorities, and organizing principles, examining how U.S. doctrine does address the will to fight reveals not only what the military emphasizes, but also what it systematically neglects. Tracing the doctrinal evolution of the will to fight therefore clarifies how the U.S. military has been understood, constrained, and operationalized (or not) the concept of military will to fight within planning. During the past century, doctrinal treatment of the will to fight has oscillated between two broad approaches.

The first is an internally focused perspective, primarily at the tactical level, emphasizing leadership, cohesion, and the development of effective fighting teams. This approach dominated interwar doctrine and reflected a renewed emphasis on the "human factor" following the psychological toll of World War I.[15] The second approach, which emerged more prominently after World War II and remains prevalent today, is externally focused and emphasizes targeting and degrading an adversary's will to fight. Driven in part by technological advances, particularly the rise of airpower, this latter perspective increasingly framed the will to fight as something to be destroyed in the enemy rather than protected within one's own force.[16]

The introspective, protective perspective appeared first. During the 1920s and 1930s, reflection on the psychological demands of industrialized warfare prompted military leaders to reengage with the "human factor" described by Clausewitz.[17] The 1939 edition of *Operations*, FM 100-5, defined *combat power* as consisting of morale and fighting ability and introduced "will to fight" as an element of a unit's "combat value." The manual acknowledged both intrinsic and external influences on combat motivation, as well as the relationship between military and national will.[18] It asserted that a soldier "readily accepts symbolic ideals implanted by tradition and national culture and will fight for

[15] *Operations*, FM 100-5 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1939), 7, hereafter *Operations*, year.
[16] *Operations*, 1939, 2–19.
[17] Clausewitz, *On War*, 86.
[18] *Operations*, 1954, 51.

these ideals when he is aroused," reflecting an early appreciation of motivation as socially constructed, situational, and contingent.[19]

Following World War II, doctrine shifted toward an offensive orientation focused on destroying the enemy's will to fight. The 1949 edition of *Operations* defined the objective of military operations as the "destruction of the enemy's armed forces and his will to fight."[20] This asymmetry persisted in the 1954 edition, which explicitly introduced psychological operations designed to "lessen the enemy's will to resist, create dissension and defections in his ranks, and reduce or eliminate the support of civilian populations."[21] Notably, the same manual linked combat motivation to narrative and information control, directing that news be "censored with due regard for public support and benefits to troop morale and unit esprit de corps."[22]

The Vietnam War, during which unprecedented levels of U.S. military dissent contrasted with the Viet Cong persistence, highlighted the difficulty of assessing or manipulating the will to fight. This, combined with the transition to an all-volunteer force with assumed high levels of combat motivation, may have contributed to the concept's subsequent disappearance from doctrine.[23] The absence of the will to fight was reinforced by an increasing focus on technology during and, after the Cold War, reduced the focus to more human elements that are more challenging to quantify. From 1968 to 1986, doctrinal publications omitted explicit discussion of the will to fight. Leadership responsibilities to "protect the force" through cohesion, morale, and information remained, but were framed as tactical imperatives rather than components of a broader motivational capability.[24] During the transition to an all-volunteer force, the military sponsored research on these internal variables, which later informed modern leadership doctrine, even as the will to fight remained doctrinally absent.[25]

The 1993 edition of *Operations*, published after Operation Desert Storm, marked a renewed appreciation for the human dimension of warfare.[26] The decisive victory—attributed in part to the collapse of the Iraqi will to fight—revived Clausewitz's assertion that "war is a contest of wills."[27] The manual emphasized enemy will as the central focus of combat operations and offered

[19] *Operations*, 1939, 29.
[20] *Operations*, 1949, 4–2.
[21] *Operations*, 1954, 51.
[22] *Operations*, 1954, 51.
[23] *Operations*, 1968, 3–4.
[24] *Operations*, 1982, 2–10.
[25] *Leadership and the Profession*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2019); and Connable et al., *Will to Fight*, 187.
[26] *Operations*, 1986; and *Operations*, 1993.
[27] *Operations*, 1993, 6–7; and Connable et al., *Will to Fight*, 193.

one of doctrine's few explicit definitions of will: "the disposition to act toward achievement of a desired end state . . . to persevere in the face of all difficulties."[28] It further described will as nonlinearly related to combat power, noting that "when will is lacking, so is combat power; when will is strong, it multiplies the effectiveness of military forces."[29] This framing acknowledged the emergent and cumulative nature of combat power.

The 1993 edition also recognized the importance of the U.S. will to fight, stating that "Army forces must also be adept and have will to fight in more protracted conflicts if necessary."[30] Internal factors, such as cohesion and training, continued to be leader-managed elements of the "human dimension."[31] However, the manual identified leadership as the singular source of will without justification and failed to acknowledge that units may demonstrate a will to fight despite poor leadership (or conversely lose it under competent leaders).[32]

The enduring institutional lesson drawn from the First Gulf War, however, emphasized technological superiority rather than human factors. Subsequent doctrine reflected a bias toward quantifiable and tangible elements of combat power, relegating the will to fight to a secondary consideration. Combat motivation became subordinate to technological advantage, particularly in information systems.[33] Consequently, the 2001 edition of *Operations* made only passing reference to the will to fight, noting that enemy forces might use "terrorist tactics and other attacks to erode public support, alliance or coalition cohesion, and the will to fight."[34] This limited acknowledgment reinforced the doctrinal tendency to treat American will to fight as effectively inexhaustible.

Beginning in 2016, Clausewitzian language emphasizing war as a human endeavor reemerged in U.S. doctrine, but treatment of the will to fight remained asymmetric. While the term appears 4 times in the 2019 *Operations*, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 3-0, and 18 times in the 2025 edition of the field manual, it remains poorly defined. *Operations*, FM 3-0, elevates the will to fight as a potential decisive factor and quotes Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz: "The final objective in war is the destruction of the enemy's capacity and will to fight."[35] This offensive framing is reinforced by guidance directing leaders to "do everything possible in the physical and information dimensions to reduce the enemy's will to fight."[36] References to protecting U.S. will to fight are rare and

[28] *Operations*, 1993, 6–7.
[29] *Operations*, 1993, 6–7.
[30] *Operations*, 1993, 6–16.
[31] *Operations*, 1993, 6–16.
[32] Connable et al., *Will to Fight*, 194.
[33] Connable et al., *Will to Fight*, 195.
[34] *Operations*, 2001, 1–9.
[35] *Operations*, 2025, 7–1.
[36] *Operations*, 2025, 127.

tangential. Current Army doctrine addresses friendly combat motivation only twice, indirectly through the mission of Army bands "to instill in our forces the will to fight and win" and through acknowledgment that disinformation campaigns can reduce morale and will within the United States.[37] Although cohesion, trust, and alliances are described as components of the "human advantage," doctrine does not explicitly connect them to the will to fight.[38]

Joint doctrine follows a similar pattern. *Joint Campaigns and Planning*, JP 3-0, states that "achieving strategic objectives frequently involves the destruction of the enemies' capabilities and their will to fight," but provides no definition or further discussion of the concept.[39] *Joint Planning*, JP 5-0, reinforces the importance of the will to fight by incorporating it into discussions of the enemy centers of gravity, defined as "the source of power or strength that enables a military force to achieve its objective."[40] While this framing acknowledges the systemic nature of the will to fight, doctrine offers no guidance on identifying, assessing, or protecting the factors that promote or degrade it.[41] Despite noting that the will to fight can have a "dramatic impact on the joint force's success," it remains an intangible consideration rather than an operationalized capability.[42] U.S. Marine Corps doctrine follows a similar trajectory. *Marine Corps Operations*, Marine Corps Doctrine Publication (MCDP) 1-0, states that "the ultimate military objective of war is to defeat the enemy's forces or destroy the will to fight" but offers no definition or analysis.[43]

In contrast, some partner nations and multinational organizations explicitly incorporate the will to fight into doctrine, treating it as a principle or capability rather than an assumption. The United Kingdom includes "maintenance of morale," which is closely aligned to the will to fight, as a principle of war.[44] Defined as "a positive state of mind derived from inspired political and military leadership, a shared sense of purpose and values, well-being, feeling of worth, and group cohesion," it is described as "crucial for operational success" and manifests as "staying power and resolve."[45] Similarly, North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO), *Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations*, Allied Joint Publication 3, identifies "maintenance of morale" as both a principle

[37] *Army Bands*, Army Regulation (AR) 220-90 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 2016), 1.
[38] *Operations*, 2022, 6–6.
[39] *Joint Campaigns and Planning*, A-1.
[40] *Joint Planning*, IV–22.
[41] *Joint Planning*, 2020, IV–24.
[42] *Joint Planning*, 2020, IV–19-20.
[43] *Marine Corps Operations*, Marine Corps Doctrine Publication (MCDP) 1-0 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2019), C–4.
[44] *UK Defence Doctrine*, Joint Doctrine Publication (JDP) 0-01, 5th ed. (London: Ministry of Defence, 2014), 50.
[45] *UK Defence Doctrine*, 25.

and operational consideration.[46] NATO defines *will* as "based on the unity of communities of interest or armed groups, fighting spirit, morale and cohesion," noting that once the will to fight is lost, an adversary relinquishes the ability to influence events.[47] This insight, widely acknowledged in theory, is one that U.S. doctrine recognizes rhetorically but rarely operationalizes in practice.

Theory

Doctrine is not developed in isolation. Broader military theory influences the way militaries conceptualize the will to fight and associated planning. A brief survey of military theory therefore provides essential context for understanding how the current doctrinal imbalance emerged and why the protection of friendly will to fight remains underdeveloped. Military theory has long recognized the will to fight as a decisive element of combat effectiveness. A review of theorists indicates "there are many occurrences when the strength of will was the center of gravity at the operational or even tactical level of war."[48] Yet despite this recognition, military theory mirrors doctrinal practice in one critical respect: it overwhelmingly emphasizes how to destroy an adversary's will while offering comparatively little guidance on how to protect or cultivate one's own. A survey of military theory thus reveals not a lack of appreciation for the will to fight but a persistent asymmetry in its application. This imbalance helps explain why friendly the will to fight risks treatment as an assumption, rather than as a vulnerable capability requiring deliberate protection.

Although Clausewitz is often considered the foundational authority on will in war, earlier theorists articulated similar insights. Writing in 370 BCE, the Greek commander Xenophon recognized that sustaining morale in combat was imperative.[49] He rejected the notion that numerical or materiel superiority alone determined victory, arguing instead that success favored those with "stouter hearts" whose adversaries lacked the will to stand against them.[50] Clausewitz echoed this perspective more than 2,000 years later, asserting that "the moral elements are among the most important in war" and that will is a moral force that animates and directs physical power.[51] Writing in the late nineteenth century, French Army colonel Ardant du Picq similarly emphasized the primacy of

[46] *Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations*, Allied Joint Publication (AJP) 3, ver. 1 (Brussels, Belgium: NATO Standardization Office, 2019), 1–11.
[47] *Allied Joint Doctrine for the Conduct of Operations*, 1-26–1-27.
[48] Daniel E. Liddell, "Operational Art and the Influence of Will," *Marine Corps Gazette* 82, no. 2 (February 1998): 52; Connable et al., *Will to Fight*, 2; and Michael J. McNerney et al., *National Will to Fight: Why Some States Keep Fighting and Others Don't* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2018), xix, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2477.
[49] Godfrey Hutchinson, *Xenophon and the Art of Command* (London: Greenhill Books, 2000), 60.
[50] Hutchinson, *Xenophon and the Art of Command*, 60.
[51] Clausewitz, *On War*, 183.

the human element. In *Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battle*, he argued that organization, discipline, and tactics ultimately depend on the "human heart," lamenting that "it is rarely taken into account; and often strange errors are the result. . . . We must consider it!"[52]

Throughout the twentieth century, interest in the psychological component of warfare persisted, particularly among theorists focused on land combat. In *The Principles of War*, French field marshal Ferdinand Foch described defeat not as a product of material forces alone, but as a moral collapse produced by fear and discouragement.[53] He characterized war as "the domain of moral forces," victory as "moral superiority," and battle as "a struggle between two wills."[54] Although Foch advocated offensive action to shatter enemy morale through sudden and violent blows, he also stressed the defensive imperative of strengthening one's own moral force, arguing that an army must "always aim at increasing and strengthening its moral force."[55] Similarly, in a 1941 address, U.S. Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall argued that victory depended less on fighting than on the spirit brought to the fight, identifying morale as the psychological element responsible for success.[56]

Paralleling doctrinal trends, the emergence of strategic airpower in the twentieth century reinforced a shift toward externally focused theories of will. The ability to strike adversaries at a distance encouraged theorists to prioritize offensive action aimed at degrading enemy morale, often at the expense of considering how to protect or develop one's own will to fight. Giulio Douhet's *The Command of the Air* exemplifies this shift. Although Douhet adopted Clausewitz's framing of war as a contest of wills, he advocated a purely offensive approach, arguing that bombing population centers would induce sufficient suffering to break national will and compel political capitulation.[57] Similar logic appears in the work of airpower advocates such as Brigadier General Billy Mitchell, Lord Hugh Montague Trenchard, and Colonel John R. Boyd, all of whom emphasized attacking "vital" or "nerve" centers to achieve "strategic paralysis" and the collapse of the will to fight.[58] These theories also fail to take into account the inverse or nonlinear effect where increased strategic strikes results in an increase in the will to fight, even if degrading the capability to do so.

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[52] Ardant du Picq, excerpt from *Battle Studies: Ancient and Modern Battle, in Roots of Strategy: Book Two*, ed. David Jablonsky (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1987), 135.
[53] Ferdinand Foch, *The Principles of War*, trans. Hilaire Belloc (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), 3.
[54] Foch, *The Principles of War*, 287.
[55] Foch, *The Principles of War*, 33, 293.
[56] Gen George C. Marshall, "Speech at Trinity College" (speech, Trinity College, Hartford, CT, 15 June 1941), 122–23.
[57] Douhet, excerpt from *The Command of the Air*, 333.
[58] David S. Fadok, "John Boyd and John Warden: Airpower's Quest for Strategic Paralysis," in *The Paths of Heaven: The Evolution of Airpower Theory*, ed. Phillip S. Meilinger (Maxwell, AL: Air University Press, 1997), 362.

This adversary-oriented focus was not limited to airpower theorists. B. H. Liddell Hart argued that decisive victory required destroying an opponent's "moral equilibrium."[59] He asserted that "the chief incalculable is the human will, which manifests itself in resistance," and that a "willing spirit" was as important as any tangible means.[60] Like earlier theorists, Liddell Hart acknowledged the intricate relationship between physical and psychological factors and concluded that the moral component was both more vulnerable and more decisive.[61] While he emphasized movement and surprise as the most effective means of achieving psychological effects, his prescriptions similarly concentrated on attacking enemy morale rather than safeguarding one's own will to fight.[62]

The type of direct conflicts the U.S. military entered during the last 75 years served to reinforce the development and persistence of offensive focus on the will to fight. The power and technology differential between the United States and its adversaries allowed planners to be less concerned with strategic strikes targeting population centers and resulting decline in the will to fight. Instances of striking U.S. population centers, such as in Pearl Harbor or 11 September (9/11) have been very rare (and actually served to increase the will to fight). The adversaries the United States has faced during the last half century have generally lacked the capacity for sustained strategic strikes against American forces.

Non-Western theorists also underscore the preeminence of the will to fight, with similar implications for its protection. Sun Tzu viewed physical resistance as an extension of will, emphasizing leadership, discipline, and cohesion as essential to motivating action in combat.[63] He considered defeating an enemy without physical battle the ideal form of victory, making will a legitimate and decisive military target.[64] He warned that "an entire enemy army can be demoralized and its commander can be made to lose heart."[65] Mao Zedong's theory of protracted warfare similarly aimed to degrade the national spirit of a stronger adversary over time. General Vo Nguyen Giap operationalized this approach during the Vietnam War, by explicitly targeting the will of the U.S. military and public.[66] Soviet military thought echoed these perspectives. Field Marshal Georgy Zhukov asserted that "large-scale battles and whole wars are

[59] Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Decoding Clausewitz: A New Approach to On War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 35.
[60] B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy* (San Francisco, CA: Tannenberg Publishing, 2016), 302.
[61] Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 4.
[62] Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 261.
[63] Maj Jerry D. Garrett, *The Problem of Motivation in the Third Dimension of Combat: What's the Solution?* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army General Command and Staff College, 1991), 5.
[64] Liddell, "Operational Art and the Influence of Will," 50.
[65] Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 76.
[66] Connable et al., *Will to Fight*, 11.

won by troops which have a strong will for victory, clear goals before them, high moral standards, and devotion to the banner under which they go to battle."[67] In Afghanistan, Taliban leadership frequently relied on the strategy to sustain resistance until the U.S. political will collapsed, expediting the process with provoking overreaction and deliberate propaganda.[68]

Modern military thinkers continue to affirm the centrality of the will to fight, with more appreciation of its value on both sides than doctrine currently reflects. A 2018 Rand study characterizes it as "arguably, the single most important factor in war," and describes military effectiveness as the product of capability and will.[69] General Norman Schwarzkopf similarly argued that "if you don't have the will to fight, then, you are not going to have a very good army."[70] Former Secretary of Defense general James N. Mattis echoed this view, observing that defeat ultimately befalls the belligerent whose will collapses first.

Examined holistically, military theory demonstrates enduring recognition of the decisive role of the will to fight while simultaneously reinforcing a conceptual imbalance. Will is consistently treated as something to be attacked in the enemy rather than safeguarded within one's own force. This theoretical tendency, mirrored in doctrine and reinforced by the type of conflicts the United States has engaged in, risks the use of an unacknowledged planning assumption that the U.S. will to fight is durable, self-sustaining, and immune to erosion.

Acknowledging the Assumption

Treating the military will to fight as an assumption unintentionally obscures its vulnerability and limits planners' ability to design mitigation measures or appropriate branches or sequels. This tendency is not new. At the end of the nineteenth century, Ardant du Picq identified it as a common—and dangerous—error among military professionals. In *Battle Studies*, he criticized planners for beginning with weapons and technology, while maintaining an unquestioned belief that soldiers would perform exactly as intended.[71] More than a century later, this error still occurs in modern planning practice. Contemporary analysis reinforces du Picq's warning. The 2018 Rand study acknowledges the failure to understand and apply will to fight as a "significant vulnerability in US strategy development," yet it offers little elaboration or practical guidance.[72]

[67] Georgy Zhukov, *The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov*, trans. Jonathan Cape (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), 301.
[68] Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 457.
[69] Connable et al., *Will to Fight*, 2; and McNerney et al., *National Will to Fight*, xix.
[70] H. Norman Schwarzkopf, "Commander's Briefing: Excerpts from Schwarzkopf News Conference on Gulf War," *New York Times*, 28 February 1991.
[71] du Picq, excerpt from *Battle Studies*, 65.
[72] McNerney et al., *National Will to Fight*, 11.

Relying on a purely offensive strategy to destroy an enemy's will to fight is increasingly hazardous given the potential nature of future conflict. Future adversaries are increasingly more capable of aerial strikes, drone attacks, or executing strategic events that are likely to degrade military will to fight. Adversaries that lack this ability, particularly those confronting a numerically or technologically superior U.S. force, are likely to find alternative means to target psychological components and the will to fight. In an all-volunteer force, protracted conflict, attrition, and information operations can exert considerable influence on combat motivation. The shift to multidomain operations and great power competition, with its emphasis on technological development, platform parity, and logistics, increases the need to deliberately address the human element of will.[73] The changes in modern combat may also limit the extent to which previous lessons about the military will to fight in an all-volunteer force can be applied.

A common axiom holds that a planner should not identify problems or challenge assumptions without proposing solutions. The first step in preventing U.S. military will to fight from being an unacknowledged planning assumption is to establish a Joint definition of the will to fight that is deliberately applicable to *both* friendly and enemy forces. This would facilitate acknowledgment of its bilateral nature, encourage research, and develop an appreciation of the complex nature of the will to fight. The second is to acknowledge that U.S. military will to fight must be protected. This would rebalance the primarily offensive, enemy-focused viewpoint in current doctrine and theory. More importantly, it confronts the presence of U.S. military will to fight as an unacknowledged assumption and facilitates the planning, assessment, and collection associated with planning assumptions. Protecting the military will to fight requires exploration and discussion of options to do so.

Fortunately, the same characteristics that make military will to fight complex offer leverage points for planners at all echelons to protect it. Recognizing will to fight as a finite friendly capability does not require planners to control or more accurately influence it directly. Instead, it enables planners to shape the conditions that influence combat motivation at the operational level. Since the will to fight emerges from a complex adaptive system, operational design provides planners with leverage to potentially preserve and strengthen it. Theory and history suggest that achievable and legitimate objectives, prudent risk acceptance, deliberate manipulation of tempo, and a coherent narrative can protect and amplify combat motivation. Since protective measures are likely to have mixed (and unpredictable) effectiveness, multiple strategies may be beneficial.

[73] Emma Moore, "Attrition and the Will to Fight a Great Power War," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Winter 2019): 10.

While beyond the scope of military planners, national will to fight merits discussion because of its influential relationship with military will to fight and the interplay between the two forces. Rand defines *national will to fight* as a government's determination to sustain operations despite declining prospects and rising costs.[74] Typically, the national and military will to fight have a corresponding, reinforcing relationship. Operational success can bolster public support, while societal commitment strengthens military morale at all echelons.[75] Public support enhances military morale, recruiting, and tolerance for risk.[76] National combat motivation directly affects military operations through its influence on morale, recruiting, and tolerance for risk, extended duration, and casualties.[77] In fact, public support is sufficiently consequential that some theorists advocate adding it as a principle of war.[78] Declining public support during the Vietnam War correlated with discipline problems and a diminished sense of purpose among troops.[79] Expectations shaped by Operation Desert Storm may have further eroded public tolerance for casualties in a future great power conflict, increasing the importance of protecting the will to fight.[80] Given the importance and influence of the national will to fight, it is important to recognize the limitations of military planners, especially at the operational level. While some mitigation may be possible, planners cannot compensate for all fluctuations or shortcomings in the national will to fight.

Designing Protection Operations

Objective

The objective, or end state, of an operation is one of the most powerful determinants of the will to fight, shaping both expectations of success and tolerance for sacrifice. *Joint* Planning, JP 5-0, defines the objective as "a clearly defined and achievable aim toward which an operation is directed."[81] An end state with these characteristics promotes unity of effort and reduces risk.[82] When person-

[74] McNerney et al., *National Will to Fight*, xii.
[75] McNerney et al., *National Will to Fight*, 6, 39.
[76] R. Eimers-van Nes, "The Will to Fight: Evaluation of Dutch Morale Research during Several Missions Since 1997," in *Human Dimensions in Military Operations: Military Leaders' Strategies for Addressing Stress and Psychological Support*, Paper 27 (meeting proceedings, RTO-MP-HFM-134, Neuilly-sur-Seine, France, 2006), 21-7-27–10.
[77] LtCol Jeff Brown, "The Nature of National Will in Operations Other-than-War" (master's thesis, National Defense University, National War College, Washington, DC, 1998), 2.
[78] Russell W. Glenn, "No More Principles of War?," *Parameters* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 58, https://doi.org/10.55540/0031-1723.1863.
[79] Anthony Kellett, *Combat Motivation: The Behaviour of Soldiers in Battle* (Boston, MA: Kluwer, 1982), 178.
[80] Moore, "Attrition and the Will to Fight a Great Power War," 10.
[81] *Joint Planning*, GL–8.
[82] *Operations*, 2025, 34.

nel perceive an objective as achievable, the will to fight increases. Clausewitz observed that "the desire for peace on either side will rise and fall with the probability of further successes and the amount of effort these would require."[83] Accordingly, planners must ensure objectives are contextually realistic. British field marshal Sir William Slim reinforced this relationship in *Defeat into Victory,* noting that soldiers must believe not only that the objective is attainable but that the organization pursuing it is competent and effective.[84] This can be done at echelon, even if higher objectives are ambiguous or undefined.

Clarity further enhances the protective value of the objective. The sacrifices an organization is willing to accept, both in magnitude and duration, depend on the perceived value of the objective and the precision with which it is articulated.[85] A clearly defined enemy promotes cohesion and unity of effort at both the military and national levels.[86] Without this clarity, *Operations*, ADP 3-0, warns that missions lose focus and purpose.[87] Modern conflict complicates this requirement. Nonstate actors, nonattributional actions, and competition below the level of armed conflict obscure enemy identification, as experienced in Afghanistan, Korea, and Vietnam. As political scientist John E. Mueller notes, compared to World War II, modern adversaries appear less morally distinct, progress is harder to measure, and war termination is often ambiguous.[88] Operational clarity may be easier to achieve than strategic but efforts should be made for them to be nested and consistent.

Legitimacy, or *casus belli*, further shapes the will to fight. *Joint Planning*, JP 5-0, describes *legitimacy* as a "key factor, based on the actual and perceived legality, morality, and rightness of the actions from the various perspectives of relevant actors, stakeholders, and other interested audiences."[89] Planners can influence both cognitive legitimacy, or feasibility, and normative legitimacy, defined as the perceived value of the objective relative to its costs.[90] Ideology plays a central role in normative legitimacy. As Slim argued, a worthy cause must be positive and compelling, not merely defensive or oppositional.[91] Legitimacy

[83] Clausewitz, *On War*, 92.
[84] Field Marshal Viscount Slim, *Defeat into Victory: Battling Japan in Burma and India, 1942–1945* (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Cooper Square Press, 2000), 182–83.
[85] Clausewitz, *On War*, 92.
[86] Moore, "Attrition and the Will to Fight a Great Power War," 15.
[87] *Operations*, 2019, 2–6.
[88] John E. Mueller, "Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam," *American Political Science Review* 65, no. 2 (June 1971): 358, https://doi.org/10.2307/1954454.
[89] *Joint Planning*, 2020, A-4.
[90] LtCol Christopher M. McGowan, *Understanding and Accounting for National Will in Strategies that Use Military Force* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: School of Advanced Military Studies, U.S. Army General Command and Staff College, 2015), 23.
[91] Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 97.

increases when an organization perceives a direct threat to something it values, such as territory or ideals.[92] When national war aims are clear and imminent, military and society tend to unify; when aims are diffuse or ambiguous, cohesion erodes.[93] Clausewitz emphasized that powerful and inspiring motives align political and military objectives and intensify commitment.[94] A clearly defined, ideologically aligned objective is therefore among the most effective levers for sustaining the will to fight.

The role of ideology calls for particular attention in an all-volunteer force. Popular narratives that emphasize fighting solely for comradeship are insufficient.[95] While interpersonal loyalty and unit cohesion matter, research suggests that modern soldiers are educated, reflective and motivated by ideological commitments.[96] Studies of the Iraq War (2003–11) indicate that freedom, democracy, and liberty remain salient motivators.[97] Reliance on "brotherhood" alone ignores the heterogeneity of the force and the social independence of today's soldiers.[98] Enabled by technology, modern servicemembers maintain identities more independent from their military service than earlier generations. As a result, aligning the military end state with organizational identity is critical to strengthening combat motivation.

Alliances and international organizations further enhance legitimacy. Rand finds that strong allies improve a state's ability to sustain combat through shared resources and increased confidence.[99] While establishment of these relationships occurs at high echelons, operational planners can influence how effectively allies and partners are integrated into operations. Exercising and integrating bilateral relationships and coalition partners can strengthen legitimacy.[100] Coalition warfare and United Nations' authorization increase public support, as demonstrated during the First Gulf War.[101] General Schwarzkopf recognized this, noting that "we had no less than nine United Nations resolutions authorizing our actions, and we had the support of virtually the entire world." The resolutions "provided the legal basis for our military operations in the Gulf" and "were clear in their intent: kick the Iraqi military force out of Kuwait."[102] As operations

[92] Richard Holmes, *Acts of War: The Behavior of Men in Battle* (New York: Free Press, 1985), 277.
[93] Kellett, *Combat Motivation*, 175.
[94] Clausewitz, *On War*, 88.
[95] du Picq, excerpt from *Battle Studies*, 122.
[96] Col Thomas A. Kolditz et al., *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2003), 20.
[97] Kolditz et al., *Why They Fight*, vii.
[98] du Picq, excerpt from *Battle Studies*, 122.
[99] McNerney et al., *National Will to Fight*, 31.
[100] McNerney et al., *National Will to Fight*, 52.
[101] Moore, "Attrition and the Will to Fight a Great Power War," 15.
[102] Gen H. Norman Schwarzkopf, *It Doesn't Take a Hero* (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 92.

shift toward theaters with fewer traditional allies, legitimacy and clarity of the end state become even more critical.[103]

The legitimacy, feasibility, and partnered nature of an operational objective has the potential to influence national will to fight by influencing public perception of these components within the overall war effort. These events are often unpredictable and have varied impact on the military will to fight. Extreme, highly publicized events, such as My Lai Massacre (1968) or the Battle of Mogadishu (1993), had direct degrading impact on the national will to fight and only an indirect, time-lagged impact on military will to fight.[104] The Tet Offensive, and more importantly, the U.S. response to it, impacted both nation and military will to fight. At the national and military levels, it increased disillusionment and confidence in the ability to achieve military and nation objectives and degraded confidence in leadership.[105] For a positive example, Operation Neptune Spear in 2011, the killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, positively increased both national and military will.[106] Given the potential for implications on the national and military will to fight, it is helpful for planner to acknowledge what General Frederick C. Weyand observed: "when the Army is committed the American people are committed, when the American people lose their commitment, it is futile to try to keep the Army committed."[107]

Risk

To achieve a clearly defined objective, planners must accept prudent risk while mitigating events that degrade combat motivation. *Joint Planning* defines risk as "the probability and consequence of an event causing harm to something valued."[108] The relationship between casualties and the military will to fight is complex. In some cases, losses increase friendly resolve; in others, they strengthen enemy determination and undermine legitimacy. Unexpected losses degrade the will to fight more rapidly than predicted losses of equal magnitude. A study of the Korean and Vietnam Wars found that each time U.S. casualties increased by a factor of 10, popular support declined by approximately 15 percentage

[103] Moore, "Attrition and the Will to Fight a Great Power War," 15.
[104] Howard Jones, *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 401; and Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999), 337.
[105] Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 1988), 714
[106] Mark Owen and Kevin Maurer, *No Easy Day: The Autobiography of a Navy Seal* (New York: Dutton, an imprint of Penguin, 2012), 300.
[107] Lawrence E. Key, *Cultivating National Will: An Introduction to National Will*, Maxwell Paper no. 5 (Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: Air War College, 1996), 1.
[108] *Joint Planning*, 2025, J–3.

points.[109] With great power competition, high casualty rates pose a central risk, with attrition inversely affecting U.S. willingness to fight. After decades of asymmetric conflict, U.S. forces and the American public have become unaccustomed to high attrition, making risk aversion the norm. Future conflicts are unlikely to permit delayed entry, proxy warfare, or reliance on standoff capabilities. High early casualties may be especially damaging to an all-volunteer force. As researcher Emma Moore notes, it is now reasonable to question "whether a highly professional, voluntary, innovative military can overcome huge losses and remain an effective fighting force."[110]

Once significant attrition occurs, rotation and replacement policies become critical. Research indicates that rotating larger cohesive units preserves morale more effectively than individual replacements.[111] Defense analyst Anthony Kellett found that during the Korean and Vietnam Wars, the arrival of individual replacements, especially immediately before or during combat, had "a negative effect on the group psyche and cohesion."[112] Predictable rotation schedules provided soldiers with achievable goals and preserve the will to fight.[113] This finding echoes du Picq's insistence on maintaining stable combat groups so that "comrades in peacetime maneuvers shall be comrades in war."[114]

Tempo

Tempo, defined by *Operations* as "the relative speed and rhythm of military operations over time with respect to the enemy," shapes the will to fight and creates opportunity for surprise.[115] Former Army planner Robert R. Leonhard elaborates that the temporal characteristics of war include duration, frequency, sequence, and opportunity.[116] These factors are interdependent and mutually reinforcing, with the potential to both influence and be influenced by will to fight. Unsurprisingly, high operational frequency (defined as the number of engagements, maneuvers, or operations that occur per unit of time) risks institutional fatigue and strains coalition cohesion. As Leonhard summarizes, "frequency can threaten disintegration of a military or political establishment."[117] Similarly, extremely low frequency, or extended periods of time without any events, can cause a decline the military will to fight. Elevated levels of combat

[109] Mueller, "Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam," 365.
[110] Moore, "Attrition and the Will to Fight a Great Power War," 14.
[111] Kellett, *Combat Motivation*, 323.
[112] Kellett, *Combat Motivation*, 323.
[113] Kellett, *Combat Motivation*, 127.
[114] du Picq, excerpt from *Battle Studies*, 122.
[115] *Operations*, 2019, 2–8.
[116] Robert R. Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes: Time and the Art of War*, 2d ed. (n.p.: self-published, 2017), 14–15.
[117] Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes*, 227.

motivation may shorten conflict duration by increasing the intensity and effectiveness of combat. Planners may be able to modulate temporal characteristics to impact duration, overall risk and intensity and indirectly influence the will to fight. As Clausewitz observed, tempo and objective are closely related, with the willingness to sustain effort dependent on perceived legitimacy and ideological alignment. Wars with vague or incoherent ideology tend to be "among the bloodiest and longest in history."[118]

Planners should think in terms of available time and how best to use it, rather than designing an operation and then assessing how long it will take.[119] This is due in part to the impact operational tempo can have on the national will to fight and vice versa. The U.S. public favors short wars with visible, measurable progress.[120] As duration extends without perceptible progress, individual and collective meaning erodes, accelerating declines in both national and military will to fight. Historically, U.S. conflicts against state actors have been relatively brief, with Vietnam as a notable exception. Protracted wars tend to favor the defenders, increase uncertainty, and invite disinformation.[121] Extended conflicts also allow adversaries to adapt, develop new tactics, and exploit time. Mao's theory of protracted war underscores this risk.[122] Prior to China's entry into the Korean War, U.S. public support for the war was relatively high, correlating with expectations of a short conflict.[123] When the war "dragged on with seemingly no conclusion in sight," U.S. combat motivation eroded.[124] Time available to planners may also be influenced by election cycles and the desire for candidates to show progress to their constituents.

Narrative

Operational design alone is insufficient to protect the will to fight without a coherent narrative that translates plans into meaning. Narrative links objective, risk, and tempo to purpose, potentially shaping both national and military will to fight. Internal to the military, narrative enables soldiers to understand why they fight and how their actions contribute to success. Externally, it sustains national will to fight by reducing civil-military distance and legitimizing continued effort.

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[118] Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes*, 72.
[119] Leonhard, *Fighting by Minutes*, 224.
[120] Key, *Cultivating National Will*, 18.
[121] Clausewitz, *On War*, 597.
[122] E. Margaret Phillips, "National Will from a Threat Perspective," *Military Review* 90, no. 5 (October 2010): 34.
[123] Mueller, "Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam," 361.
[124] Donald Stoker, *Why America Loses Wars: Limited War and US Strategy from the Korean War to the Present* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 11, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009220897.

Information strengthens morale by shaping perception. Soldiers should understand the desired end state, expected duration, and associated risks of an operation.[125] British field marshal Bernard Law Montgomery argued that "every single soldier must know, before he goes into battle, how the little battle he is to fight fits into the larger picture."[126] General Viscount Slim institutionalized this principle through "Information Rooms," that displayed operational orders, intelligence reports, and news from home and were open to all ranks. Slim credited these rooms with improved performance by fostering trust, awareness, and inclusion.[127]

Conversely, information gaps breed rumor and pessimism, degrading morale and combat motivation.[128] Soldier and organization motivation is complex and related to the shared ideology of the objective [129] Reflecting on World War II, General William C. Westmoreland argued that the U.S. Army often failed to provide soldiers with sufficient information to justify the risks they were asked to assume.[130] During the Korean War, infantrymen frequently expressed frustration over their limited situational awareness, often overestimating enemy strength.[131] This pattern is not new. During the 1862 Peninsular Campaign, Union forces consistently overestimated Confederate numbers, contributing to operational paralysis.[132] As Clausewitz observed, in the absence of reliable information, "men are always more inclined to pitch their estimate of the enemy's strength too high than too low."[133]

Effective narratives therefore communicate purpose, duration, and ideological justification for risk. When Army leaders concluded that traditional lectures failed to motivate disengaged troops, Army Chief of Staff general George C. Marshall commissioned filmmaker Frank Capra to produce a seven-part documentary series explaining "why we are fighting, and the principles for which we are fighting."[134] Similarly, when General Matthew B. Ridgway assumed command of the Eighth Army in Korea, he restored combat motivation by reasserting control of the narrative. His widely distributed memorandum addressed the questions of "Why are we here?" and "What are

[125] Sean Childs, "Soldier Morale: Defending a Core Military Capability," *Security Challenges* 12, no. 2 (2016): 50.
[126] Bernard Law Montgomery, *The Memoirs of Field Marshal Montgomery* (London: Fontana Books, 1960), 88.
[127] Slim, *Defeat into Victory*, 98.
[128] Kellett, *Combat Motivation*, 227.
[129] Kolditz et al., *Why They Fight*, vii.
[130] Kellett, *Combat Motivation*, 227.
[131] Kellett, *Combat Motivation*, 227.
[132] Drew Thompson, "The Peninsula Campaign: McClellan's Strategic Masterstroke and Tactical Blunder," American Battlefield Trust, 27 April 2021.
[133] Clausewitz, *On War*, 85.
[134] Kolditz et al., *Why They Fight*, 1.

we fighting for?"—clarity that proved instrumental in stabilizing morale.[135]

In the modern environment of rapid information exchange, military and national narrative are impossible to separate. Therefore, planners should make efforts for consistent messaging at all echelons and to the public. When planning public affairs, it is also helpful to remember that as historian John Lewis Gaddis notes, there is growing "disconnection between the security to which we've become accustomed and the means by which we obtained it."[136] This gap has widened as public familiarity with the military has declined, fatigue from the Global War on Terrorism has set in, and the force has become increasingly socially isolated.[137] A coherent external narrative can mitigate these trends by fostering legitimacy, understanding, and shared responsibility.

Regardless of audience, narrative must remain truthful to be credible. Exposure of deception or fabrication rapidly undermines both military and national will. Cultivating the will to fight does not require manipulation, but clear articulation of objectives, rationale, and anticipated duration.[138] Coherent narratives also counter to adversary disinformation.[139] Since public attention naturally declines over time, narrative construction must be continuous and adaptive, incorporating plans for sustainment and reengagement.[140] As Kellett observed, a soldier's will to fight erodes not only from battlefield hardship, but from "his sense of war-weariness or of flagging support at home."[141]

The Korean War illustrates the consequences of narrative failure. Initial U.S. involvement was clearly justified: supporting South Korea against North Korean aggression within a legitimate international framework. As the war progressed, however, the United States failed to define a clear military end state or even an identifiable enemy. Both soldiers and civilians struggled to justify the continued sacrifice. The father of Private Kenneth R. Shadrick, the first U.S. soldier killed in Korea, could only conclude that his son was "fighting against some kind of government."[142] Elevated risk and mounting casualties, absent a coherent and credible narrative, accelerated the collapse of the will to fight. In

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[135] Kellett, *Combat Motivation*, 252.

[136] John Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 32.

[137] Amy Schafer, *Generations of War: The Rise of the Warrior Caste & the All-Volunteer Force*, Military, Veterans & Society Series (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2017), 9, 3.

[138] Key, "Cultivating National Will," 2.

[139] Elsa B. Kania and Emma Moore, "The US Is Unprepared to Mobilize for Great Power Conflict," *Defense One*, 21 July 2019.

[140] Brown, "The Nature of National Will in Operations Other-than-War," 5.

[141] Kellett, *Combat Motivation*, 177.

[142] Susan A. Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 151, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195381351.001.0001.

this case, narrative failure did not merely fail to protect combat motivation, but rather actively hastened its erosion.

Conclusion

Military will to fight, defined here as the cognitive capacity to engage in and sustain combat operations in pursuit of a unit's mission, is neither permanent nor inexhaustible. However, without a doctrinal definition and the primarily offensive focus in doctrine, theory, and practice, there is a propensity for the presence of U.S. military will to fight to be an unacknowledged assumption. Allow it to remain as such constitutes a systemic vulnerability in military planning. When the military will to fight is instead recognized *and defined* as a critical friendly capability, planners can deliberately design operations to preserve and strengthen it. Relying primarily on the destruction of enemy will as a proxy for protecting U.S. combat motivation is insufficient in modern warfare, particularly against adversaries that deliberately target psychological vulnerabilities or are capable of inflicting large numbers of casualties.

Although military theory and doctrine consistently affirm the importance of the will to fight, this recognition has not translated into commensurate understanding or institutional emphasis. U.S. doctrine neither defines the concept nor provides meaningful guidance for its protection. Instead, military thought and resourcing continue to favor quantifiable and technological components of combat power. This bias has contributed to a poor historical record of assessing and safeguarding the will to fight and has reinforced a doctrinal emphasis on eroding enemy motivation rather than protecting U.S. combat motivation. Future adversaries are likely to exploit this imbalance by targeting the psychological resilience of both the force and the population.

If planners are willing to acknowledge the military will to fight as an assumption rather than a guarantee, operational design offers practical mechanisms for its preservation at the operational level. Clear, achievable, and ideologically aligned objectives increase combat motivation, particularly when reinforced by legitimacy derived from allies, partners, and a clearly defined enemy. Risk must be deliberately managed and communicated, especially given the attrition probable in great power competition. Tempo, particularly duration and frequency, also exerts a powerful influence. Shorter more decisive conflicts tend to preserve higher levels of the will to fight, while protracted operations erode it.

Equally important is the reinforcing relationship between military and national will, mediated through narrative. Military and national will are mutually supporting; degradation of one accelerates the erosion of the other. Information is essential to sustaining both. When individuals understand how their sacrifices contribute to a meaningful objective, will is strengthened; when information is

absent, rumors and pessimism fill the void. Effective narratives must therefore be coherent, truthful, and sustained over time.

Protecting the military will to fight is neither simple nor guaranteed. As Clausewitz observed, "one must marvel at the fact that heart and strength do not give out more often, and at the way in which the power of an idea can, by its lasting effect, summon up and support incredible exertions in human beings."[143] That endurance however, is not automatic. By rejecting the assumption that the will to fight is inherent and deliberately incorporating its protection into planning and operational design, the U.S. military can better preserve the human foundation necessary to fight and win the nation's wars.

[143] Clausewitz, *On War*, 339.

Beyond Willingness to Fight

The Individual's Defense Relationship Theory as a Comprehensive Framework for Citizen Commitment to National Defense and Security A Review Article

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Abstract: This article argues that research on citizens' willingness to defend their country, often referred to as "defense will" and "will to fight," must move beyond narrow, binary measures of armed resistance. The individual defense relationship (IDR) theory provides a multidimensional analytical framework to understand how individuals position themselves in relation to the state, society, national defense, and comprehensive security. IDR specifies three framing factors (belonging, worth, and threat) and four positioning factors (attitude, trust, competence, and agency) to clarify the cognitive, social, and emotional mechanisms of commitment. By incorporating nonmilitary forms of defense and a comprehensive security perspective, the theory expands the scope of citizen roles and agency beyond military defense. This article also discusses how IDR has been operationalized qualitatively (e.g., thematic interviews) and quantitatively (e.g., standardized surveys validated with factor analysis) and shows how the approach applies across conscription-based and all-volunteer force contexts. IDR provides a rigorous tool to assess citizen agency in contemporary environments characterized by hybrid, cyber, and other subconventional threats.

Keywords: citizenship, civil-military relations, comprehensive security, defense will, individual defense relationship theory, IDR, national defense, total defense, will to fight

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Introduction

The willingness to defend one's country, often proxied as a "defense will" or "will to fight," has long been a significant topic in political science and military sociology.[1] Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 altered the European security environment and intensified scrutiny of how scholars and policymakers gauge citizen commitment, particularly in the Nordic and the Baltic region that buffers the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union against Russian coercion. In this context of change within the military, security and geopolitical environment, traditional survey questions of defense will typically condense the phenomenon to binary judgments about armed resistance or personal readiness to fight. While such approaches remain informative, they understate the diverse ways in which citizens relate to national defense and contribute the national preparedness in an era of hybrid warfare, cyber operations, disinformation, economic coercion, and large scale of subconventional threats (i.e., gray zone warfare).

The traditional Nordic model of defense will, which has typically centered on citizens' willingness to protect their nation, has faced significant criticism for its vague definitions and methodological limitations.[2] The tradition of quantitative research measuring national willingness to defend has often crystallized around two main types of survey questions. The first type, concerning general national defense will, often asks (by national perspective): "If [your country] were attacked, should citizens, in your opinion, defend the country militarily in all situations, even if the outcome seemed uncertain?[3] This formation of the survey question is based on the original Swedish version used since the 1950s: *Anser Ni att vi bör göra väpnat motstånd även om utgången för oss ter sig oviss?*[4]

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[1] Māris Andžāns and Andris Sprūds, "Three-Decade Evolution of the Willingness to Defend One's Own Country: The Case of the Baltic States," *Lithuanian Annual Strategic Review* 18 (2020): 195–220, https://doi.org/10.47459/lasr.2020.18.9; and Ralph Sundberg and Gina Gustavsson, "Defending the National Identity: Exploring the Links Between a Multidimensional National Identity Concept and the Willingness to Defend One's Country," *European Security* (August 2025): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/09662839.2025.2540091.

[2] Jarkko Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina: Asevelvollisten sitoutuminen maanpuolustukseen ja sen eri tehtäviin" [Citizens as Soldiers and Defenders of the Country: The Commitment of Conscripts to National Defense and Its Various Tasks] (PhD diss., National Defence University, 2019); and Risto Sinkko, "Maanpuolustustahto Asevelvollisen Koulutuksen ja Palveluksen Onnistumista Selittävänä Tekijänä" [The Will to Defend the Country as a Factor Explaining the Success of Conscripts' Training and Service] (PhD diss., National Defence University, 2015).

[3] *Finns' Opinions on Foreign and Security Policy, National Defence and Security*, Bulletins and Reports 2024:6 (Helsinki: Advisory Board for Defence Information Ministry of Defence, 2024), 18–20.

[4] *Psykologiskt Försvar: Betänkande Avgivet av Kommittén för Utredning om det Psykologiska Försvaret*, Statens Offentligar Utredningar 1953:27 (Stockholm: Emil Kihlstroms Tryckeriaktiebolag, 1953). English translation: Do you believe that we should resist with armed force even if the outcome seems uncertain for us?

The second type, concerning individual participation and willingness in integrated security asks (by national perspective): "If [your country] were attacked, would you personally be willing to participate in various national defence duties according to your abilities and skills?"[5] or "If there were a war that involved [your country], would you be willing to fight for your country?"[6] The question of personal participation includes also the perspectives of individuals' agency in national defense, total defense, or comprehensive security.[7]

Traditional survey questions and variables on national defense have been developed within the context of Nordic welfare states (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden) and have been widely used in various countries. These questions have proven effective as variables in citizen surveys, public opinion polls, and in various types of polls collected for different purposes.[8] In states where the defense system is based on (universal) conscription, the relationship between the armed forces, society, and citizens is more closely intertwined than in countries that rely on occupational contracts to recruit personnel for their all-voluntary military forces.[9] Within the context of conscription, citizens' willingness to defend their country plays a crucial role in supporting the armed forces, influencing public opinion, endurance the defense system, and shaping the readiness of citizen-soldiers to participate in national defense.[10]

This review article advances the claim that modern national resilience is better explained when "defense will" is conceptualized as a dynamic relationship rather than a single attitude. Building on prior Finnis and Nordic work, the IDR theory introduced by the author in 2019, the article reconceptualizes the domain by specifying the social, cognitive, and emotional mechanisms that

[5] *Finns' Opinions on Foreign and Security Policy, National Defence and Security*, 20.

[6] "Fewer People Are Willing to Fight for Their Country Compared to Ten Years Ago," Gallup International Association, 11 March 2024.

[7] *Security Strategy for Society: Government Resolution* (Helsinki: Security Committee Finnish Government, 2025); and Vesa Valtonen and Minna Branders, "Tracing the Finnish Comprehensive Security Model," in *Nordic Societal Security: Convergence and Divergence*, ed. Sebastian Larsson and Mark Rhinard (London: Routledge, 2020), 93–96, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003045533.

[8] Timo Rantama, Jarkko Kosonen, and Torik Sieberg, "Evaluating the Strength and Internal Consistency of Positioning Factors in the Individual's Defence Relationship Theory: Implications for Survey-Based Research on Defence Will," (forthcoming).

[9] Maya Hadar and Teemu Häkkinen, "Conscription and Willingness to Defend as Cornerstones of National Defense in Israel and Finland," *Journal of Political & Military Sociology* 47, no. 2 (2021): 188–218; and Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina."

[10] Jarkko Kosonen and Juha Mälkki, "The Finnish Model of Conscription: A Successful Policy to Organize National Defence," in *Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries: Cases, Lessons, Challenges*, ed. Caroline de la Porte et al. (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022), 456–73, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192856296.003.0022; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; and Sinkko, "Maanpuolustustahto Asevelvollisen Koulutuksen ja Palveluksen Onnistumista Selittävänä Tekijänä."

underpin perceptions and commitment to the state, national defense and its comprehensive security.[11]

IDR connects attitudes toward armed defense with broader experiences of social belonging, the perceived worth of the state and its institutions, and perceptions of threat that extend beyond conventional war. This analytical depth is essential because a citizen's commitment to defense is inextricably linked to the social contract; if the state fails to provide essential security and services or maintain legitimacy, the individual's reciprocal motivation to defend that state may diminish.[12]

The strategic necessity of this nuanced understanding of IDR is underscored for instance by the total defense model, comprehensive security framework, and the resistance operating concept. Total defense and comprehensive security models are concerned with the overall security of the state and society, where armed defense is just one component of security. Both models emphasize the significance and agency of various societal authorities and citizens in addressing different threats. Total defense encompasses all sectors of society, including the military, authorities, citizens, and infrastructure. It considers not only military threats but also cyber threats, economic crises, and internal security disturbances in relation to national security. It highlights active citizenship in supporting preparedness and defense.[13] Comprehensive security, conversely, approaches security as a broader concept, incorporating factors such as the national economy, health, environment, education, and other societal sectors as contributors to security and influencing factors. This model fosters cooperation across different

[11] Jarkko Kosonen, Alisa Puustinen, and Teemu Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen–Siviilipalvelusvelvollisten ja Reservistä Eroavien Kokemuksia Asevelvollisuudesta ja Hyvinvointivaltiosta" [From Will to Defend to Relationship with National Defense: Experiences of Conscripts in Alternative Service and of Those Resigning from the Reserve, and Their Views on Conscription and the Welfare State], *Sosiologia* 56, no. 3 (2019): 300–19; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; and Teija Sederholm, Rasmus Rannikko, and Mikael Salo, "Total Defence Model at the Heart of Finland's National Defence and Resilience," in *European Total Defence: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Gjermund Forfang Rongved (London: Routledge, 2025), 115–34, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003497370-7.

[12] Otto C. Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: Joint Special Operations University Press, 2020), 32, 66; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; and Alisa Puustinen, Jarkko Kosonen, and Teemu Tallberg, "Kansalaisuuskäsitykset ja asevelvollisuus Suomessa" [Concepts of Citizenship and Military Service in Finland], *Tiede ja ase* 76 (2018): 98–125.

[13] Jan Angström and Kristin Ljungkvist, "Unpacking the Varying Strategic Logics of Total Defence," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 47, no. 4 (2024): 498–522, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2023.2260958; Ieva Gajauskaite, "Defining Societal Resilience as a Defensive Power," in *Democratic Resilience in the Baltics*, vol. 2, *Baltic Security and Defense*, ed. Rasa Smaliukienė, David Schultz, and Vidmante Giedraitytė (Cham: Springer, 2026), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-032-10146-4_5; and Kristin Ljungkvist, "The Military-Strategic Rationality of Hybrid Warfare: Everyday Total Defence under Strategic NonPeace in the Case of Sweden," *European Journal of International Security* 9, no. 4 (2024): 533–52, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2024.18.

societal sectors to enhance and maintain the resilience and stability of society.[14] Within the context of the resistance operating concept (ROC), comprehensive resistance by the civilian population refers to a national, whole-of-society effort, in which the population is not merely a passive target, but rather the primary actor in resistance. This approach is grounded in national resilience, or the population's will and ability to withstand external pressure and restore sovereignty in terms of foreign occupation.[15]

Following the extensive dialogue on defense willingness at the 2024 European Research Group on Military and Society (ERGOMAS) Conference in Stockholm, this review article introduces IDR theory in English to an international audience and demonstrates its relevance as an extension of the traditional concept of defense will.[16] These discussions have become central to the ongoing academic dialogue on national defense, making it particularly timely and relevant to contribute to the U.S. academic literature with this review on modern military sociological research on national willingness to defend and will to fight.[17]

The article seeks to answer the following research question: How can the IDR theory serve as a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the multidimensional nature of citizen commitment to national defense in contemporary military and societal contexts? By synthesizing modern military sociology with the operational requirements of national resistance, this article contributes to the academic debate on maintaining sovereignty in an increasingly changing security environment in the world.

Individual's Defense Relationship Theory

IDR extends the traditional "defense will" and "willingness to defend" research by moving from a one-dimensional, linear attitudinal measure toward a multidimensional and comprehensive analytical framework that structures the individual's relationship with the state, society, national defense, and security.[18] It

[14] *Security Strategy for Society: Government Resolution*; Sederholm, Rannikko, and Salo, "Total Defence Model at the Heart of Finland's National Defence and Resilience"; and Vesa Valtonen and Minna Branders, "Tracing the Finnish Comprehensive Security Model," 93–96.

[15] Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept*.

[16] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Ilona Bontenbal, Jarkko Kosonen, and Reetta Riikonen, "The National Defense Relationship of Military Service Recruits with a Migrant Background" (forthcoming).

[17] Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2018), https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2341; and Michael J. McNerney et al., *National Will to Fight: Why Some States Keep Fighting and Others Don't* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2018), https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2477.

[18] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; and Sederholm, Rannikko, and Salo, "Total Defence Model at the Heart of Finland's National Defence and Resilience."

separates (a) framing factors that shape an individual's orientation to state and society from (b) positioning factors that capture how a person locates themselves within national defense and its security.[19] In terms of understanding the individual's relationship with national defense, the theory recognizes that commitment to national defense and security is not merely a static attitude toward conventional warfare, but also encompasses social, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. The theory is deliberately inclusive, encompassing classical national and total defense along with nonmilitary forms of defense, civil protection, and preparedness activities across the comprehensive security field. Consequently, IDR remains applicable when threats manifest as cyber operations, disinformation, economic shocks, public-health crises, or environmental hazards rather than armed invasion.[20]

An individual's defense relationship is built on a set of framing factors, including perception of belonging to society and the country (belonging), perception of one's country as worth defending (worth), and perception of threats to society and the ability to respond to them (threats).[21] The individual is positioned within national defense through positioning factors such as attitudes, trust, competence, and agency.[22] This framework broadens the understanding of how citizens locate themselves within the field of national defense, for example, on the basis of their knowledge, skills, or perceived self-efficacy.

Framing Factors

The model posits three main factors that frame an individual's defense relationship.

- **Belonging:** This factor refers to an individual's felt of membership and sense of belonging in the political community, society and country. Belonging includes perceptions of fairness, inclusion, cohesion, and reciprocity that sustain legitimacy and readiness to contribute. The factor encompasses trust in societal systems and institutions, and the

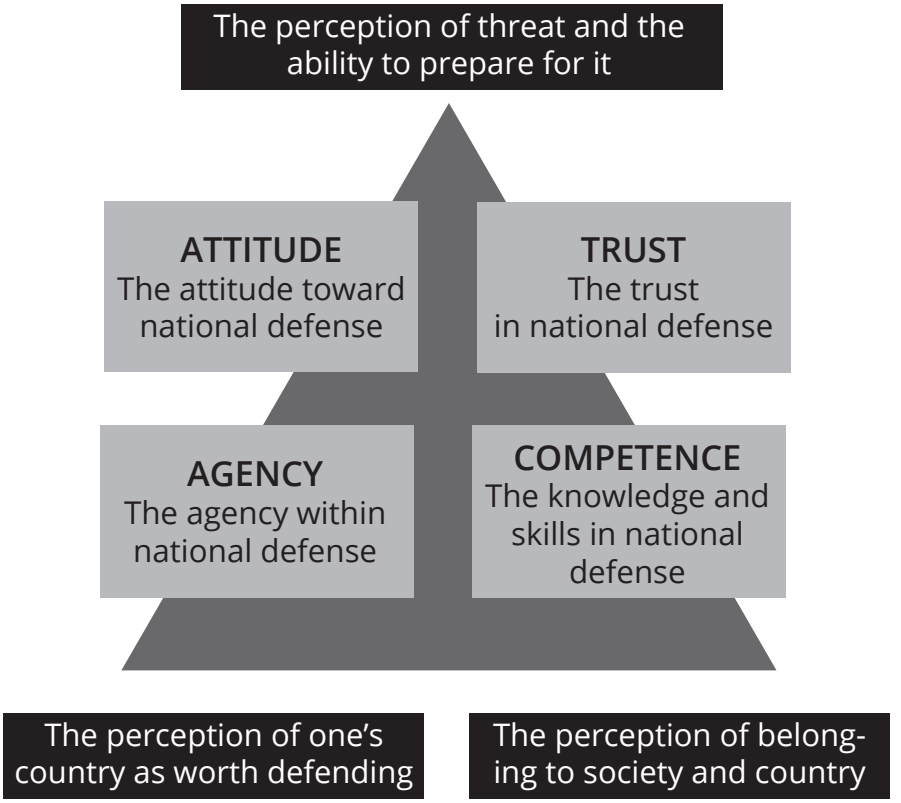
[19] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; with the English translation referencing also Einar L. Opedal, "The Will to Defend: Exploring Finnish Political Efforts to Influence the Will to Defend the Country" (master's thesis, Norwegian Defence University College, 2023).

[20] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen."

[21] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; and Pasi Jalkanen, A. T. Pulkka, and T. Norri-Sederholm, "Maanpuolustussuhde: Monipuolisempi näkökulma maanpuolustukseen" [Individual's Defense Relationship: A More Comprehensive Perspective on National Defense], in *Maanpuolustustahto Suomessa*, ed. Teemu Häkkinen, Miina Kaarkoski, and Jouni Tilli (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2020), 196–216.

[22] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; and Jalkanen, Pulkka, and Norri-Sederholm, "Maanpuolustussuhde."

Figure 1. Individual's defense relationship (IDR) theory



Source: adapted and translated from Jarkko Kosonen, Alisa Puustinen, and Teemu Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen–Siviilipalvelusvelvollisten ja Reservistä Eroavien Kokemuksia Asevelvollisuudesta ja Hyvinvointivaltiosta" [From Will to Defend to Relationship with National Defense: Experiences of Conscripts in Alternative Service and of Those Resigning from the Reserve, and Their Views on Conscription and the Welfare State], *Sosiologia* 56, no. 3 (2019): 61.

belief that the state fairly represents and protects its citizens' interests. Unlike traditional models that might stress societal structures within a welfare state, the IDR model prioritizes individual agency, action, and commitment to societal values, highlighting freedom of choice and self-interest.[23]

- **Worth:** This factor reflects an individual's perceived value of the state and country and their order as worth defending. Worth is shaped by their trust in the defense system, the integrity of democratic institu-

[23] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; Jalkanen, Pulkka, and Norri-Sederholm, "Maanpuolustussuhde"; and Bontenbal, Kosonen, and Riikonen, "The National Defense Relationship of Military Service Recruits with a Migrant Background."

tions and the quality of essential services, such as healthcare, education, and social security. Declines in these services provision or pronounced societal polarization can depress the perceived worth of the state.[24]

- **Threat:** This factor involves individuals' perceptions and awareness of risks and threats facing society or country and assessment of capacity to respond to them. Threat perceptions draw on direct experience as well as mediated understanding of military, hybrid, economic, epidemiological, and ecological hazards.[25]

Positioning Factors

There are four key factors that position the individual toward national defense. These factors are shaped, developed, and mutable at a personal level. Through these factors, the individual engages in dialogue about their relationship with national defense and the meanings it assumes. The defense relationship is not static, but subject to continuous, process-like change at the individual level, guided by the individual's actions and social interactions.[26]

- **Attitude toward national defense:** This factor reflects an individual's stance (or disposition) regarding national defense, the armed forces, conscription and related service, and the legitimate use of military force, including attitudes toward weapons and killing. Attitudes range from supportive to critical and shape whether an individual perceives mandatory service as a state-imposed compulsion, a socionormative obligation, or a personal opportunity.[27]
- **Trust in national defense institutions and capabilities:** This factor encompasses confidence and trust in the various elements of national defense, from personal efficacy in facing security threats to confidence in the nation's defense capabilities during various crises. It also includes trust in the defense policy management, shaped by experiences,

[24] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; Jalkanen, Pulkka, and Norri-Sederholm, "Maanpuolustussuhde"; and Bontenbal, Kosonen, and Riikonen, "The National Defense Relationship of Military Service Recruits with a Migrant Background."

[25] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; and Bontenbal, Kosonen, and Riikonen, "The National Defense Relationship of Military Service Recruits with a Migrant Background."

[26] Jalkanen, Pulkka, and Norri-Sederholm, "Maanpuolustussuhde"; Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; and Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina," 59–67.

[27] Jalkanen, Pulkka, and Norri-Sederholm, "Maanpuolustussuhde"; Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina," 59–67; Opedal, "The Will to Defend"; and Timo Rantama, Jarkko Kosonen, and Torik Sieberg, "Evaluating the Strength and Internal Consistency of Positioning Factors in the Individual's Defence Relationship Theory: Implications for Survey-Based Research on Defence Will," (forthcoming).

perceptions, and knowledge and judgments about national readiness across military, hybrid, and civil contingencies.[28]

- **Agency, roles, and participation in national defense**: This factor characterizes how individuals claim, accept, or decline and navigate various roles or positions in national defense and security system. It is being done either independently or based on social interaction and normative expectations. It may manifest actions such as desire to actively seek a role through volunteering or a profession, performing military service, actively seeking a role in national defense or conversely, opting out, such as resigning from the military reserve or adopting political pacifism.[29]
- **Competence, knowledge, and skills, in national defense:** This refers to the domain-relevant knowledge and skills related to national defense and acquired through education, conscription or nonmilitary service, vocational training, employment, hobbies, or civic security-related activities. It reflects an individual's ability to contribute to societal defense and security in both normal and wartime conditions.[30]

The Societal Context in Studying IDR

IDR aligns with whole-of-society approaches. It is both as a theoretical concept and an analytical tool for examining how individuals or entire populations perceive matters related to national defense and security. It takes into account nonmilitary forms of defense and citizens' agency within the context of total defense or comprehensive security models by integrating nonmilitary forms of defense, hybrid threats, and citizens' willingness to participate national defense in these forms.

Total Defense and Comprehensive Security

Total defense integrates military and civil sectors to ensure continuity of

[28] Jalkanen, Pulkka, and Norri-Sederholm, "Maanpuolustussuhde"; Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina," 59–67; Opedal, "The Will to Defend"; and Rantama, Kosonen, and Sieberg, "Evaluating the Strength and Internal Consistency of Positioning Factors in the Individual's Defence Relationship Theory."

[29] Jalkanen, Pulkka, and Norri-Sederholm, "Maanpuolustussuhde"; Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina," 59–67; Opedal, "The Will to Defend"; and Rantama, Kosonen, and Sieberg, "Evaluating the Strength and Internal Consistency of Positioning Factors in the Individual's Defence Relationship Theory."

[30] Jalkanen, Pulkka, and Norri-Sederholm, "Maanpuolustussuhde; Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina," 59–67; Opedal, "The Will to Defend"; and Rantama, Kosonen, and Sieberg, "Evaluating the Strength and Internal Consistency of Positioning Factors in the Individual's Defence Relationship Theory."

governance, critical infrastructure, and societal functions during crises.[31] Comprehensive security broadens the concept still further by emphasizing interdependencies among defense, economy, health, environment, education, and internal security.[32] Within these frameworks, threat perceptions and preparedness are not solely state-centric; they hinge on citizen competence and agency, participation in conscription or all-volunteer professional forces, but also in nongovernmental organizations, volunteer rescue services, first-aid and resilience training, and spontaneous civic action.[33]

The analysis of threat for the framing factors addresses the diversity of citizens' perceptions of threats, highlighting temporal, geographical, social, or societal class-related similarities and differences. This broadens the analytical use of IDR as a research tool to encompass a wide array of societal threats, such as hybrid threats, information warfare, cyber operations, ecological crises, climate change, pandemics, economic crises, and societal polarization.

The perception of threats and responses to them is tied to both state and individual levels, particularly through citizens' competence and agency in total defense or comprehensive security contexts. Agency includes participation in armed defense (obligatory conscription or all-volunteer forces) as well as involvement in third-sector organizations, nongovernmental organizations and volunteer organizations like the Red Cross, or rescue services. It also acknowledges agency in compulsory nonmilitary (civil service) service and voluntary crisis management and rescue training. These all serve as tools for building societal resilience by fostering citizens' agency and competence.

From the perspective of societal preparedness and resilience, it is crucial to understand how citizens trust their own abilities and the society's readiness to respond to contemporary threats, such as hybrid warfare and cyber operations. This viewpoint demonstrates that the IDR theory has been developed to analyze individuals' relationships with total defense in a broader sense, where threats are not limited to traditional military invasions.

The IDR theory connects the defense relationship to the functioning of the welfare state. An individual's experience of the value of state services and

[31] Angström and Ljungkvist, "Unpacking the Varying Strategic Logics of Total Defence"; Gajauskaite, "Defining Societal Resilience as a Defensive Power"; and Ljungkvist, "The Military-Strategic Rationality of Hybrid Warfare: Everyday Total Defence under Strategic NonPeace in the Case of Sweden."

[32] *Security Strategy for Society: Government Resolution*; and Valtonen and Minna Branders, "Tracing the Finnish Comprehensive Security Model," 93–96.

[33] Harri Raisio et al., "Beneath the Surface: Spontaneous Volunteering and Its Perceived Role in Shaping Community Resilience in National Defence," *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 8, no. 1 (2025): 484–502, https://doi.org/10.31374/sjms.371; and Harri Raisio et al., "Co-Producing National Defense?: Strategic Considerations for Spontaneous Volunteer Involvement," *International Journal of Public Sector Management* (2025), https://doi.org/10.1108/IJPSM-02-2025-0056.

rights (worth) and social belonging forms the foundation for national unity, resilience, and the capacity for resistance. This suggests that societal stability and services are seen as a core component of the defense relationship as these objects have seen reciprocal factors in ROC.[34]

Alignment with the Resistance Operating Concept

The resistance operating concept envisions the population as an active agent of resistance, armed and unarmed, grounded in resilience and the will and ability to withstand external pressure.[35] IDR complements ROC by providing a diagnostic lens on the values and perceptions that underpin civilian commitment: the perceived worth of the state and society, and a sense of social belonging bolster psychological defense and help citizens resist coercion and propaganda. IDR thereby offers an empirical path to assess legitimacy, cohesion, and the connective tissue between society and the security apparatus.

The IDR aligns with the ROC in terms of the "will and ability to withstand external pressures and influences and/or recover from the effects of those pressures or influences."[36] Each of the ROC, total defense, and comprehensive security frameworks emphasizes citizens' active role in societal preparedness, resilience, and crisis endurance, but each does so with slightly different emphases. The IDR theory can support both theoretically and empirically the role of citizens within the ROC and their commitment to defending society. The knowledge and insights derived from it can be utilized in societal decision-making and preparedness planning.

In the ROC model, the civilian population is envisioned as participating in both unarmed and armed resistance. The model depicts the population not as a passive target but as the primary agent of resistance. Citizens' commitment to resistance is not a static state but a dynamic process linked to the social contract.[37] According to the IDR theory, the civilian defense relationship depends on whether individuals perceive the state's services and rights as worth defending.[38] Psychological defense will and a strong national identity are prerequisites for the civilian population to resist the occupier's propaganda and maintain faith in liberation.[39] In this regard, IDR provides a research tool for examining citizens' defense will, agency, competence, and the underlying values that support these aspects.

[34] Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept*.
[35] Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept*.
[36] Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept*.
[37] Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept*.
[38] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; and Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina."
[39] Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept*.

The IDR theory was developed within the context of Nordic welfare states, it can be extended and applied globally to different societies. The perception of one's country, state, society, or local community as worth defending, along with social belonging, are universal and cross-cultural values.[40] These values are part of the social contract between the state and its citizens, regardless of geopolitical location or circumstances.[41]

IDR beyond Conscription: All-Volunteer Force Contexts

Although developed in Nordic conscription settings, IDR is not country- or system-bound. The application of the IDR theory to all-volunteer forces outside the Nordic countries is based on its ability to function as a universal analytical framework that is not tied to a specific country, military system, or conscription. It is noted within the theory that it is not intended to serve as a measure of good citizenship, and that its application to different societies should be further explored.[42]

In all-volunteer force contexts, the social contract still conditions citizen commitment: people appraise defense policy and budgets through perceived worth (rights protection, service quality, democratic integrity) and belonging. Support for defense may coexist with a preference for peaceful instruments (diplomacy, civil resistance). IDR captures this spectrum by tracing how attitudes, trust, competence, and agency manifest outside the uniformed force, including volunteerism, civil protection, and specialized contributions (e.g., cybersecurity).

The worth of defense and sense of belonging to society are part of the social contract, particularly in countries with all-volunteer military forces. In practice, citizens evaluate their attitude toward defending the state based on the fundamental rights, public services, and democratic integrity that the state provides. These factors shape each individual's defense relation, their willingness, competencies, and agency in supporting homeland security. Notably, democratic values such as solidarity, freedom, and dignity build civic resilience; when people trust institutions and feel they belong to the state,

[40] Kelly-Ann Allen et al., "Belonging: A Review of Conceptual Issues, an Integrative Framework, and Directions for Future Research," *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73, no. 1 (2021): 87–102, https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409; and Shalom H. Schwartz, "Universals in the Content and Structure of Values: Theory and Empirical Tests in 20 Countries," in *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 25, ed. Mark P. Zanna (New York: Academic Press, 1992), 1–65, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60281-6.

[41] Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept*, 23, 66; and Justin P. Bruner, "Diversity, Tolerance, and the Social Contract," *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics* 14, no. 4 (2015): 429–48, https://doi.org/10.1177/1470594X14560763.

[42] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen."

they see themselves as part of something larger and are more inclined to defend it.[43]

Even if an individual does not serve in the military, their experience with the state's worth defending forms the basis for whether they support the defense system, the use of armed force, and the work of professional soldiers. This is reflected, for example, in policy. The public opinion, level of support for national defense, armed forces, and defense budgets in Western democratic countries can be shaped by these attitudes. The opposite of the worth of defense is not necessarily political pacifism. A state may be considered worthy of defense, yet an individual may emphasize peaceful means to defend its sovereignty, such as diplomacy and civil resistance.[44] The theory enables a broader understanding of various forms of agency that are crucial in total security alongside all-volunteer military forces. Through the IDR theory, citizens' roles in national defense can be studied through voluntary organizations, spontaneous volunteerism, or civil resistance.[45] In the total defense model, the utilization of citizens' civil competencies (e.g., IT skills or professional expertise) is seen as part of national resilience, which responds to the competences of hybrid threats and other nonmilitary challenges.

The IDR theory can be integrated into the resistance operating concept model, which addresses national resilience and resistance. This would allow for further research into civil population attitudes, competence, trust, and agency across different countries and various social and security contexts, examining citizens' relationship to national defense through broader, nontraditional, and nonmilitary means. The IDR theory, as well ROC and total defense model, emphasize that "warfighting" is only a small part of the broad spectrum of resistance (taxonomy of action), and it helps analyze the factors that encourage civilians to engage in these different roles.[46]

Methodological Perspective

By disaggregating commitment into seven factors, IDR improves construct clarity over single-item will-to-fight measures. It links citizens' attitudes to societal functioning (belonging, worth, threat) and maps concrete pathways for

[43] Rasa Kazlauskaitė Markelienė, "Civic Resilience and Defence Preparedness: Training Citizens to Defend Their Country," in *Democratic Resilience in the Baltics*, vol. 2, *Baltic Security and Defense*.

[44] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; and Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept*.

[45] Raisio et al., "Beneath the Surface: Spontaneous Volunteering and Its Perceived Role in Shaping Community Resilience in National Defence"; Raisio et al., "Co-Producing National Defense"; and Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept*.

[46] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; and Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept*.

action (attitude, trust, competence, agency). The framework supports qualitative inquiry and survey research alike and enables targeted policy interventions.

While traditional measures focus on armed resistance, the IDR model explores broader spectrum of agency and also considers nonmilitary forms of defense, hybrid threats, and the broader perspective of total security. This opens up space for understanding the diverse roles and forms of action (e.g., agency and competence) that citizens can play outside of military combat.

The theory's framing factors (belonging, worth, and threat) directly link the willingness to defend the nation to the functioning of society. By breaking down the relationship into seven variables, the theory serves as a tool to identify, alongside academic interests, those societal areas that require social and strategic actions to strengthen resilience. For example, if trust is high but citizens national defense competence is low, the state can take targeted actions by enhancing and expanding national defense training in governmental or nongovernmental volunteer organizations.[47]

It provides a validated tool for both qualitative and quantitative research, helping overcome the methodological limitations and definitional ambiguity of traditional survey methods.[48] It is also applicable for analyzing the complex relationships of various population groups, such as immigrants or conscientious objectors.[49] The operationalization of the IDR theory through standardized surveys allows for comparisons and cross-national analysis between different countries, regardless of their defense systems. International researchers can analyze how factors emphasize differently in countries with all-volunteer military forces compared to conscription-based countries, or in Western democracies compared to authoritarian or totalitarian states.

Operationalization of IDR Theory

Operationalizing IDR involves converting the theory for use in qualitative and quantitative research.[50] In qualitative studies, such as focus group interviews

[47] Kazlauskaitė Markelienė, "Civic Resilience and Defence Preparedness."

[48] Rantama, Kosonen, and Sieberg, "Evaluating the Strength and Internal Consistency of Positioning Factors in the Individual's Defence Relationship Theory."

[49] Bontenbal, Kosonen, and Riikonen, "The National Defense Relationship of Military Service Recruits with a Migrant Background"; Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; and Jarkko Kosonen, Reetta Riikonen, and Ilona Bontenbal, "Ulkomaalaistaustaisten asevelvollisten maanpuolustussuhde ja sitä asemoivat tekijät" [Individual's Defense Relationship among Conscripts of Foreign Background and the Factors that Position It], in *Sodankäynnistä ja Sotilaskoulutuksesta*, ed. A. T. Pulkka and J. Hollanti (Helsinki: National Defence University, 2023), 77–109.

[50] Sederholm, Rannikko, and Salo, "Total Defence Model at the Heart of Finland's National Defence and Resilience"; Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; and Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; and Sinkko, "Maanpuolustustahto Asevelvollisen Koulutuksen ja Palveluksen Onnistumista Selittävänä Tekijänä."

and studies examining various reference groups' understanding of the will to defend or their relationship in national defense, IDR factors can be used to form a comprehensive understanding of the multidimensional and complex nature of the phenomenon. IDR has been applied in Finland, for example, in studies of individuals with migrant background defense relationships, the interaction between integration indicators for Finns with migrant background and defense attitudes, and the relationship between the sense of belonging among conscription-age/call-up-age individuals and their defense attitudes.[51]

Thematic interviews can be structured around open-ended questions based on the IDR factors, facilitating an in-depth exploration of these dimensions. An example of qualitative categorization of IDR theory, as a result of theory-guided analysis is found in Jarkko Kosonen, Reetta Riikonen, and Ilona Bontenbal.[52] The data set for this article included 47 interviews with individuals with migrant background in Finland, which provided rich insights these dimensions (table 1).

The use of quantitative research in the operationalization of IDR was initiated in 2025. Dr. Anni Ojajärvi, serving as a consultant at Finnish Swan Lake Consulting, carried out the operationalization under a research project commissioned by the Finnish Army Command and Ministry of Defense. The theory was translated into a quantitative format through the development of a standardized questionnaire designed to measure attitudes and preparedness using numerical scales. The survey variables were developed to assess the positioning factors of the IDR theory in alignment with the qualitative examples provided earlier.

The IDR variables of attitude, trust, and competence were measured using Likert-scale statements (ranging from "Don't agree at all" to "Agree completely" on a scale from 1–7 or 1–10), where respondents evaluate, for example, the success of the activities of the armed forces or their sense of duty. The agency factor was operationalized through dichotomous (yes/no) questions that assess concrete participation, such as membership in national defense organizations or involvement in voluntary training.

Statistical validation of the variables and the functionality of the structure were ensured through factor analysis (exploratory [EFA] and confirmato-

[51] Kosonen, Riikonen, and Bontenbal, "Ulkomaalaistaustaisten asevelvollisten maanpuolustussuhde ja sitä asemoivat tekijät"; Bontenbal, Kosonen, and Riikonen, "The National Defense Relationship of Military Service Recruits with a Migrant Background"; Skippari 2023; and Ville Pikkarainen, "Asevelvollisuuden Kynnyksellä: Kutsuntaikäisten kuuluvuuden tunteen ja maanpuolustusasenteen välinen yhteys" [On the Threshold of Conscription: The Relationship between the Sense of Belonging and National Defense Attitudes among Conscription-Age Individuals] (master's thesis, National Defence University, 2024).

[52] Kosonen, Riikonen, and Bontenbal, "Ulkomaalaistaustaisten asevelvollisten maanpuolustussuhde ja sitä asemoivat tekijät."

Table 1. Example of theory-guided categories mapped to IDR positioning factors

IDR positioning factor	Interview-derived category	Illustrative subcategories
The attitude toward national defense	Attitudes toward military service and conscription	Desire to join the military (conscript service) Experience of the importance of national defense One's role and duty to the homeland Family and close social circle's appreciation of military service (Perception of) national defense as a source of security (Debate on individual level) of time commitment to fulfilling duties
	Experiences of military/conscript service	Experiences with war and weapons Experiences with military service and time in the armed forces
	Equality in conscription	Equality within the system Law as a mandate and obligation
	Freedom of choice within the system	Choice between service options (i.e., military service or nonmilitary civil service) Perceptions and knowledge of service alternatives
The trust in national defense	Trust in the armed forces and its capabilities	Relationship between the armed forces (Finnish Defense Forces or FDF) and society Institutional appreciation Visibility of the armed forces (FDF) in society and the media Finland's military strength: A comparison with other countries' armed forces Appreciation of conscripts
	Trust in basic military/conscript training	Expectations and experiences of military/conscript service Quality of (military/conscript) training
	Finland's NATO membership	—
	Sense of security	Sense of security Fear and anxiety
The agency within national defense	Participation in national defense	Military service versus nonmilitary civilian service National defense in normal and wartime circumstances
	The impact of military/conscript service on (get or keep) citizenship	Impact of service on participation Impact of service on integration
	The significance of international (military) experience	International service (i.e., peacekeeping or crisis management operations) Participation in national defense abroad (i.e., international exercises)
The competences in national defense	Concrete skills related to national defense	Wartime duties Personal development Civilian life skills benefiting from conscript service - Driver's license - Proficiency in Finnish
	Knowledge related to national defense and conscription	-

Source: based on Jarkko Kosonen, Reetta Riikonen, and Ilona Bontenbal, "Ulkomaalaistaustaisten asevelvollisten maanpuolustussuhde ja sitä asemoivat tekijät" [Individual's Defense Relationship among Conscripts of Foreign Background and the Factors that Position It], in *Sodankäynnistä ja Sotilaskoulutuksesta*, ed. A. T. Pulkka and J. Hollanti (Helsinki: National Defence University, 2023), 87.

ry [CFA]), which tested whether the questions formed theoretically coherent constructs. According to the data, national defense attitude and trust emerged as statistically strong and consistent indicators. The more detailed operationalization process and analysis with the results of factor loadings are presented in article that is in referee process.[53]

While attitudes and trust were easily measurable, agency and other aspects of national defense within the broader framework of comprehensive security have proven more challenging to operationalize. This is often due to response bias (e.g., the fact that most citizens do not actively engage in organizations) or the political charge of certain issues (such as climate change), which weakens the statistical consistency of the measures (table 2).

The operationalization of IDR in quantitative research presents somehow some challenges, despite its aim to address the methodological limitations and vague definitions of traditional studies. One of the primary difficulties is measuring agency, as aspects such as attitudes and trust are easier to quantify, while agency and other components of the broader security concept are more complex to operationalize. Additionally, response bias complicates the measurement of agency, since most citizens are not actively engaged in organizational activities, which can skew statistical results. Political sensitivity also plays a role, as some total defense and comprehensive security topics, such as climate change, are politically charged, undermining the statistical consistency of the measures. To fully utilize the theory, large-scale surveys are required to analyze all seven variables across different nations, demanding extensive data. Furthermore, although IDR provides a more precise framework than traditional research, converting its variables into numerical scales requires complex statistical validation, including factor analysis (EFA and CFA), to ensure theoretical consistency.

Conclusion

The individual's defense relationship (IDR) theory represents a necessary paradigm shift in military sociology, moving from a static, one-dimensional attitudinal measurement of "defense will" to a dynamic, multidimensional and comprehensive analytical framework of individual's commitment to the state, society, and security. While traditional metrics have often been criticized for their methodological narrowness and vague definitions, the IDR provides the "connective tissue" required to understand how individuals relate to the state in an era of hybrid warfare and subconventional threats. This review article introduces the IDR to the international academic community as a rigorous tool

[53] Rantama, Kosonen, and Sieberg, "Evaluating the Strength and Internal Consistency of Positioning Factors in the Individual's Defence Relationship Theory."

Table 2. Illustrative survey variables derived from IDR

Variable (statement or indicator)	Variable scale
Universal conscription is a value in itself in Finland and should be preserved under all circumstances. The general national defense obligation applying to all citizens is a value in itself and should be upheld in all conditions. Preparing for Finland's military defense is just as important today as it was during the previous wars. The Finnish society and societal order is worth defending. It is my duty to defend Finland, either through military service or in other capacities, if the country is under threat. Military defense and activities related to it are incompatible with my personal values. Nonmilitary service, in its current form, constitutes a legitimate form of national defense. It would be justified if a Finnish citizen did not have to defend the country, militarily or otherwise, if they contribute significantly through taxation or economic activity. The societal benefit of conscription outweighs the individual cost. If Finland were attacked, I believe citizens should engage in armed defense in all circumstances, even if the outcome seems uncertain. If a NATO member state is attacked, Finland should participate in its military defense under all circumstances, even if the outcome appears uncertain. If Finland faces devastating consequences from climate change, I believe Finns should take climate action in all circumstances, even if the outcome seems uncertain. If Finland enters an economic crisis, I believe citizens should support economic measures in all circumstances, even if recovery seems uncertain. If Finland is struck by a pandemic, I believe citizens should adopt protective measures in all circumstances, even if the outcome seems uncertain. If societal inequality increases significantly in Finland, I believe citizens should take measures to promote equality in all circumstances, even if the outcome seems uncertain.	1–10 Opinion scale 1 = Do not agree at all 10 = Agree completely
Finnish citizens should defend their country, either militarily or in other roles, even if the state is unable to guarantee basic public services. Finnish citizens should defend their country, either militarily or in other roles, even if the state is unable to guarantee their fundamental rights. Participation in national defense should be voluntary. Every citizen should be responsible for themselves and for securing their own well-being.	0–100 Opinion scale 0 = Do not agree at all 10 = Agree completely
What is your past/current participation in national defense? I have completed / I am currently completing	1 = Military service 2 = Unarmed service 3= Nonmilitary service 4 = I have been exempted from service 5 = None of the above
Are you, or do you act as: I am a member of a national defense association. I am a member of an association that promotes comprehensive security (e.g., Voluntary Rescue Service, Finnish Red Cross). I am actively involved in a national defense association. I am actively involved in an organization or association that promotes comprehensive security. In the past five years, have you participated in any training related to national defense or crisis preparedness in any capacity (e.g., as a student, reservist, instructor)? Training organized by the Finnish Defense Forces. International operations and related training (e.g., peacekeeping, military or civilian crisis management). Voluntary national defense training (e.g., organized by The National Defense Training Association or defense-related NGOs). Training supporting authorities or comprehensive security (e.g., voluntary rescue services, first aid courses, or other training provided by civic associations). I have not participated in any of these.	yes/no
I would likely leave the country if Finland experienced a major crisis or war. I have an above-average understanding of Finland's national defense. Security and national defense are regularly discussed within my close social circle. My knowledge of the various ways in which I can participate in national defense is excellent. I know what my role would be in a crisis or state of emergency. Finland is well prepared for a range of security threats. Finnish citizens are capable of defending the country against various types of threats. If Finland were attacked militarily, I would trust in the country's ability to defend itself. If Finland were subjected to hybrid warfare, I would trust in the country's ability to defend itself. It is highly unlikely that Finland will face a military threat within the next ten years. Finland is not currently subject to cyber or information influence operations.	1–7 Opinion scale/Likert 1 = Do not agree at all 7 = Agree completely

Source: Timo Rantama, Jarkko Kosonen, and Torik Sieberg, "Evaluating the Strength and Internal Consistency of Positioning Factors in the Individual's Defence Relationship Theory: Implications for Survey Based Research on Defence Will," (forthcoming).

capable of overcoming the methodological limitations and vague definitions often associated with conventional *defense will* metrics.[54]

The IDR theory emerged from sociological research conducted in Finland and other Nordic countries, a nation historically based on (universal) conscription and structured as a Nordic welfare state.[55] This foundational context informs the model's core premises. The theory acknowledges that civic duties, such as conscription, and civic rights, such as access to welfare services and education, form a unique, though not strictly reciprocal, relationship in the Finnish social contract.[56] Crucially, the model incorporates the belief that the perceived "worth" of the state, including its essential services and democratic integrity, strongly influences a citizen's commitment to national defense. This directly links defense willingness to the functionality of the (welfare) state, suggesting that as the state's perceived value and legitimacy decline, so too might the willingness of its citizens to defend it.[57]

The contemporary security environment underscores the importance of adopting a nuanced approach of studying the willingness to defend or will to fight. Considering Finland and other Baltic states' geopolitical position, now as a NATO and EU member and a border state to Russia, requires a detailed understanding of citizen commitment, especially in light of escalating complexity of military and hybrid threats, as well as nonmilitary challenges.[58] The IDR theory explicitly addresses this complexity by disaggregating *defense will* and *will to fight* into measurable factors and variables. This capacity to model citizen commitment across political, social, and cognitive domains, alongside military readiness, provides the crucial insights for understanding national defense in a total defense context. Furthermore, the empirical need for such a tool is highlighted by study indicating that traditional defense willingness mea-

[54] Rantama, Kosonen, and Sieberg, "Evaluating the Strength and Internal Consistency of Positioning Factors in the Individual's Defence Relationship Theory."

[55] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; and Bontenbal, Kosonen, and Riikonen, "The National Defense Relationship of Military Service Recruits with a Migrant Background."

[56] Puustinen, Kosonen, and Tallberg, "Kansalaisuuskäsitykset ja asevelvollisuus Suomessa"; Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; and Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina."

[57] Puustinen, Kosonen, and Tallberg, "Kansalaisuuskäsitykset ja asevelvollisuus Suomessa"; Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; and Bontenbal, Kosonen, and Riikonen, "The National Defense Relationship of Military Service Recruits with a Migrant Background."

[58] Bontenbal, Kosonen, and Riikonen, "The National Defense Relationship of Military Service Recruits with a Migrant Background"; and Jalkanen, Pulkka, and Norri-Sederholm, "Maanpuolustussuhde."

sures have constrained both theoretical exploration and methodological rigor.[59]

The study of defense will has long been rooted in the Nordic and Baltic countries, where national discourse and patriotism play a central role in structuring civil-military relations, particularly in defense systems dependent on conscription and military reserves.[60] Historically, national identity, patriotism, and the necessity of defense have been pivotal in shaping military sociology in these regions.[61] The IDR theory enhances this research tradition by providing a structured academic framework that enhances scholars to analyze the commitment of various demographic groups, including regular citizens, conscripts, military professionals, and marginalized groups such as conscientious objectors or individuals with migrant or diverse backgrounds. These groups' relationships with national defense are often far more complex than traditional survey responses can capture.[62] By offering a validated tool for quantitative survey measures and qualitative interpretation, IDR theory contributes significantly to military sociology by providing evidence that reflects the intricate interplay between citizens, society, and the armed forces.[63]

The primary benefit of this expanded theory lies in its diagnostic precision for strategic decision-making in different countries with different defense systems. By disaggregating commitment into seven distinct factors, the theory allows policymakers to move beyond generalities to targeted strategic or policy

[59] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; and Sinkko, "Maanpuolustustahto Asevelvollisen Koulutuksen ja Palveluksen Onnistumista Selittävänä Tekijänä."

[60] Andžāns and Sprūds, "Three-Decade Evolution of the Willingness to Defend One's Own Country"; and Māris Andžāns et al., *Willingness to Defend Own Country in the Baltic States: Implications for National Security and NATO's Collective Defence* (Rīga: Rīga Stradiņš University, 2021); Christofer Berglund, Kairi Kasearu, and Juhan Kivirähk, "Fighting for the (Step)Motherland?: Predictors of Defence Willingness in Estonia's Post-Soviet Generation," *Journal of Political and Military Sociology* 49, no. 2 (2023): 146–69, https://doi.org/10.5744/jpms.2022.2002; Ieva Bērziņa and Uldis Zupa, "Factors Affecting Willingness to Fight for a Country in the Latvian and Russian-Speaking Communities in Latvia," *National Identities* 23, no. 3 (2021): 239–52, https://doi.org/10.1080/14608944.2020.1851668; Bontenbal, Kosonen, and Riikonen, "The National Defense Relationship of Military Service Recruits with a Migrant Background"; and Virgilijus Rutkauskas, "Factors Affecting Willingness to Fight for One's Own Country: The Case of Baltic States," *Special Operations Journal* 4 (2018): 48–62, https://doi.org/10.1080/23296151.2018.1456286.

[61] Opedal, "The Will to Defend"; and Teemu Häkkinen, "Maanpuolustustahdon poliittisuus 1970-luvulta kylmän sodan päättymiseen" [The Political Nature of National Defense Will from the 1970s to the End of the Cold War], in *Maanpuolustustahto Suomessa*, ed. Teemu Häkkinen, Mikko Kaarkoski, and Jouni Tilli (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2020), 108–27.

[62] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; and Bontenbal, Kosonen, and Riikonen, "The National Defense Relationship of Military Service Recruits with a Migrant Background."

[63] Kosonen, Puustinen, and Tallberg, "Maanpuolustustahdosta Maanpuolustussuhteeseen"; Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina"; and Rantama, Kosonen, and Sieberg, "Evaluating the Strength and Internal Consistency of Positioning Factors in the Individual's Defence Relationship Theory."

making interventions. For instance, the state can prioritize expanding training through governmental or nongovernmental organizations rather than focusing on broad patriotic information operations. This level of granularity transforms defense will from an abstract sentiment into a somehow manageable asset for national resilience.

The IDR theory highlights the unique mechanisms of resilience in liberal democracies. Unlike authoritarian regimes that may coerce resilience at the expense of the population, a democratic state's resilience is rooted in the perceived worth of the social contract, specifically the protection of fundamental rights and the provision of essential welfare services. When citizens feel a sense of belonging and perceive their state as worth defending, their commitment to national defense probably increases. As state legitimacy or service quality declines, the theory predicts a corresponding shift in the individual's defense relationship, providing an early warning system for societal cohesion before or during various military or societal crises.

While developed within the Nordic context, the core mechanisms of IDR's positioning factors (trust, belonging, and worth) are universal values and components of the social contract. This framework is not a measure of "good citizenship" but a tool for cross-national analysis. It allows researchers to compare commitment across diverse geopolitical contexts, from mandatory conscription systems to all-volunteer forces, and from Western democracies to states facing existential threats.

Expanding the spectrum of agency by integrating the IDR theory with the resistance operating concept and the taxonomy of action demonstrates that "fighting" is merely one small part of a larger spectrum of national defense and resistance, making the theory highly relevant even for all-volunteer forces where the majority of citizens do not serve in uniform.[64] The author therefore encourages international scholars to engage with the IDR theory.[65] By applying this framework, scholars can test, refine, and further develop its constructs in diverse geopolitical and defense contexts globally. Exploring the four positioning factors and the three framing factors of IDR theory across different nations, whether they operate mandatory, selective, or all-volunteer force defense systems, will advance our universal understanding of the mechanisms that underpin citizen commitment to national defense and security.

[64] Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept*.

[65] Kosonen, "Kansalaiset sotilaina ja maan puolustajina," 83–84; see also Opedal, "The Will to Defend," 63.

More than Morale
Identity Fusion and the Psychology of the Will to Fight

Brent Lawniczak, PhD

Abstract: Identity fusion theory—where personal and group identities merge to foster deep kinship—provides insight into the will to fight in military contexts. Examples from the American Revolution illustrate identity fusion through events like the retreat from New York and the Battle of Trenton and George Washington as the embodiment of "shared essence." The U.S. Marine Corps exemplifies transgenerational identity fusion via rites of passage, collective rituals, and functional equivalence. Implications for military strategy emphasize enhancing allied resolve while eroding adversaries' will.
Keywords: identity fusion theory, transgenerational fusion, shared essence, dysphoric events, euphoric events, collective rituals, military psychology, will to fight, *esprit de corps*

Introduction

> We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
> For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
> Shall be my brother.[1]

Drawing from William Shakespeare, Stephen Ambrose, in his seminal work *Band of Brothers*, captured the essence of a group's will to fight: its creation, combat effectiveness, and enduring nature. Many view the will to fight as an

[1] William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act 4, Scene 3.

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inherent aspect of human nature—at least a latent one that can be awakened when necessary. This motivation to fight and to persist in fighting, whether of an individual, a military unit, or an entire nation, has intrigued scholars for millennia. Its existence is evident, yet its definition remains imprecise and its origins elusive. Numerous combat leaders and average soldiers have drawn on forces native to the human condition to instill and sustain the will to fight. Modern social science has theorized and named these forces, providing insights into the factors relevant to the creation of the will to fight, and offering potential paths for reducing the will of an enemy force. *Identity fusion* theory provides a framework for a greater understanding of the will to fight.

Ambrose tells us, as a result of shared hardships and triumphs, that the soldiers in Easy Company, 2d Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment, established what is described as:

> a closeness unknown to all outsiders. . . . They were prepared to die for each other; more important, they were prepared to kill for each other. . . . Comradeship is by far the strongest motivator. . . . They . . . found in combat the closest brotherhood they ever knew.[2]

Ambrose illustrates how shared experiences merge individual and group identities, forging an unbreakable will to fight. He, like Shakespeare before him, expressed a phenomenon others have recognized as inherent to the human condition for thousands of years.

Pericles, the Athenian statesman and general, sought 2,400 years ago to sustain his people's will to fight amid a protracted war, drawing on a real, yet indeterminate mechanism. Invoking Athenian heroes, Pericles emphasized that "the prize for courage will surely be awarded most justly to those who . . . are never tempted to shrink from danger."[3] Those recently killed, having put Athens ahead of personal desires and gain, were hailed by Pericles as heroes who "[chose] to die resisting, rather than to live submitting, they fled only from dishonor, but met danger face to face, and . . . left behind them not their fear, but their glory."[4] Invoking such heroism exemplifies the theoretical notion of *shared essence* discussed below.

The will to fight can also be linked to what Carl von Clausewitz called "military virtues." Clausewitz noted that these virtues "should not be confused

[2] Stephen E. Ambrose, *Band of Brothers: E Company, 506th Regiment, 101st Airborne from Normandy to Hitler's Eagle's Nest* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 21, 62, 155, 289.
[3] Thucydides, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Richard Crawley (New York: Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, 2008), 114.
[4] Thucydides, *Landmark Thucydides*, 115.

with simple bravery, and still less with enthusiasm for the cause."[5] Clausewitz goes on to posit that "military spirit"—or the will to fight—"is one of the most important moral elements in war" sourced from "a series of victorious wars . . . [and] frequent exertions of the army to the utmost limits of its strength . . . [and that] once it has grown . . . it will survive the wildest storms of misfortune and defeat."[6] Identity fusion, explored in this article, elucidates this phenomenon. Identify fusion builds on Clausewitz by emphasizing dysphoric events—such as defeat, peril, and trauma—that foster a heightened will to fight, creating what Clausewitz described as an "expanded and refined solidarity of a brotherhood."[7] Many will be familiar with the related concept of *esprit de corps*:

> Esprit de corps describes the spirit of the unit, something intangible in nature but experienced in very tangible ways. It is the common spirit reflected by all members of a unit, providing group solidarity. It implies devotion and loyalty to the unit and all for which it stands, and a deep regard for the unit's history, traditions, and honor. Esprit de corps is the unit's personality; it expresses the unit's will to fight and win despite seemingly insurmountable odds.[8]

Importantly, Clausewitz warns that "it would be a serious mistake to underrate" this *esprit de corps*.[9] Identity fusion helps to explain the origin and promulgation of this *esprit* and related phenomena and the resultant will to fight.

As the country marked the 250th birthday of the United States Marine Corps in 2025 and now celebrates the nation's semiquincentennial, it is appropriate to illustrate identity fusion with examples from the American Revolution and the Marine Corps. The United States has drawn on the forces noted by Thucydides, Clausewitz, and Ambrose during and since its founding to cultivate and sustain the will to fight. The American Revolution provides a rich and relatable case study for identity fusion theory with numerous examples of events that foster the will to fight for individuals, units, and a nation.

The U.S. Marine Corps exemplifies the concept of *transgenerational* identity fusion. Marine Corps history is replete with examples of the will to fight. Individual and unit triumphs and hardships create a deep bond and identification of the individual with the unit, the Marine Corps, and the country. The Marine

[5] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 187.
[6] Clausewitz, *On War*, 189.
[7] Clausewitz, *On War*, 189.
[8] *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, Marine Corps Reference Publication (MCRP) 6-10.1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2023), 2-1.
[9] Clausewitz, *On War*, 187.

Corps example indicates that it is not essential for an individual to experience events firsthand for fusion to occur. Transgenerational identity fusion helps to explain not only *esprit de corps*, but also the will to fight across generations of Marines.

This article is presented in four parts. First is an examination of identity fusion theory and factors that are theorized to create that fusion through dysphoric and euphoric events. The second section draws on the American Revolution for examples of dysphoric and euphoric events, and the effects of identity fusion on the will to fight. The third section draws from U.S. Marine Corps history to demonstrate how identity fusion is transgenerational. The fourth section offers implications for identity fusion theory and points to the necessity of leveraging the science behind the theory to build the will to fight for ourselves and our allies, and suggests pathways to reducing adversaries' will.

Identity Fusion Theory

Identity fusion has been used to explain extreme pro-group behaviors in diverse contexts from radical insurgents and soccer fans to Vikings.[10] It is theorized as a process where personal and social identities merge.[11] The fusion yields "a visceral sense of 'oneness' with the group" in which "the personal self fades into the background, and people come to see themselves as exemplifying the qualities" of the group.[12] Counterintuitively, fused individuals retain their individual agency, channeling it into pro-group action, feeling that they strengthen the group.[13] When the individual identity becomes fused with the group identity, the individual's membership in that group becomes "intensely personal," and such fused individuals feel that group outcomes are as important as personal outcomes.[14] The retention of individual agency, coupled with strong, familial bonds to other group members, prompts pro-group action.[15]

Identity fusion differs from social identification, where personal and group identities remain distinct. When a person identifies with a group, even strongly,

[10] Ben Raffield et al., "Ingroup Identification, Identity Fusion and the Formation of Viking War Bands," *World Archaeology* 48, no. 1 (2016): 35–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2015.1100548.

[11] William B. Swann et al., "Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96, no. 5 (2009): 995, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0013668.

[12] William B. Swann Jr. and Michael D. Buhrmester, "Identity Fusion," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 24, no. 1 (2015): 52–53, https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721414551363.

[13] Michael D. Buhrmester and William B. Swann Jr., "Identity Fusion," in *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource*, ed. R. A. Scott et al. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 3, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118900772.etrds0172.

[14] Swann et al., "Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior," 996.

[15] Swann and Buhrmester, "Identity Fusion," 52.

they maintain separate personal and group identities. Through a strong social identity with a group, an individual may at times become depersonalized. However, this depersonalization is not equivalent to identity fusion. Such "depersonalized individuals may be well suited for falling in line and obeying orders . . . but . . . lack the initiative to enact extraordinary actions for the group."[16] Theorists note that "group identification is relatively weak in producing the extreme pro-group behaviors we see in war. . . . Without the power of fusion . . . group identification produces committed citizens but not extreme self-sacrifice."[17] Consequently, identity fusion is likely tied to a heightened will to fight.

Fused individuals neither relinquish their personal identity nor view themselves as undifferentiated members. Rather, those who are fused to the group maintain a firm grip on their own identity. When the independent self becomes one with the collective, it creates an apparatus that fosters the will to take potentially extreme action in the service of the group.[18] This is significant in terms of the will to fight. While strong social bonds may prompt *conditional* combat, identity fusion sustains the will to fight even against personal advantage and the odds of victory.

This identity fusion produces individuals who perceive their relationship with the group as less abstract and analogous to a familial bond or kinship that, according to theorists, brings about two individual responses. First, an individual may perceive that all group members are "functionally equivalent." That is, there is little differentiation across members of the group. Second, identity fusion often leads to a perception of mutual commitment in which members are willing to do anything for the group, and they trust that the group will reciprocate. Together, these feelings provide the potential for an individual to take extreme actions on behalf of the group.[19]

It is thought that fused individuals see challenges to the group as challenges to themselves and vice versa.[20] Furthermore, experiments on identity fusion have found that highly fused individuals support extreme behaviors, including "fighting and dying for their country," perceiving threats to the group as personal, having a high willingness for self-sacrifice, and perceptions of their own

[16] Swann et al., "Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior," 996.

[17] Harvey Whitehouse and Jonathan A. Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us: Ritual, Fusion, and Identification," *Current Anthropology* 55, no. 6 (2014): 678, https://doi.org/10.1086/678698.

[18] Swann et al., "Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior," 996.

[19] Ángel Gómez et al., "On the Nature of Identity Fusion: Insights into the Construct and a New Measure," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 100, no. 5 (2011): 919, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0022642.

[20] Swann et al., "Identity Fusion: The Interplay of Personal and Social Identities in Extreme Group Behavior," 996.

invulnerability.[21] Simple group identification does not yield such a sacrifice, whereas identity fusion does.[22] Moreover, studies have shown that once a person is fused to a group, they remain so.[23] As noted below, this irrevocability is strong, but perhaps not permanent.

Identity fusion extends to larger communities. Theorists recognize that when people are randomly assigned to a group, they tend to show bias in favor of that group, even when the individual has not met any group members.[24] Extended fusion applies to vast groups where personal contact is absent, yet bonds form, enabling willingness to fight, kill, or die for unknown members or the collective.[25]

Central to this is the "shared essence" of the group. Rather than basing feelings of kinship on genetic bonds or other physical characteristics, fusion may come about through "shared personally self-defining experiences, such as memories for group-defining events."[26] Additionally, shared essence may be "symbolically represented by physical objects, people, places, and events," including historical artifacts, flags, and locations of events significant to the group.[27] Such events and symbols create and maintain willingness to act on behalf of the group, sometimes in extreme ways, as previously noted. Shared essence is fundamental to the will to fight.

Identity fusion may be the product of either or both positive (euphoric) or negative (dysphoric) events. Echoing Clausewitz's observation that victory fosters "fighting spirit," modern research confirms euphoric events are a key ingredient of fusion and the will to fight. Modern theorists have found that dysphoric events may have as strong or a stronger effect on identity fusion.[28] Napoléon Bonaparte understood this sentiment, noting that "The first qualification of a soldier is fortitude under fatigue and privation. Courage is only the second; hardship, poverty and want, are the best school for a soldier."[29] Dysphoric events include those that create memories associated with negative emotions. Such memories, deriving from traumatic events, foster feelings of

[21] Gómez et al., "On the Nature of Identity Fusion," 919.
[22] Swann and Buhrmester, "Identity Fusion," 54.
[23] Swann and Buhrmester, "Identity Fusion," 55.
[24] Gómez et al., "On the Nature of Identity Fusion," 919.
[25] Swann and Buhrmester, "Identity Fusion," 55.
[26] Michael D. Buhrmester et al., "Winning at Any Cost: Identity Fusion, Group Essence, and Maximizing Ingroup Advantage," *Self and Identity* 17, no. 5 (2018): 500–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2018.1452788.
[27] Buhrmester et al., "Winning at Any Cost," 502.
[28] Martha Newson, Michael Buhrmester, and Harvey Whitehouse, "Explaining Lifelong Loyalty: The Role of Identity Fusion and Self-Shaping Group Events," *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 8 (2016): 7, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0160427.
[29] Emperor of the French Napoléon I, "Maxim LVIII," in *The Officer's Manual: Napoleon's Maxims of War*, trans. Sir G. C. D. D'Aguilar (Richmond, VA: West & Johnston, 1862).

deep sadness or even anguish, which become etched in an individual's memory.[30] Such "particularly intense life events," either euphoric or dysphoric, increase identity fusion as well as enduring loyalty to the group.[31] Additionally, theorists have noted that dysphoric events may include those surrounding joining a group in the first place. Such include threats, rites of passage, "rites of terror," activities akin to torture, humiliation, and other "ordeals inflicted on participants."[32] Having paid a severe price to join, these experiences increase an individual's affinity for the group and foster high levels of trust.[33] These "life-shaping episodes" create fusion through shared experiences that outsiders cannot understand. These powerful shared experiences bind individuals to one another through vivid and memorable imagery, creating a profound and lasting sense of kinship among those who lived through them.[34]

Studies indicate "that physiological arousal and self-reported feelings of group-directed agency (e.g., I am responsible for my group's actions) mediate links between fusion and pro-group behavior." This helps to explain cross-cultural ritualistic behaviors such as "ritual chanting, dancing, marching" that "may serve to prime the pro-group pump amongst fused persons."[35] Such findings suggest that identity fusion is not accidental, but can be fostered outside of combat. This pump-priming may be useful in fostering fidelity to the group and, thereafter, the will to fight.

Ritual and routinization of tradition also contribute to and reinforce identity fusion, suggesting that identity fusion can be transgenerational.[36] Having experienced euphoric or dysphoric events, either through becoming a member of the group or through combat, "regular participation in collective rituals" may produce and reinforce the individual's identity fusion with the group. Repetition of ritual maintains the memory of the occasion on which identity fusion is based, leading "to identification with large, centralized, hierarchical traditions."[37] Repetition of group rituals enhances group building and fuses individual participants to the group, even those personally unknown to the individual.[38] The individual does not need to have personally experienced the euphoric or dysphoric events, as "traits that distinguish an ingroup can be . . .

[30] Rahaf Aldoughli, "Fighting Together: Emotionality, Fusion, and Psychological Kinship in the Syrian Civil War," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 35, no. 7 (2024): 1181, https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2024.2374036.
[31] Newson et al., "Explaining Lifelong Loyalty," 2, 7.
[32] Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 679.
[33] Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 679.
[34] Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 680.
[35] Buhrmester and Swann Jr., "Identity Fusion," 6.
[36] Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 680.
[37] Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 680.
[38] Whitehouse and Lanman, "The Ties that Bind Us," 683.

socially learned."[39] This suggests that identity fusion can be transgenerational and passed on from those who have directly participated in euphoric or dysphoric events to others who join the group later.

In this manner, identity fusion increases individual will to fight, which translates to a collective will to fight. Such fusion and will to fight is also likely iterative in nature—the individual will and the group tend to reinforce one another. For fused individuals, combat has been shown to result in personally reported feelings stronger than familial ties. This enhances individual willingness to sacrifice personally for the group.[40]

Identity Fusion and the Will to Fight in the American Revolution

> Those who have fought side by side—who have mingled their blood together; as it were in one rich stream . . . must surely be more than brethren—It is a union cemented by blood.[41]

This sentiment captures the essence of identity fusion, a key driver in the colonists' perseverance. The American Revolution stands as one of the most consequential conflicts in history, not only for its political outcomes but for the psychological dynamics produced before, during, and after the war. While many discussions of Revolutionary events focus on material factors and political ideology—important as they are—they fall short in explaining the colonists' will to fight such a long and costly war. The ability of the colonists and the Continental Army to persevere against the most powerful empire in the world at the time demonstrates their will to fight, persist, and prevail in the face of formidable odds. The events surrounding the American Revolution demonstrate the powerful effects of identity fusion, where personal and group identities are intertwined. Identity fusion helps explain colonists' steadfast commitment and extreme self-sacrifice, which illustrate the will to fight before and during the war for independence. While the focus of this article is on the will to fight after the decision to go to war has been made, the American Revolution provides insight into the will to fight when identity fusion precedes that decision.

The Revolutionaries' extraordinary will to fight stemmed not only from ideological or material grievances. Rather, it emerged from a deeply personal identification with the American cause as part of a unified struggle against tyr-

[39] Raffield et al., "Ingroup Identification, Identity Fusion and the Formation of Viking War Bands," 37.
[40] Buhrmester and Swann Jr., "Identity Fusion," 7–8.
[41] Heidi Tarver, "The Creation of American National Identity: 1774–1796," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 37 (1992): 70.

anny, amplified by key euphoric and dysphoric events.[42] The social, political, and economic factors that caused the American colonies to break with Great Britain have filled volumes during the last 250 years. For purposes of demonstrating identity fusion theory and the will to fight when faced with multiple failures and the longest odds, a selection of euphoric and dysphoric events will suffice. Additionally, examining the personification of the will to fight in General George Washington illuminates the impact of symbols on identity fusion. Suffice it to say that a distinct American identity—if only found among the estimated forty percent of the population who favored a break—was essential to the independence declared in 1776.[43]

Before deciding to break with Great Britain, it was necessary to form and recognize a distinct American identity across social strata and across the various colonies, which viewed themselves as unique. Without the fusion of individual identities across strata of colonial society, the Revolution would have been short-lived. The fusion that occurred did not emerge suddenly in 1776, but it was brought about both unintentionally and intentionally by British policies and colonial leaders. The geographic separation, coupled with distinct experiences, also fostered a psychological divide.[44]

Even before the war broke out, the ideological struggle was evident. During this struggle, the identity fusion of the individual colonist with the identity of America—and dissociation with the British—created the seams that would be exploited and increase the American will to fight. Robert Leckie notes that this ideological struggle resulted in a situation in which:

> Ordinary subjects or citizens—"the people"—were no longer indifferent bystanders or unhappy victims . . . but actually participants. They fought for an ideal: in this case, freedom . . . they suffered prodigies of misery and hardship. . . . [T]hey had a *spiritual* purpose, they were *motivated*, they had *morale*, and, as Napoleon said, in war the moral or spiritual is to the material as three is to one. Untrained and slothful soldiers, they would surely run, but most of them would always come back.[45]

This morale, rooted in identity fusion, transformed ordinary colonists into re-

[42] Dean Caivano, "The Fear of Domination: Resistance Against Tyranny," *Journal of the American Revolution* (January 2020).
[43] "Patriots, Loyalists and America's First Civil War," *Americana Corner* (blog), 27 May 2022.
[44] Jack P. Greene, "An Uneasy Connection: An Analysis of the Preconditions of the American Revolution," in *Essays on the American Revolution*, ed. Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973), 77.
[45] Robert Leckie, *George Washington's War: The Saga of the American Revolution* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 276, emphasis original.

silient fighters. Frontier life, harsh winters, conflicts with indigenous peoples, and other factors unique to colonial living created shared hardships—dysphoric experiences—that fostered a unique colonial identity.

British actions such as the Sugar Act (1764), the Stamp Act (1765), and the Townshend Acts (1767) were perceived by colonists as *collective* threats. Despite distinct socioeconomic strata in the colonies, the acts fostered a sense of community against an increasingly alien and often hostile British authority. The Sugar Act increased shared identity across the colonies. While few in New England were involved in the continental molasses trade, those opposed to "taxation without representation" called for other colonies to unite in response to the new tax.[46] Building on this unity, the colonial objection to the Stamp Act was even stronger and more widespread as the new tax applied to nearly every adult colonist.[47] Samual Adams noted that the "inherent, inestimable, inalienable *American* rights had been invaded" by the British Parliament.[48] After its repeal, it was noted that "only by their mutual efforts had the colonies defeated an objectionable act. Only by their mutual efforts would they deter future encroachments."[49] In response to the Townshend Acts, Samuel Adams wrote that "America would defend her liberties at any cost."[50] A sense of kinship was created across disparate colonies and individuals who had never met. The colonists were initially united by common economic and political goals, and they then coalesced in their American identity. The successful efforts, resulting in the repeal of the acts, solidified that identity.

These economic grievances evolved into overt acts of defiance, such as the Boston Massacre in 1770 and the Boston Tea Party in 1773. These are notable for having a fusion effect, tying individuals to the nascent nation. The rallying effect and response of men and supplies from multiple colonies to events at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts Bay Colony, in 1775 further solidified the American identity and indicated the fusion of individuals with the revolutionary identity.[51] The fusion intensified with the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, as the signers pledged their "Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."[52]

The Declaration of Independence served not merely as a political rupture but as an "expression of the American mind," as Thomas Jefferson described it

[46] Stacy Schiff, *The Revolutionary Samuel Adams* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2022), 72–73, 79.
[47] Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 43.
[48] Schiff, *The Revolutionary Samuel Adams*, 87, emphasis added.
[49] Schiff, *The Revolutionary Samuel Adams*, 114.
[50] Schiff, *The Revolutionary Samuel Adams*, 123.
[51] Schiff, *The Revolutionary Samual Adams*, 20–24, 291, 294.
[52] "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives, 1 November 2015.

in an 1825 letter to historian Henry Lee.[53] This document, alongside the Bill of Rights and the U.S. Constitution, later formed a powerful triad that crystallized American national identity from the Revolutionary era onward. Together, they articulated core principles of liberty, self-governance, and individual rights, providing an ideological foundation for what it means to be American. For fused individuals such as the Revolutionaries and those who followed, these texts fostered a shared ethos that extended beyond personal experiences, inspiring a collective will to fight for the nation's ideals.

The formation of national identity "[united] people at a level that [was] perceived to have primacy over formal social bonds . . . as the old paradigm for identity was torn away."[54] Though most colonists did not experience these events first-hand, they created the shared essence expected by identity fusion theory. These prewar grievances laid the groundwork for the dysphoric and euphoric experiences that would further intensify identity fusion during the war and beyond.

The famous winter of 1777–78 at Washington's Valley Forge encampment is a well-known example of negative experiences that served to solidify identity fusion and intensify the will to fight, and develop that will in others. Yet, it was the earlier retreat of Washington's army from New York that tried the force in combat and provided the dysphoric experience on which the Continental Army built for the remainder of the war.

The Dysphoric Experience of the Retreat from New York

After a series of defeats across New York, General Washington was forced to retreat to New Jersey and then to Pennsylvania in 1776. However, in defeat, the soldiers displayed dedication to the cause, as several who fled the battle returned to fight.[55] Moreover, Washington was able to preserve the core of his army and continue the war. Present at this retreat, Thomas Paine, "sick at heart over the suffering and despair he saw, but inspired by the undaunted resolution" of the American forces, wrote:[56]

> These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country. . . . [W]e have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. . . . Yet panics, in some cases, have their uses; they produce as much good as hurt. Their duration is always short; the mind

[53] Thomas Jefferson, "Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, 8 May 1825," Founders Online, National Archives, accessed 11 March 2026.
[54] Tarver, "The Creation of American National Identity: 1774–1796," 59, 66.
[55] Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 276.
[56] David G. McCullough, *1776* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 251.

> soon grows through them, and acquires a firmer habit than before. . . . Let it be told to the future world, that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive, that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet and to repulse it. . . . I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress, and grow brave by reflection.[57]

Paine thus drew on defeat and severe hardship—the "discomfort, distress, or sadness" identity fusion theory expects of dysphoric events—as a call for an enduring will to fight. This served to steel the will of the army and as a unifying call to the cause for those not yet engaged in the fight. Newspapers of the day recognized the retreat as a great success, noting "the manner in which our retreat was performed" and that the preservation of the army "reflect[ed] the highest credit upon our commander-in-chief."[58] These experiences and the sentiments they inspired fused personal identity with group identity and increased the will to fight. Such defeat certainly led to despair and may have led to surrender. Yet, the dynamics of identity fusion help to explain why the Revolutionary cause persisted despite military disasters. As the theory predicts, for highly fused individuals, surrender would represent not merely military and political defeat, but self-betrayal. Fused individuals would rather suffer and possibly die than see their group or other members of the group be harmed or killed.[59] During normal circumstances, setbacks and defeats would demoralize an army and erode popular support. The defeated army was disheartened and exhausted. Identity fusion explains why many Revolutionaries maintained the will to fight.

The Euphoric Experience of Trenton

Any success can be viewed as a euphoric event, all of which boosted morale, continued to fuse identities, and bolstered the will to fight. Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill, though the British held the field in the latter case, had shown that the "rabble" would actually fight.[60] Other euphoric events include the early American triumph at Fort Ticonderoga in 1775, the Siege of Boston in 1775–76, and successes later at Monmouth in 1778 and Yorktown in 1781. The Battle of Trenton in 1776 stands out as a euphoric event that built on prior dysphoric trials and stands as a testament to the American will to fight. The

[57] Thomas Paine, "The Crisis, December 23, 1776," USHistory.org, accessed 19 March 2026.
[58] McCullough, *1776*, 196.
[59] William B. Swann et al., "When Group Membership Gets Personal: A Theory of Identity Fusion," *Psychological Review* 119, no. 3 (July 2012): 7, https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028589.
[60] John Shy, "The American Revolution: The Military Conflict Considered as a Revolutionary War," in *Essays on the American Revolution*, 132.

battle points to the will to fight gained through previous failures and successes, which contributed to highly fused identities. Additionally, the success of the Battle of Trenton sparked the American will to continue fighting the war, which would last another seven years.

The Christmas night crossing of the Delaware River by Washington and his army is well-known from the famous 1851 painting by Emanuel Leutze. Following the agony of defeat and retreat from New York, the minor tactical victory at Trenton provided a crucial boost to morale. The army was inspired by Paine's words, and "a thrill of patriotism and purpose ran through Washington's ragged ranks."[61]

After suffering exposure to the extreme conditions crossing the river in the night, the long march to the attack added injury to the insult of the suffering American soldiers, whose path could be followed "by the bloodstains on the snow."[62] The Hessians did not think it possible for an attack to occur in such conditions, let alone one conducted by the Americans.[63] Yet, 2,400 cold and wet Revolutionary soldiers in the main force pressed the attack with great energy.[64] Having suffered snow, ice, hail, and a follow-on march—"standing up to horrendous physical affliction"—the Americans surprised the Hessians and won the battle with few American casualties.[65] Washington praised the men and noted that "the troops behaved like men contending for everything that was dear or valuable."[66] The identity fusion of the individual soldier with the army—and with the cause—created a fierce will to fight at Trenton.

The success at Trenton, followed by another successful action at Princeton, "had sensational effects . . . and inspired . . . renewed hope."[67] Papers praised the daring surprise attack with the details of the victory. The victory produced elation among the population and increased Congress's will to continue the war.[68] Trenton was perceived as a turning point in the war, as this victory made it apparent that others would follow. Likewise, the victory inspired "those everywhere in the country" who saw Trenton as "the first great cause for hope."[69] Fusion occurred as Washington united militia from various colonies into a single, collective national force.[70] The making of this force was not one of organization, but of identity, cause, and spirit. The power of identity fusion and dysphoric

[61] Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 318.
[62] Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 320.
[63] McCullough, *1776*, 279.
[64] McCullough, *1776*, 280.
[65] James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (New York: Little, Brown, 1974), 95–96.
[66] McCullough, *1776*, 282.
[67] Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man*, 98.
[68] McCullough, *1776*, 283–84.
[69] McCullough, *1776*, 290–91.
[70] "Trenton," American Battlefield Trust, 2025.

events were clear to Abigail Adams, writing that "affliction is the good man's shining time." Adams' correspondent, Mercy Warren, also recognized the fighting spirit proffered by such fusion, noting that there was "no people on earth in whom a spirit of enthusiastic zeal is so readily kindled, and burns so remarkably, as among Americans. . . . From the state of mind bordering on despair, courage was invigorated, every countenance brightened."[71] This euphoric event reinvigorated the will to fight.

The Personification of Revolutionary Identity and Will to Fight

Beyond events, symbols like George Washington promoted identity fusion. As noted in section two, symbols help define the shared essence of the group, even for those who have no personal experience or contact. The new American flag, the Liberty Bell, and even an eight-piece rattlesnake symbolized the Revolution. There are also many notable heroes of the American Revolution, many of whom serve not only as examples of leadership and heroism but as symbols with which individuals fused their own identity. Nathan Hale epitomized identity fusion with words that have echoed through history, even if of dubious historical accuracy: "I only regret that I have but one life to lose for my country."[72] George Washington is celebrated for his leadership during the American Revolution. One author noted that Washington is "a national symbol, an alternate to the American flag."[73] In Washington, we find the most powerful symbol that sparked and sustained identity fusion across the colonies, providing the continued will to fight. Highly fused individuals do not see themselves merely as members of a collective; they are the embodiment of it. It is paradoxical that "a cult of veneration formed around one man in a culture that was explicitly disdainful of the glorification of personality."[74] Washington embodied revolutionary virtues and connected emotionally with soldiers and civilians. He was simultaneously highly fused personally to the collective identity and served as a symbol of the Revolution. He fostered greater identity fusion in others and increased their individual and collective will to fight. The symbolic power of Washington is captured in a summary of his influence during the Revolution:

> Washington's ascension to national honor was abrupt. On his way to Boston . . . he was repeatedly delayed by enthusiastic crowds. Symbols of his adoration emerged before he even did anything. . . . [B]efore even a shot was fired on his command, books were dedicated to him, children were named af-

[71] McCullough, *1776*, 291–92.
[72] McCullough, *1776*, 224.
[73] Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man*, xvi.
[74] Barry Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 1 (1983): 20, https://doi.org/10.2307/2095142.

> ter him, and ships were named after . . . him. . . . Before seeing a demonstration of Washington's military skill, . . . Congress voted him a gold medal and his praises were sung throughout the land. . . . The Massachusetts Assembly . . . praised his achievements. Harvard . . . voted him the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. There was no letup in veneration when the real battles sent the now "godlike Washington" and his men reeling southward in defeat. Celebrations of his birthday [were held] while he was still the harassed commander of a lank, losing army.[75]

It was not Washington's military prowess that provided his symbolic power. People identified with and found a tangible symbol of the cause in George Washington.[76] Individual identities merged with the cause through Washington.

Despite dedication to the cause and the dysphoric bonding experience of New York and the elation of victory at Trenton, many soldiers' terms of service were expiring. Washington appealed to the men whose service obligation was ending:

> My brave fellows, you have done all I asked you to do, and more than could be reasonably expected, but your country is at stake. . . . You have worn yourselves out with fatigues and hardships. . . . If you will consent to stay . . . you will render that service to the cause of liberty, and to your country, which you can probably never do under any other circumstance.[77]

Washington's appeal had the desired effect. The soldiers agreed to remain and fight so long as they saw their fellow soldiers remain committed: "Something about this man touched their hearts. They could not name it, this mysterious, magical quality of leadership, but they could sense that he was asking nothing for himself but pleading for a cause bigger than all of them."[78] Such a will to fight cannot be explained by a short speech. The individual identity of the soldier was now bound, through trials, hardships, and hard-won successes, to the collective. The bonds of kinship were forged through battle. Washington personified this bond.

Washington declined a salary for his service, endured most of the same harsh conditions as his men, and refused royal titles. This symbolized his personal fusion with the group rather than being above it. After he was appoint-

[75] Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," 21.
[76] Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," 23.
[77] McCullough, *1776*, 285–86.
[78] Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 323.

ed commander in chief, it was said that Washington would play a major role in strengthening and uniting the colonies. His influence on the soldiers and younger officers was noted as especially powerful, observed as an immediate boost in morale. There was also hope that others would follow his example and place a higher value on the pursuit of liberty than their own personal interests.[79] A soldier retreating from New York with Washington wrote, "I saw him . . . at the head of a small band, or rather in its rear, for he was always near the enemy, and his countenance and manner made an impression on me which I can never efface."[80] Another soldier cursed Washington for refusing a drink, but later exclaimed after Washington turned back and imbibed, "Now, I'll be damned if I don't spend the last drop of my heart's blood for you!"[81]

Washington served as much more than a military commander; he embodied the entire Revolutionary cause as its living symbol.[82] The power of Washington as a symbol of the shared essence and source of identity fusion fulfilled the popular desire for a tangible symbol of the American cause.[83] People tied their belief in the cause "in the form of devotion to a man" whom they viewed as "a visible symbol of the values and tendencies of his society."[84] In George Washington, soldiers and civilians found the shared essence of the Revolution and the collective will to fight.

This identity fusion did not end with the Revolution. As the revolutionary identity fusion was institutionalized and mythologized, it became the foundation of American national identity. The United States did not base its new identity on shared ancestry or ethnic background. Instead, being American depended on shared ideals and actions, all of which ultimately stemmed from the principles established during the American Revolution.[85] The Declaration of Independence initiated an American identity, which was later expanded on in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights.

This indicates the transgenerational potential of identity fusion and offers insights into contemporary conflicts. As the theory notes, shared essence and ritual foster this powerful bond. The American Revolution and personal identification with the nation have been perpetuated across generations through rituals such as Independence Day celebrations, Washington's birthday, battle reenactments, and monuments. President Washington issued the first Thanksgiving Proclamation, designating 26 November 1789 as a National Day of

[79] McCullough, *1776*, 43–44.
[80] McCullough, *1776*, 247.
[81] Leckie, *George Washington's War*, 444.
[82] Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," 21.
[83] Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," 22–24.
[84] Schwartz, "George Washington and the Whig Conception of Heroic Leadership," 30.
[85] Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 409.

Thanksgiving, embedding national gratitude as a unifying ritual.[86] These and other practices have sustained the resolve among Americans for generations. The United States Marine Corps illustrates this transgenerational dynamic, demonstrating the enduring bonds and heightened will to fight that stem from such fusion.

The U.S. Marine Corps and Transgenerational Identity Fusion

> I don't know where we get the likes of Corporal [Joel] Jaime . . . but the truth is . . . we got lots of 'em . . . and they're all willin' to kill you.[87]

Tun Tavern, Tripoli, Belleau Wood, Samuel Nicholas, John Lejeune, and Lewis B. "Chesty" Puller; these events and people represent the bond of kinship—the fusion of identity—for U.S. Marines across generations. Identity fusion is passed down to those without first-hand experience with euphoric or dysphoric events. Identity fusion theory recognizes the power of rites of passage and ordeals imposed on participants, and the power of ritual, routinization, and repetition. Additionally, Marines' functional equivalence—that all Marines share core capabilities—fosters fusion. Marine Corps Recruit Training, the Marine Corps Birthday, and the concept of functional equivalence reflected by "every Marine a rifleman" serve as examples of how the Marine Corps realizes transgenerational identity fusion.

Rites of Passage: Marine Corps Recruit Training

The primary rite of passage for U.S. Marines, foundational to the bonds expected by identity fusion, is Marine Corps Recruit Training, colloquially known as boot camp. This identity fusion is more than identification with a group. It is stronger and deeper than social identification. The individual does not view themselves as merely part of a group at selected times and places, while retaining some personal identity outside of that of the group. The fusion of identities is enduring, and it can be passed to others. It is a force "such as regiments hand down forever."[88] Marines:

> represent a great deal more than individuals mustered into a division. There is also what is behind [them]. The old battles

[86] George Washington, "Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1789," George Washington's Mount Vernon, 3 October 1789.
[87] Eric M. Smith, "Vice President JD Vance and the Second Lady Usha Vance Attend the United States Marine Corps Ball," X [Twitter] post, 8 November 2025.
[88] USMC 100504: "Such as Regiments Hand Down Forever," United States Marine Corps Film Repository, Moving Image Research Collections, University of South Carolina.

> long-forgotten that secured our nation. Traditions of things endured and things accomplished. . . . All this passes into the forward zone to the point of contact where war is grit with horrors and common men endure these horrors and overcome them along with the . . . reasonable promptings of fear.[89]

The Marine Corps advertises boot camp as a test during which recruits must demonstrate physical, mental, and moral strength to be worthy of the title.[90] The right to wear the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor of the Marine Corps emblem is earned, and the reputation and will to fight is passed on to new Marines by the generations that served before them and helped to build the legacy and shared essence of fighting spirit and the determination to win.[91] This is the very definition of the will to fight as produced by identity fusion.

At boot camp, Marines learn the iconic names and places that exemplify dysphoric and euphoric events, which fuse the new Marine with the Corps. As identity fusion theory predicts, boot camp—through classes, close-order drill, and ritual chanting and marching—transmits collective memories to new generations. Marine recruits learn of the euphoria of the flag raising on Mount Suribachi at Iwo Jima and the bonds created by dysphoric events at the Chosin Reservoir in Korea. This propagates the collective memory of events not personally experienced, forms bonds and pride in the group, and kinship with group members they have never met. Identity fusion is socially learned.

The culminating event at recruit training is the Crucible, which exemplifies both the euphoric and dysphoric experiences imposed on participants as expected by fusion theory. This 54-hour challenge imposes stress and requires individual endurance and teamwork. The Crucible is designed to teach new recruits how to create a cohesive team, rely on other group members, and be a reliable team member. This serves to create mutual and enduring affinity among Marines to each other and to the Marine Corps.[92] The successful recruit is awarded the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor insignia, indicating that the fusion with the Marine Corps and all those who have gone before is complete.

Identity fusion begins on the painted yellow footprints at either the Parris Island or San Diego Recruit Depots and has long been recognized, though perhaps not understood in terms of a precise theoretical basis. The identity fusion that is handed down from one generation to the next, starting in recruit train-

[89] USMC 100504.
[90] "Marine Corps Boot Camp | Recruit Basic Training | Marines," Marines.com, accessed 20 October 2025.
[91] "Marine Corps Boot Camp | Recruit Basic Training | Marines."
[92] "Marine Corps Boot Camp | Recruit Basic Training | Marines."

ing, continues to exist today and is still being transmitted from one generation of Marines to the next. It is in this setting that Marine *esprit de corps* first takes shape, and on these training grounds the next generation of Marines is formed. The identity fusion that is passed down through generations.[93]

Marines like to highlight that the Corps is *of* Marines. It is not a branch of Service that one joins, but it is a being one becomes. Personal identity becomes fused with group identity, creating bonds as strong, if not stronger, than kinship as described by identity fusion theory:

> It's here that these young Americans grasp a full understanding of what it is to be a Marine. That noble inheritance of tradition and honor is carefully handed down. It's here that they learn to be physically tough enough and mentally strong enough to withstand the ugly violence and terrors of war. It's here that they earn the right to share in legends of pride, earned with blood and courage on the battlefields. It's here that they become once and for all Marines, now and forever.[94]

The individual's identity as a Marine is forged—fused—here. It provides the foundation of a Marine's will to fight. It is the individual Marine's identity fusion into that of the Marine Corps that creates and sustains the Marine Corps' superior will to fight.

Marine Corps Recruit Training serves as the foundational rite of passage, forging initial identity fusion. This fusion deepens throughout a Marine's career via the professional military education (PME) continuum, which includes both enlisted (EPME) and officer (OPME) programs. Enlisted Marines reinforce it at the Corporal's Course, Sergeant's Course, and the Staff Noncommissioned Officer Academy. Officers advance fusion beyond The Basic School through the Expeditionary Warfare School, Command and Staff College, War College, and programs such as the School of Advanced Warfighting. These formal episodes, combined with ongoing informal training and education within units—rooted in Marine Corps history, culture, leadership, ethics, and warfighting—keep kinship alive, iterative, and transgenerational, sustaining the will to fight across ranks and generations.

Collective Rituals

Through collective rituals, dysphoric and euphoric events that fused individuals to the group are remembered. Repetition provides a path to maintain the memory of events and people not personally known to the individual. Identity

[93] USMC 100504.
[94] USMC 100504.

with the Marine Corps is socially learned. This identity results in the sense of oneness or kinship, the impetus for pro-group action, extreme behaviors including self-sacrifice, and feelings of invulnerability expected by theory. The annual celebration of the Marine Corps Birthday illustrates the role of collective ritual in maintaining bonds of kinship.

The 10th day of November 1775 is a date all Marines know. As fusion theory notes, ritual chanting during marching or running serves as a conduit for knowledge and kinship. Most Marines know the chant: "Back in 1775, my Marine Corps came alive."[95] It is important to note the ownership Marines take of this birthday and *their* Marine Corps. Invariably, during celebrations of the Marine Corps Birthday, Marines greet one another with "happy birthday, Marine!" The birthday is not referred to as the *anniversary* of a founding; it was a birth. The birth of the organization is shared as a common birth of every individual in that organization. Marines take the group identity as their own, as indicated by this possessive language.

In 1921, the 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps, John A. Lejeune, ordered that a reminder of the honorable service of the Marine Corps be published. It is still read at every Marine Corps Birthday celebration. The proclamation reflects an innate understanding of identity fusion, its powerful effect on the will to fight, and how identity is passed down. A particularly relevant portion of Lejeune's message suggests the transgenerational nature of identity fusion:

> This high name of distinction and soldierly repute we who are Marines today have received from those who preceded us in the corps. With it, we have also received from them the eternal spirit which has animated our corps from generation to generation and has been the distinguishing mark of the Marines in every age.[96]

The identity fusion of Marines to the collective, passed through generations, has long been recognized as contributing to the Marines' and the Marine Corps' famous will to fight. This extends to the concept of functional equivalency.

Every Marine a Rifleman: Functional Equivalency and Fusion

One of the perceptions of highly-fused individuals is functional equivalency—that on some level, each member of the group is the same, fostering a "powerful

[95] "Marine Corps Cadences," DODReads, accessed 20 October 2025.
[96] *Marine Corps Order 47, Marine Corps Birthday Message* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1 November 1921).

sense of connectedness."[97] One needs to look no further than "The Creed of the United States Marine" and the associated sentiment "every Marine a rifleman" to observe how this aspect of identity fusion theory functions within the Marine Corps.[98]

While Marine Corps infantrymen are the specialists of ground combat, every Marine is expected to be capable. When it comes to the will—and ability—to fight, every Marine is able and willing to engage the enemy, no matter their specialty. The 2012 attack on Camp Bastion in Afghanistan serves as evidence. Marines from support forces, aircraft maintainers, and aircrew engaged the enemy in ground combat. One Marine who engaged in that fight later said, "At the time, all I could think of was the guys and girls in my shop and keeping them safe. . . . I didn't really care about my well-being."[99] These Marines drew on their basic infantry training and identity as Marines. Moreover, the feeling of kinship with Marines both past and present offers insight into the power of identity fusion across generations. Another Marine, injured in that fight, when asked if he wanted to go home, replied, "I told them I just got here, why would I want to go home?"[100] This sentiment reflects a long history of the Marines' will to fight, reflected famously in the words of Marine Captain Lloyd W. Williams during the Battle of Belleau Wood in France in 1918, "Retreat, hell! We just got here."[101]

There would perhaps be no Battle of Fallujah without a Hue City, no Hue City without a Chosin Reservoir, no Chosin without Iwo Jima. Success at Iwo Jima may have been in doubt without a Belleau Wood. The Marines fighting with the legendary Sergeant Dan Daly likely drew on the spirit of Chapultepec and Derna, as do modern-day Marines. Identity fusion produced the Marine who requested that his senior drill instructor, rather than the Commandant of the Marine Corps, award the Marine his Purple Heart medal.[102] The results are Lance Corporal Jordan C. Haerter and Corporal Jonathan T. Yale, who selflessly stood their ground and sacrificed their lives for fellow Marines at a gate in

[97] Gómez et al., "On the Nature of Identity Fusion," 919.
[98] "The Rifle Creed, " History Division, Marine Corps University, 2025; and LCpl Bridget M. Keane, " 'Every Marine a Rifleman' Begins at Recruit Training," Marine Corps Training and Education Command, 11 May 2012.
[99] Cpl Bill Waterstreet, "Purple Hearts and Guts of Steel: VMA-211 Marines Recognized for Actions at Camp Bastion," Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, 29 August 2013.
[100] James Mercure, "Face of Defense: Marine Recalls Camp Bastion Attack," DVIDS, 26 September 2012.
[101] Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, 1991), 301.
[102] "Bo Tells the Story of Pinning a Purple Heart on One of His Former Recruits, " JC and Bo Show, YouTube, 8 October 2025.

ar-Ramadi, Iraq.[103] The results are Marine Corps legends John Basilone, Joseph Vittori, and Oscar Austin. Identity fusion creates the likes of Medal of Honor winners Jason L. Dunham, William Kyle Carpenter, and Dakota Meyer. It results in uncommon valor being a common virtue.

Similarly, knowledge of the United States' experience in the American Revolution has served as a pathway for identity fusion on a national scale, described as an "ism." Americanism is unique in terms of the incorporation of individual identity into national identity.[104] This fusion of personal and national identity fosters a kinship across various cultures within the United States. Identity fusion has served the individual and national will to fight for generations. Stemming from the spirit of the American Revolution, and passed down for generations, identity fusion surpasses patriotism. It transcends what an individual belongs to and becomes what an individual is. Personal and national identity are fused, forging a kinship that enhances the will to fight.

Implications and Conclusion

> Fortitude, perseverance, boldness, esprit, and other traits not explainable by art or science are . . . essential in war. We thus conclude that the conduct of war is fundamentally a dynamic process of human competition . . . driven ultimately by the power of human will.[105]

The implications of identity fusion and the will to fight are numerous. These include its role in counterinsurgencies, the centrality of popular will, the power of ideology in shaping resolve, the enduring relevance of nonmaterial factors in war, and caution against underestimating an adversary's will to fight.

Identity fusion theory provides a robust framework for understanding the will to fight—not as an ephemeral sentiment, but as a durable psychological mechanism rooted in the union of personal and group identities. This fusion, cultivated through dysphoric and euphoric events, rituals, and shared symbols, has important implications for military strategy, particularly in an era of protracted conflicts and widely distributed operations. For the United States and its allies, leveraging this theory offers pathways to enhance the will to fight, ensuring resilience amid adversity. Conversely, it illuminates methods for undermining an adversary's fusion, thereby eroding their collective resolve. As

[103] LCpl Casey Jones, "Heroic Last Stand, Marines Thwart Enemy Attack," I Marine Expeditionary Force, 20 May 2008.
[104] Martin Diamond, *The Founding of the Democratic Republic* (Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock Publishers, 1981), 2–3.
[105] *Warfighting*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2018), 1-17.

Clausewitz observed, the moral elements of war often outweigh the physical; identity fusion theory and related concepts give some insights into how these elements can be forged or fractured.[106]

For building the will to fight, theory suggests that military leaders can design experiences that promote oneness with the group. Dysphoric events, such as rigorous training regimens or simulated combat hardships, are exemplified by the Crucible of U.S. Marine Corps recruit training. Such activities aid in forging bonds that surpass mere identification with a group and instill a visceral sense of kinship. Complementing these are euphoric triumphs, whether in exercises or operations, that reinforce identity fusion, as seen in the surge in the morale of both soldiers and civilians following the Battle of Trenton. Rituals—annual commemorations, unit traditions, and recitation of canons like the U.S. Armed Forces' Code of Conduct—transmit this fusion across generations, ensuring that even isolated forces in extensive battlespaces maintain a sense of kinship and connectedness to a broader group.[107] This is especially salient for conflicts in which forces are geographically dispersed. The fused individual's perception of reciprocal strength and functional equivalence can sustain the will to fight and transform potential isolation into an opportunity for heroic resolve. The lack of proximity to other units or the homeland may be substituted with a formidable will to fight stemming from identification as an American, a Marine (soldier, sailor, airman, guardian), and a brother/sister-in-arms. Close kinship gained through identity fusion may offer the will that it takes to persist and prevail.

The Code of the U.S. Fighting Force embodies the use of identity fusion to strengthen individual will to fight. The code draws on history and transgenerational identity fusion, noting that "the Code, although first expressed in written form in 1955, is based on time-honored concepts and traditions that date back to the days of the American Revolution."[108] The Article 1 of the Code of Conduct states, "I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense."[109] This draws on the concept of Americanism, reminding the individual what they are and their duty to potentially die for their country. This kinship formed by identity fusion creates an individual willing to fight and die for another member of the group, including those not personally known to them.

Article 6 of the Code of Conduct reminds the individual to "never for-

[106] Clausewitz, *On War*, 184–85.
[107] *NAVMC 2681, Code of the U.S. Fighting Force* (Washington, DC: American Forces Information Service, Department of Defense, 1988).
[108] *NAVMC 2681, Code of the U.S. Fighting Force*, 2.
[109] *NAVMC 2681, Code of the U.S. Fighting Force*, 4.

get that [they are] an American, fighting for freedom, responsible for [their] actions, and dedicated to the principles which made [their] country free." Further, the individual is to trust in their "God and in the United States of America."[110] This code relies on individual identity being fused, rather than simply associated, with the national identity. The individual fuses with the group, embracing kinship, duty, and a willingness to sacrifice for it. The other's group membership suffices: fighting and dying for it is not only appropriate, but a duty and honor, as theory expects. Such sentiments, previously afforded a place in an imprecise collection of enigmatic forces, are explained by identity fusion.

However, intentional efforts to produce identity fusion might be viewed as exploitive. Likewise, attempts to defuse individuals, even when in their best interests, could be unethical. The use of psychological operations to break existing bonds and create new ones may be counterproductive. The term *propaganda* is most often used as a pejorative: "It is a word fraught with emotional consequence."[111] Any effort to educate, inform, or create new dysphoric and euphoric experiences for individuals might be problematic, especially in democracies.[112] Yet, as one author notes, efforts to inculcate identity fusion build on social contract theory, and may simply "ask the audience . . . to adopt a more selfless perspective."[113] In this way, identity fusion becomes "less about information operations" in terms of propaganda or psychological operations "and more about social identity and civic duty as elements of national security."[114] This is the "democratic propaganda of integration," whereas the malevolent use of propaganda is described as "coercive strategies of agitation," which are akin to the more familiar use of information or psychological operations for indoctrination.[115]

Despite the irrevocability aspect of identity fusion, it is not entirely impervious; it can be eroded through "defusion."[116] This erosion may arise internally from unchecked dysphoria without the balancing effects of euphoric reinforcement, leading to disillusionment. Mao Zedong recognized this, noting that there "must be an ever-present conviction, and if it is forgotten, we may succumb to the temptations of the enemy or be overcome with discourage-

[110] *NAVMC 2681, Code of the U.S. Fighting Force*, 14.
[111] Peter K. Fallon, "Propaganda 1.0: Rhetoric, Persuasion, and Propaganda," in *Propaganda 2.1*: *Understanding Propaganda in the Digital Age* (London: Lutterworth Press, 2022), 1.
[112] Kevin P. Eubanks, "Private Snafu and Political Propaganda," in *Dr. Seuss and the Art of War: Secret Military Lessons*, ed. Montgomery McFate (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), 125–32.
[113] Eubanks, "Private Snafu and Political Propaganda," 141.
[114] Eubanks, "Private Snafu and Political Propaganda," 141.
[115] Eubanks, "Private Snafu and Political Propaganda," 141.
[116] Newson et al., "Explaining Lifelong Loyalty," 10.

ments."[117] Mao also captured the essence of fusing one's own forces through shared hardships like the Long March—dysphoric events that merged personal identities with the revolutionary cause—while defusing enemies via propaganda that amplifies internal divisions and defeats.[118] Mao highlighted betrayals or class fractures that can isolate individuals, prompting them to question why they should sacrifice for a fragmented group.[119] Others have noted that *external* agents may cause defusion.

Russian strategist Evgeny Ivanovich Martynov explained the importance of "subversion of the enemy's population," noting that "almost every country carries within it the germ of internal political or social disease."[120] His goal is to find and exploit collaborators "who are dissatisfied with the existing order"; in other words, those without strongly fused identities.[121] Unknowingly drawing on identity fusion theory, Martynov claims that finding individuals "in the enemy's camp" that can be used to subvert cohesion is

> especially easy when moral decay and the general pursuit of material wealth occupy the society. . . . The idea of the fatherland loses its unifying power and the sense of patriotism weakens, being replaced by individualistic interests. . . . Any country in such a state of decay is easy prey . . . regardless of its visible external might, huge army, enourmous [*sic*] fleet or highly developed culture.[122]

Martynov highlights the significance of psychological operations that target societal cohesion, advocating moral-psychological assaults to fracture group shared essence—operations that defuse the individual from national identity. In modern war, such actions might involve cyber intrusions to manufacture disloyalties or media campaigns that subvert or desecrate symbols, with the effects of eroding functional equivalence and shared essence of a populace that might otherwise sustain the will to fight.

These implications underscore the role of identity fusion as both a bulwark and a vulnerability in modern warfare. By harnessing dysphoric and euphoric pathways, nations and military forces can cultivate the will to fight. Under-

[117] Mao Tse-tung, *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, FMFRP 12-18, trans. BGen Samuel B. Griffith (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1961), 88.
[118] Mao Tse-tung, "Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung: On Protracted War," Marxists.Org, May 1938.
[119] Mao, *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare*, 87–89.
[120] Evgeny Ivanovich Martynov, "The Responsibilities of Politics in Its Relations with Strategy," in *Strategiya: The Foundations of the Russian Art of Strategy*, ed. Ofer Fridman (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 90, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197606162.003.0003.
[121] Martynov, "The Responsibilities of Politics in its Relations with Strategy," 91.
[122] Martynov, "The Responsibilities of Politics in its Relations with Strategy," 92.

standing defusion enables asymmetric advantages, potentially allowing us to bolster our own while diminishing the enemy's will to fight. By understanding experiences, history, rites, rituals, and symbols in more than a superficial manner, we may find ways to reduce adversaries' fusion and reduce their will to fight.

Identity fusion theory helps to demystify the will to fight, offering concrete insights into a phenomenon long recognized but imprecisely understood. The paths for identity fusion evident in the Revolutionaries' will to fight and the Marine Corps' transgenerational kinship provide a starting point for greater theoretical application. The examples here indicate that it is possible to integrate this science into strategy. Enhancing fusion fortifies our warriors and nation against adversity; exploiting defusion weakens foes. Ultimately, the will to fight is not merely awakened but intentionally, and honestly, engineered. Fused identities supply a moral force that, properly leveraged, ensures that those who stand together—as with Shakespeare's "happy few"—prevail not *despite* hardship, but through the enduring bonds that it creates.

National Will to Fight in Allied Democracies
A Comparative Enabling-Conditions Assessment

Graham Wild, PhD, and Paul Fraser, PhD

Abstract: This article examines national will to fight as a system-level enabling condition for sustained defense and deterrence in allied democracies. Rather than attempting to measure resolve directly, predict wartime behavior, or construct composite indices, the study instead undertakes a structured comparative quantitative assessment of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) members and United States allies in the Indo-Pacific. Will to fight is an emergent national capacity shaped by the interaction of material resources, governance legitimacy, institutional effectiveness, social cohesion, and informational resilience, operating within specific alliance, nuclear, and strategic-industrial contexts. Using a proxy-based framework for will to fight based on quantitative dimensions, the analysis suggests that material capability and alliance membership alone are insufficient indicators of national endurance. States with similar defense spending or force structures exhibit different potential will-to-fight profiles once institutional and social substrates are considered. The findings highlight how governance quality, trust, and information resilience act as underlying constraints on sustained resistance, with implications for alliance burden sharing, deterrence credibility, and strategic assessment. The article reframes will to fight as a peacetime preparedness problem rather than a wartime psychological variable.

Keywords: will to fight, deterrence, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, Indo-Pacific, governance, social cohesion, resilience

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Introduction

Will to Fight

The war in Ukraine has recentered attention on a factor that repeatedly outweighs material asymmetries in conflict outcomes; that is, the willingness of a population and its institutions to remain resilient at a cost.[1] Despite clear disadvantages in population size, industrial base, and inherited military stockpiles at the outset of Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, Ukrainian resistance did not collapse.[2] Instead, widespread civilian participation, rapid mobilization, and persistent societal support for national defense have all reshaped expectations about the conflict's trajectory.[3] This outcome can neither be explained by material inputs alone, nor by battlefield performance in isolation, but it points to the strategic importance of popular endurance as a national-level phenomenon, including the integration of cyber operations with kinetic actions targeting communications, infrastructure, and societal systems.[4]

Accounts of Ukrainian resistance consistently emphasize factors beyond force ratios; perceived legitimacy of political authority, clarity of existential stakes, trust in national institutions, and a shared narrative of survival rather than expediency, including the role of information operations and narrative control in shaping public perception and sustaining resistance, as well as the influence of force structure and command and control shaped by regime

[1] Mikhail A. Alexseev and Serhii Dembitskyi, "For Victory in Freedom: Why Ukrainian Resilience to Russian Aggression Endures," in *Proceedings of the PONARS Eurasia Spring Policy Conference* (Washington, DC: PONARS Eurasia, Institute for Europeans, Russian and Eurasian Studies, George Washington University, 2024).

[2] Mykhaylo Zabrodskyi et al., *Preliminary Lessons in Conventional Warfighting from Russia's Invasion of Ukraine: February–July 2022* (London: Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 2022).

[3] Nurlan Aliyev and Mykola Nazarov, "The Role of Civilian-Military Cooperation in the Ukrainian Asymmetric War Strategy," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 38, no. 2 (2025): 157–78, https://doi.org/10.1080/13518046.2025.2533630; Ibrahim Muradov, "Disrupting the Narrative: Ukrainian Agency in Resisting Russia and Winning Western Support," *Europe-Asia Studies* 77, no. 3 (2025): 341–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2025.2465569; and Tetiana Madryha et al., "The Volunteer Movement as a Tool for Strengthening Civil Solidarity in Wartime," *Community Empowerment through Education, Technology and Infrastructure* 17, no. se2 (2024): 183–94, https://doi.org/10.14571/brajets.v17.nse2.183-194.

[4] Lt Ian A. Clark, "The Ethical Character of Russia's Offensive Cyber Operations in Ukraine: Testing the Principle of Double Effect," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 88–101, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402005.

characteristics.[5] Public opinion data throughout the conflict indicate sustained support for continued resistance despite casualties, infrastructure destruction, and economic contraction.[6] Taken together, this national persistence suggests that a tactical view that implicitly conflate will to fight with material superiority or external military support; instead, this suggests a strategic view of will as a system-level property of societies under threat, shaped by governance credibility, social cohesion, and the perceived justice and legitimacy of the cause.[7]

At the same time, the Ukrainian case illustrates the difficulty of measuring will to fight directly. It does not appear as a single observable variable, nor does it map cleanly onto conventional indicators such as defense spending, troop numbers, or alliance commitments. Rather, it manifests indirectly through behavioral outcomes; mobilization compliance, civilian resilience, tolerance of loss, and acceptance of prolonged disruption.[8] These outcomes emerge from interacting political, social, and institutional conditions that are not easily reduced to quantitative metrics.

The Ukrainian experience therefore serves less as an anomaly than as an empirical reminder of a longstanding strategic reality; material superiority does not guarantee success if it is not matched by a society's capacity to endure, adapt, and persist. For allied democracies facing renewed security pressures, particularly within NATO and the Indo-Pacific treaty network, the central question is not whether will to fight exists in the abstract, but under what national conditions it is sustained, eroded, or misjudged. Addressing that question requires moving beyond narrow battlefield indicators toward a com-

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[5] Javier Cifuentes-Faura, "Corruption in Ukraine during the Ukrainian–Russian War: A Decalogue of Policies to Combat It," *Journal of Public Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2024): e2905, https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2905; Shaun Walker, "Kyiv Protesters Celebrate as Parliament Votes to Restore Anti-corruption Bodies' Power," *Guardian* 31 July 2025; Yulia Kurnyshova, "Ukraine at War: Resilience and Normative Agency," *Central European Journal of International and Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2023): 80–110, https://doi.org/10.51870/UXXZ5757; Larysa Tamilina, "Primary Conditions for Institutional Trust in Ukraine during the Conflict," *SSRN* (2025), https://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.5942294; Alex Hughes, "Plan Z: Reassessing Security-Based Accounts of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 174–208, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402009; and Gilbert W. Merkx, "Russia's War in Ukraine: Two Decisive Factors," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 13–33, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402001.

[6] Alina Nychyk and Paul D'Anieri, "Ukrainian Public Opinion and the Path to Peace with Russia," *East European Politics* (2025): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2025.2538481; and V. Chernets et al., "The Impact of Russian Military Aggression on the Establishment of a New Ukrainian Political Nation," *Cuestiones Políticas* 41, no. 78(2023): 357–73, https://doi.org/10.46398/cuestpol.4178.25.

[7] Mikhail A. Alexseev and Serhii Dembitskyi, "Victory-in-freedom: Ukraine's Democratic Resilience in the Face of War," *Sociology: Theory, Methods, Marketing*, no. 2, (2024): 40–55, https://doi.org/10.15407/sociology2024.02.040.

[8] Anthony Roney I, "The Devil's Advocate: An Argument for Moldova and Ukraine to Seize Transnistria," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 121–50, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402007.

parative assessment of enabling conditions that support popular and institutional endurance in war.

Scope and Contribution

This article examines national-level will to fight as an enabling condition for sustained defense and deterrence among allied democracies. This is the state level as noted in the previous work of Ben Connable.[9] The focus is explicitly structural and comparative. The unit of analysis is the sovereign state, not military units, formations, or individual combatants. Issues of battlefield morale, cohesion, leadership psychology, or tactical performance are therefore outside the scope of this work.

The analysis does not attempt to predict conflict behavior, forecast wartime endurance, or quantify resolve in a causal or probabilistic sense. No composite index of will to fight is constructed, and no ranking is offered as a claim about future performance. Instead, the article provides a qualitative comparison of enabling conditions that shape how national will to fight can be generated, sustained, or constrained under stress.

The contribution of the article lies in integrating material capacity, institutional quality, social cohesion, informational resilience, and nuclear context within a single comparative framework across NATO members and Indo-Pacific U.S. allies. By separating material foundations from social and institutional substrates, the article clarifies why similar levels of defense investment or force structure can translate into very different national capacities for sustained resistance. The intent is not an explanation in the strict causal sense, but structured interpretation, providing a defensible basis for assessing national preparedness and alliance resilience beyond narrow measures of military power. Limiting the NATO and U.S. Indo-Pacific allies excludes other interesting and topical historical examples, such as the fall of Kabul in 2021 and the fall of Saigon in 1975, these represent the focus of future work.[10]

Will to Fight at the National Level

Defense and security studies consistently distinguish between will to fight at the tactical or unit level and will to fight at the strategic or national level. *Tactical will to fight* refers to the immediate motivation and effectiveness of military

[9] Ben Connable, "Structuring Cultural Analyses: Applying the Holistic Will-to-Fight Models," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* SI (2022): 153–67, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.2022SIstratcul009.

[10] Florian Weigand, "Why Did the Taliban Win (Again) in Afghanistan?," *LSE Public Policy Review* 2, no. 3 (2022): 1–10, https://doi.org/10.31389/lseppr.54; and Heather Marie Stur, "Blurred Lines: The Home Front, the Battlefront, and the Wartime Relationship between Citizens and Government in the Republic of Vietnam," *War & Society* 38, no. 1 (2019): 57–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/07292473.2019.1524345.

units in combat and is closely associated with morale, cohesion, leadership, and psychological readiness.[11] These factors shape short-term battlefield performance and can often be influenced directly through training, command practices, and organizational culture. *Strategic or national will to fight*, by contrast, refers to a society's capacity to sustain conflict over time. It is rooted in political legitimacy, societal support, shared narratives, and tolerance of cost, rather than in battlefield dynamics alone.[12] The literature emphasizes that strong tactical cohesion does not guarantee strategic success if broader institutional and societal support erodes, highlighting the need to treat national will to fight as a distinct, system-level property rather than an aggregate of unit-level morale.[13]

Defense and military studies literature consistently identifies a small set of national-level factors that enable a sustained will to fight over time. Foremost among these are governance legitimacy and institutional effectiveness, which shape whether populations accept the costs of conflict and comply with mobilization, taxation, and sacrifice. Governance legitimacy is typically operationalized through indicators of political stability, public trust, and perceived responsiveness, and is repeatedly shown to condition societal support for prolonged military engagement.[14] Closely related is institutional effectiveness, referring to the capacity of state institutions to function under stress, allocate resources, and maintain policy coherence during crisis. Empirical work suggests that institutional resilience, including decentralized and adaptive governance structures, plays a critical role in sustaining national endurance during extended conflicts.[15]

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[11] Daniel Ussishkin, "New Wars: Morale and Democratic Mobilization," in *Morale: A Modern British History* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 73–101, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190469078.003.0005.

[12] Maj Jeffrey L. LaFace, *Tactical Victory Leading to Operational Failure: Rommel in North Africa* (India: Lucknow Books, 2014); Israel Drori and Benson Honig, "A Process Model of Internal and External Legitimacy," *Organization Studies* 34, no. 3 (2013): 345–76, https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840612467153; and Christopher Bobier and Daniel Hurst, "Battlefield Triage: A Resolvable Moral Tragedy," *Voices in Bioethics* 10 (2024), https://doi.org/10.52214/vib.v10i.12913.

[13] Catherine L. Dempsey et al., "Social Closeness and Support Are Associated with Lower Risk of Suicide among U.S. Army Soldiers," *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 51, no. 5 (July 2021): 940–54, https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12778; and Deirdre MacManus at al., "The Mental Health of the UK Armed Forces in the 21st Century: Resilience in the Face of Adversity," *Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps* 160, no. 2 (June 2014): 125, https://doi.org/10.1136/jramc-2013-000213.

[14] Vladyslav Pustovar, Kostyantyn Zakharenko, and Yehor Minenko, "Institutional Stability of the State during the War: Political Factors of Economic Security of Ukraine," *Baltic Journal of Economic Studies* 11, no. 4 (October 2025): 260–68, https://doi.org/10.30525/2256-0742/2025-11-4-260-268.

[15] Pustovar, Zakharenko, and Minenko, "Institutional Stability of the State during the War"; and Nataliia Sabadash and Anatoliy Kruglashov, "Decentralisation Processes in Ukraine: Dilemmas of Democratisation and National Security," *Public Policy & Administration* 21, no. 1 (March 2022): 22–37, https://doi.org/10.5755/j01.ppaa.21.1.28441.

The literature shows social cohesion and information resilience are key enabling conditions. Social cohesion reflects the degree of common identity, norms, and shared commitment within a society, which can support collective action and tolerance of hardship, although findings remain mixed regarding which forms of social capital translate into durable national resilience.[16] Information resilience has become increasingly prominent in contemporary conflict analysis, capturing a society's ability to withstand misinformation, propaganda, and information manipulation, and to maintain coherent public understanding of war aims and costs. Also, alliance assurance becomes a significant external modifier of national will to fight. Credible security partnerships can reinforce domestic confidence, reduce perceived isolation, and strengthen political legitimacy for sustained defense commitments, particularly for non-nuclear or medium powers.[17] How the Donald J. Trump administration's suspension of military aide has affected Ukrainian morale is yet to be fully studied.[18]

The literature consistently notes that national will to fight is difficult to measure directly because it is an abstract, emergent property rather than a single observable variable. Unlike material indicators such as force size or defense spending, will to fight encompasses legitimacy, public acceptance of cost, and societal commitment, which are shaped by historical, political, and cultural context.[19] These dimensions vary significantly across regimes and conflicts, limiting the validity of direct cross-national measurement and making singular metrics analytically misleading. As a result, defense and security studies typically avoid direct quantification and instead rely on proxy-based and qualitative approaches. Common proxies include public opinion indicators, measures of governance quality and institutional performance, and indicators of social cohesion, which are used to infer societal support and mobilization capacity rather than resolve itself.[20] Qualitative methods, including case studies, interviews, and content

[16] Xiang Gao, " 'Staying in the Nationalist Bubble': Social Capital, Culture Wars, and the COVID-19 Pandemic," *M/C Journal* 24, no. 1 (2021), https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2745; Ben Caves et al., *Enhancing Defence's Contribution to Societal Resilience in the UK: Lessons from International Approaches* (Cambridge, UK: Rand Europe, 2021); and Daniel P. Aldrich, *Building Resilience: Social Capital in Post-Disaster Recovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

[17] Will Davies, *Improving the Engagement of UK Armed Forces Overseas: Generating a Sophisticated Understanding of Complex Operating Environments* (London: Chatham House, 2022).

[18] Iselin Brady et al., "Can Ukraine Fight Without U.S. Aid?: Seven Questions to Ask," Center for Strategic and International Studies, 19 May 2025.

[19] Mark C. Suchman, "Managing Legitimacy: Strategic and Institutional Approaches," *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3 (July 1995): 571–610, https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.2307/258788; and Bruce Gilley, "The Meaning and Measure of State Legitimacy: Results for 72 Countries," *European Journal of Political Research* 45, no. 3 (May 2006): 499–525, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6765.2006.00307.x.

[20] Muhammad Nadeem, Mumtaz Anwar, and Zahid Pervaiz, "The Impact of Political Institutional Quality on Social Cohesion: Evidence from Worldwide Perspective," *Journal of Public Affairs* 22, no. 4 (2022): e2630, https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2630.

analysis, are frequently employed to capture contextual dynamics and national narratives that shape endurance and legitimacy in wartime.[21]

Nuclear and Space Contexts as Strategic Modifiers

National will to fight does not emerge in a strategic vacuum. Certain capabilities do not constitute will in themselves, but they materially reshape how costs, risks, and survivability are perceived by political leaders, military institutions, and societies. Among these, nuclear posture and space-domain capability function as high-level strategic modifiers. They do not replace the social, institutional, or material enabling conditions identified elsewhere in this paper, but they condition how those factors are interpreted and mobilized under stress.

Nuclear Posture as a Contextual Modifier

Nuclear weapons affect national will to fight indirectly, through their influence on strategic expectations rather than through any direct contribution to conventional combat capability. Previous research found that if a state possesses weapons, it is more likely to experience conflict, but not war, as states "expand their interests" after acquiring nuclear weapons.[22]

Their effects operate along at least three analytically distinct pathways. First, nuclear deterrence influences the perception of national survivability. A reliable nuclear deterrent can increase a state's confidence that existential defeat or annihilation is unlikely, even under severe conventional pressure. This in turn can increase the tolerance for conventional costs, casualties, and disruption because of the perceived end-state. At the same time, nuclear possession can also dampen conventional will if elites or populations come to view nuclear escalation as the dominant strategic outcome, rendering conventional sacrifice strategically marginal. These effects are not contradictory; they reflect different assessments of how nuclear capability interacts with escalation control.

While people most commonly think of nuclear deterrence as discouraging attack on the possessor, deterrence is most broadly "the coaxing and persuasion of a prospective foe that the self-interest must be observed through the avoidance of assured sequence of actions," so nuclear deterrence can also include using the threat of nuclear weapons to discourage external interference in an

[21] William G. Nomikos and Eric Stollenwerk, "More Security, More Trust?: Security Perceptions as a Source of Government Trust in Post-Conflict Settings," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 19, no. 3 (2025): 329–50, https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2367862; and Clara Margotin, "Embedded Journalism as a Strategic Enabler in US Contentious Foreign Policymaking Domestic Legitimization: Evidence from the 2003 Invasion of Iraq," *Journal of Global Faultlines* 11, no. 1 (2024): 27–53, https://doi.org/10.13169/jglobfaul.11.1.0027.

[22] Mark S. Bell and Nicholas L. Miller, "Questioning the Effect of Nuclear Weapons on Conflict," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 1 (2015): 74–92, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002713499718.

expeditionary war.[23] During Vladimir Putin's speech announcing Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, he addressed "those who may be tempted to interfere with these developments from the outside" and said "they must know that Russia will respond immediately and the consequences will be such as you have never seen in your entire history."[24] This was understood as a nuclear threat and, while addressed to foreign governments, it was delivered in Russian during a televised address to the Russian people; it was intended to increase their will to fight. This was followed by a public announcement in September 2024 of changes to Russian nuclear doctrine to reduce the threshold for using nuclear weapons, and publication of the new doctrine in November of that year.[25]

Second, nuclear weapons introduce escalation risk and constraint. Especially in democratic societies, awareness of catastrophic escalation can suppress willingness to initiate or sustain high-intensity conventional operations if the perceived probability of nuclear use rises. To use Robert Powell's formulation of the "stability-instability paradox," "the less likely a conventional war is to escalate to a nuclear war, the lower the expected cost of launching a conventional war and the more likely states are to start them."[26] Here, the inverse pertains; Putin increases the risk of nuclear war if Western nations intervene conventionally, so they are less likely to launch their war against Russia, as warned by Lavoy soon after the Cold War.[27] This message is broadcast to the Russian people, with the intention that they have more will to fight. Nuclear capability can therefore simultaneously stiffen resolve through deterrence credibility and induce restraint through escalation fear. Both effects act on will to fight, but in opposite directions, depending on context, doctrine, and threat perception.

Third, nuclear posture shapes alliance assurance. For non-nuclear states, confidence in extended deterrence alters national will indirectly by influencing beliefs about abandonment, entrapment, and escalation dominance, even if no umbrella has been formally extended.[28] Strong confidence in allied nuclear protection may support sustained resistance by reducing fears of existential loss.

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[23] Arushi Singh, "Russia's Nuclear Strategy: Changes or Continuities," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 34–48, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402002.

[24] Vladimir Putin, "Address by the President of the Russian Federation" (speech, Kremlin, Russian Federation, 24 February 2022).

[25] Patricia Lewis, "How Likely Is the Use of Nuclear Weapons by Russia?," Chatham House, 2022.

[26] Robert Powell, "Nuclear Brinkmanship, Limited War, and Military Power," *International Organization* 69, no. 3, (2015): 589–626, https://doi.org/ 10.1017/S0020818315000028.

[27] Peter R. Lavoy, "The Strategic Consequences of Nuclear Proliferation: A Review Essay," *Security Studies* 4, no. 4 (1995): 695–753, https://doi.org/10.1080/09636419509347601.

[28] Matt Buehler and Arjun Banerjee, "Who Would Trust a Nuclear Umbrella?: Results from an Original Survey on Public Confidence in Future Nuclear Guarantees in Morocco," *Nonproliferation Review* 29, no. 4-6 (2022): 267–87, https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700.2023.2205299.

Conversely, doubts about extended deterrence credibility can either motivate greater national self-reliance, such as France developing its own arsenal because it considers the American nuclear umbrella unreliable, or depress will through fatalism and perceived strategic vulnerability.[29] Which effect dominates is contingent on domestic institutions, threat narratives, and historical experience. For these reasons, nuclear capability is treated in this study as a categorical contextual variable, distinguishing nuclear-armed states, nuclear-sharing hosts, extended deterrence beneficiaries, and states without an explicit nuclear umbrella. It is not a measure of will to fight, but a strategic condition that modifies how other enabling factors operate.

Space Capability and Strategic-Industrial Depth

Space capability plays a different but complementary role. National investment in space systems reflects the maturity of a country's advanced technological and engineering base, particularly its capacity to design, integrate, and operate complex, high-reliability systems under strategic pressure. Space capability therefore functions as a proxy for strategic-industrial depth rather than as a direct contributor to combat power.

From a will-to-fight standpoint, space capability matters less for what it does in combat than for what it signals about national depth. States that can design, operate, and sustain space systems generally have the industrial coordination and technical workforce needed to keep critical enabling functions working when systems are degraded or disrupted. That matters in long conflicts, where the question is not whether capabilities exist on day one, but whether they can be repaired, replaced, or adapted over time. Where this capacity is absent, reliance on allied space enablers becomes unavoidable, and that dependence can narrow strategic options and heighten perceptions of vulnerability among both decision-makers and the public.

Space investment also signals long-term strategic intent. Sustained national commitment to space programs indicates political willingness to fund complex, long-horizon projects with uncertain payoffs, a characteristic that correlates with broader state capacity and planning coherence. In this sense, space capability is not merely technological, but institutional, reflecting coordination across government, industry, and research sectors.

Interaction Effects

Nuclear and space contexts shape the environment in which national will to

[29] Nicolas Bardio, "Towards a French Nuclear Umbrella?: Assessing the Transition from US to French Dual-key Arrangements," *European Journal of International Security* (October 2025): 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1017/eis.2025.10017.

fight is formed, but they do not displace the social and institutional conditions discussed elsewhere in this paper. Nuclear capability, in particular, does not insulate a state from problems of legitimacy or public trust; possession of a deterrent alone does not sustain political consent over time. At the same time, states with effective institutions but limited deterrence may confront tighter constraints when threats are perceived as existential. Space capability operates in a comparable way. It tends to strengthen states that already possess coherent governance and social cohesion, but it does little to stabilize will to fight where those foundations are weak.

Treating nuclear posture and space capability as explicit contextual modifiers allows these interactions to be analyzed without inflating their explanatory power. They frame the strategic environment within which national will to fight is generated, sustained, or constrained, while leaving the core determinants rooted in governance, social cohesion, and institutional effectiveness.

Analysis

Analytical Framework

To be able to assess and comment on the national will to fight, several dimensions are of interest for each sovereign state to be included in the comparative analysis. The dimensions included in this analysis are not intended to measure will to fight directly. Rather, each variable functions as a proxy for structural conditions that enable or constrain a state's capacity to sustain resistance under prolonged strategic stress. Will to fight is treated here as an emergent property of these interacting conditions, not as a sentiment or psychological disposition.

Alliance: primary alliance context for the state, either NATO or an Indo-Pacific U.S. ally. Alliance context establishes the strategic environment within which national decisions are made. Alliance membership shapes expectations of support, burden sharing, and escalation control. These expectations influence national cost tolerance and political sustainability, particularly for non-nuclear states relying on extended deterrence.

Population: total national population for 2024 as given by the World Bank.[30] Generally, population provides a baseline for mobilization potential and societal depth. Larger populations do not imply greater will to fight, but they affect the scale at which losses can be absorbed, reserves generated, and economic activity sustained without systemic collapse.

Gross domestic product (GDP): GDP in current U.S. dollars per capita for 2024 as given by the World Bank.[31] GDP per capita serves as a proxy

[30] "Population, Total," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026. World population prospects are provided by the United Nations Population Division.

[31] "GDP per Capita (Current US$)," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026. GDP per capita is based on official country statistics.

for overall economic capacity and societal resilience. Higher GDP per capita increases a state's ability to finance prolonged conflict, absorb economic disruption, and maintain public services under stress, all of which condition endurance rather than immediate military effectiveness. This measure should be interpreted alongside the structure of the economy, as states with output concentrated in a narrow sector may be more exposed to external shocks, sanctions, or supply disruptions, whereas more diversified economies are likely to offer greater adaptive capacity under sustained stress.

Defense spending: defense or military spending/expenditure expressed as a percentage of national GDP for 2024 as given by the World Bank.[32] Defense spending as a percentage of GDP reflects revealed national priorities rather than absolute power. Sustained high defense effort signals political willingness to allocate resources to security at the expense of civilian consumption, a necessary precondition for long-term will to fight.

Active military: number of active-duty military personnel based on world population numbers from 2024.[33] Active military personnel represent standing force availability and immediate readiness during peacetime conditions.

Reserve plus paramilitary: the combined number of reserve and paramilitary personnel, including potential mobilization depth and surge capacity, based on world population numbers from 2024.[34] Reserve-heavy structures indicate institutionalized expectations of civilian participation in defense, which is directly relevant to national endurance.

Military per 1,000: total military personnel (active plus reserve and paramilitary) per 1,000 population.[35] This dataset normalizes force structure relative to society, providing an indicator of how deeply defense is embedded within the population. High density suggests a society structurally oriented toward sustained defense participation rather than expeditionary or symbolic force contributions.

E in, net: net energy imports as a percentage of total energy use, based on data from the World Bank, with most values being for 2023.[36] Net energy imports function as a vulnerability indicator. High external energy dependence constrains national autonomy during conflict conditions and can erode will to fight through economic shock, supply disruption, and civilian hardship, particularly in prolonged scenarios.

[32] "Military Expenditure (% of GDP)," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026. Military spending is based on data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's military expenditure database.

[33] "Current World Population, 2024," World Population Review, accessed 1 April 2026.

[34] "Current World Population, 2024."

[35] "Military Size by Country, year," World Population Review, accessed 1 April 2026.

[36] "Energy Imports, Net (% of Energy Use)," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026. Energy data based on statistics from the International Energy Agency.

National Cyber Security Index (NCSI): NCSI score based on 2024 values.[37] The NCSI score reflects institutional preparedness to defend critical digital infrastructure. Cyber resilience is a necessary condition for maintaining governance, communications, and public trust during conflict, especially during sustained hybrid or gray-zone pressure.

Education: educational attainment proxy, defined as the percentage of the adult population (older than 25) having completed at least upper secondary education based on 2024 data from the World Bank.[38] Education attainment is used as a population-level capacity indicator. Higher education levels correlate with information processing capability, institutional trust formation, and adaptability, which collectively affect resistance to panic, misinformation, and strategic shock.

Social media: social media usage, as a proportion of the population using social media platforms, from World Population Review for 2025.[39] Social media usage captures exposure to the digital information environment. High exposure increases both mobilization potential and vulnerability to disinformation. It therefore operates as a conditional variable whose effect depends on education, institutional trust, and cybersecurity capacity.

Disinformation (DIS): qualitative indicator of relative susceptibility to disinformation, derived from the interaction of education and social media exposure using median-based classification. This is a derived, interpretive column. A high education percentage and a low social media exposure percentage gives a low disinformation susceptibility ranking (1). Conversely, a lower education percentage and a high social media exposure percentage gives a high disinformation susceptibility ranking (3). Disinformation susceptibility reflects relative vulnerability to narrative manipulation rather than actual belief adoption, and is included to highlight informational fragility as a constraint on sustained will.

Space industry: space industry spending in current U.S. dollars, defined as total national investment in space programs for the reference year from the *Government Space Program* report.[40] Used as a proxy for the maturity and depth of a country's advanced technology and engineering base, reflecting the capacity to design, integrate, and manufacture complex high-reliability systems if required.

Trust in government: public trust in national government based on *Wel-*

[37] "National Cyber Security Index," NCSI, e-Governance Academy Foundation, accessed 1 April 2026.

[38] "Educational Attainment, at Least Completed Primary, Population 25+ Years, Total (%) (Cumulative)," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026. Statistics based on data from UNESCO Institute for Statistics.

[39] "Social Media Users by Country, year," World Population Review, accessed 1 April 2026.

[40] NovaSpace, "New Historic High for Government Space Spending Mostly Driven by Defense Expenditures," press release, 19 December 2023.

come Global Monitor 2020.[41] Trust in government captures perceived legitimacy and social consent. High trust increases tolerance for sacrifice, compliance with mobilization, and acceptance of hardship. Low trust constrains political sustainability even when material capacity is strong.

Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI): published each year by Transparency International, selected from data sets that capture business sector and expert surveys and assessments of public sector corruption for 2025.[42] This compliments the trust in government measure of a society's willingness to sacrifice and comply.

Government effectiveness: government effectiveness score from the Worldwide Governance Indicators provided by the World Bank, with most values being for 2023.[43] Highlights perceptions of public service quality, policy implementation capacity, and administrative competence. Government effectiveness reflects administrative competence and policy implementation capacity. Effective governance is required to translate resources into outcomes during crisis, and weak effectiveness can rapidly erode will to fight regardless of public sentiment.

Liberal democracy: liberal democracy index score from the V-Dem project values for 2024.[44] Captures democratic legitimacy context, including electoral integrity, civil liberties, and constraints on executive power. Liberal democracy indicators contextualize political legitimacy and constraint. While democracy does not guarantee will to fight, low democratic legitimacy can undermine endurance by weakening consent, increasing internal friction, or incentivizing repression that degrades institutional coherence. In this sense, liberal democracies tend to sustain mobilization through consent and institutional trust, whereas more coercive systems may generate short-term compliance but often at the cost of longer-term resilience as repression erodes legitimacy and increases systemic strain.

Nuclear context: categorical classification of the state's nuclear posture, distinguishing nuclear-weapon states (NWS), nuclear-sharing hosts, states relying on extended deterrence under an umbrella, and states with no nuclear deterrence role.[45] Nuclear context is a strategic modifier. Nuclear-armed status, nuclear-sharing arrangements, extended deterrence reliance, or absence of nu-

[41] *Welcome Global Monitor 2020: Covid-19* (London: Welcome Trust, 2021).
[42] "Corruption Perceptions Index, 2025," Transparency International, accessed 1 April 2026.
[43] "Government Effectiveness: Percentile Rank," World Bank, accessed 1 April 2026.
[44] "Liberal Democracy Index, 2024," OurWorldInData.org, accessed 1 April 2026.
[45] Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, 7 July 2017, C.N.475.2017; Anya L. Fink, *U.S. Extended Deterrence and Regional Nuclear Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2026); *SIPRI Yearbook, 2025: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2025); and "Nuclear Notebook: Nuclear Arsenals of the World," Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, accessed 8 April 2026.

clear assurance alter perceptions of survivability, escalation risk, and alliance credibility. These factors condition cost tolerance and political sustainability without constituting will to fight in themselves.

Comparative Analysis

First, there is a very sharp split between global system shapers and regional or dependent actors. The United States sits in a category of its own, not just because of population or defense spending, but because space investment and nuclear status stack on top of mass. No other country combines population scale, active forces, reserve depth, per-capita military funds, and space investment at anything like that level (table 1).

Second, the United Kingdom (UK)–France–Germany triangle looks materially uneven in a way that is often obscured in strategic discourse. France is materially more balanced than the UK, with larger active and reserve forces and substantially higher space investment. Germany has economic mass but weaker force density and modest reserves, which it is actively addressing. The UK's profile is narrower than its reputation suggests, including a moderate force size, moderate density, and relatively modest space investment compared with France. That is, the UK is problematic, it is not dominant even within its peer set at the top of the table.

Third, the Nordic approach is clear. Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark all show relatively small populations but high military density, strong reserves, and consistent defense effort. Finland stands out materially because of its extraordinary reserve depth relative to population, which structurally differentiates it from almost every other NATO member except Korea. This matters because it is a latent mobilization capacity, not just standing force size. Iceland being the exception here.

Table 1 shows the material and strategic capacity of NATO and Indo-Pacific allied states, capturing the structural foundations relevant to national defense and deterrence. It is worth dissecting the table and analyzing the contents. However, taken together, table 1 shows that material capacity is extremely unevenly distributed and that many alliance members rely implicitly on others for strategic depth.

Fourth, Eastern Europe shows a mobilization-heavy but capital-light pattern. Poland, the Baltics, Romania, and Bulgaria have high defense spending as a share of GDP and relatively high military density, but very limited space investment and lower GDP per capita. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are particularly interesting because they achieve high per-capita military figures despite tiny populations and minimal industrial depth. This suggests a will-to-fight orientation but also fragility if conflicts become prolonged or technologically escalatory.

Table 1. Material and strategic capacity indicators for NATO and Indo-Pacific allied states

Country	Alliance	Population (1,000s)	GDP (USD per capita)	Defense spending (% GDP)	Active military (1,000s)	Reserve + paramilitary (1,000s)	Military population (per 1,000)	Space industry (USD)	Nuclear context
United States	NATO	340,111	84,534	3.4	1,326	807	3.899	73,200	NWS
Canada	NATO	41,289	54,340.3	1.3	67	40	1.632	730	Umbrella
United Kingdom	NATO	69,226	53,246.4	2.3	144	71	2.086	1,448	NWS
France	NATO	68,552	46,103.1	2.1	270	205	3.939	3,466	NWS
Germany	NATO	83,517	56,103.7	1.9	184	50	2.197	2,286	Host
Italy	NATO	58,953	40,385.3	1.6	166	194	2.807	2,111	Host
Spain	NATO	48,849	35,326.8	1.4	120	91	2.464	757	Umbrella
Portugal	NATO	10,695	29,292.2	1.5	27	236	2.548	142	Umbrella
Netherlands	NATO	17,993	67,520.4	1.9	35	10	1.967	203	Host
Belgium	NATO	11,859	56,614.6	1.3	26	5	2.218	335	Host
Luxembourg	NATO	677	137,781.7	1	1	1	1.329	183	Umbrella
Norway	NATO	5,572	86,785.4	2.1	23	40	4.172	191	Umbrella
Denmark	NATO	5,977	71,026.5	2.4	15	44	2.426	66	Umbrella
Finland	NATO	5,620	53,149.8	2.3	24	268	4.235	79	Umbrella
Sweden	NATO	10,570	57,117.5	2	30	21	2.815	153	Umbrella
Iceland	NATO	387	86,040.5	0.2	0	0	0.000	0	Umbrella
Estonia	NATO	1,372	31,428.4	3.4	7	18	5.174	8.9	Umbrella
Latvia	NATO	1,866	23,409.1	3.3	6	16	3.328	1.7	Umbrella
Lithuania	NATO	2,888	29,384	3.1	20	21	6.873	1.8	Umbrella
Poland	NATO	36,559	25,103.6	4.2	114	75	3.120	169	Umbrella
Czechia	NATO	1,0905	31,823.3	1.9	22	0	1.994	80	Umbrella
Slovak Republic	NATO	5,422	25,992.7	2	16	0	2.923	3	Umbrella
Hungary	NATO	9,562	23,292.3	2.2	28	32	2.907	60	Umbrella
Romania	NATO	19,052	20,080.2	2.3	69	107	3.637	88	Umbrella
Bulgaria	NATO	6,441	17,596	2.1	37	3	5.736	0.95	Umbrella
Greece	NATO	10,405	24,626.1	3.1	143	225	13.714	39	Umbrella
Türkiye	NATO	85,519	15,892.7	1.9	355	536	4.153	329	Host
Croatia	NATO	3,866	24,050.4	1.8	15	21	3.932	0.3	Umbrella
Slovenia	NATO	2,127	34,301	1.3	7	7	3.408	13	Umbrella
Albania	NATO	2,377	11,377.8	2	9	2	3.576	0	Umbrella
Montenegro	NATO	624	13,263.3	1.8	2	10	3.769	1	Umbrella
North Macedonia	NATO	1,824	9,291.9	2.1	8	12	4.385	0	Umbrella
Japan	Indo-Pacific	123,975	32,487.1	1.4	247	71	1.992	4,653	Umbrella
Republic of Korea	Indo-Pacific	51,751	36,238.6	2.6	500	6,114	9.662	723	Umbrella

Table 1. Material and strategic capacity indicators for NATO and Indo-Pacific allied states (continued)

Country	Alliance	Population (1,000s)	GDP (USD per capita)	Defense spending (% GDP)	Active military (1,000s)	Reserve + paramilitary (1,000s)	Military population (per 1,000)	Space industry (USD)	Nuclear context
Australia	Indo-Pacific	27,197	64,604	1.9	59	30	2.155	631	Umbrella
New Zealand	Indo-Pacific	5,288	49,205.2	1.2	9	2	1.702	19	None
Philippines	Indo-Pacific	115,844	3,984.8	1.3	150	1,462	1.295	21	None

Source: based on author's compilation of data.

Fifth, Greece and Türkiye are an interesting contrast. Greece has extreme military density and very large reserves relative to population, reflecting historical threat perception, but little strategic-industrial depth. Türkiye has both population mass and large forces, but only middling defense spending and relatively modest space investment given its size. Materially, Türkiye should be a top-tier NATO power, yet even here the table shows under-realization of potential.

Sixth, the small Western European states'—Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Portugal—material profiles are thin across almost every dimension except GDP per capita in Luxembourg's case. Even the Netherlands, often seen as a capable military contributor, has very limited reserves and modest force density. Luxembourg represents the clearest illustration that extreme wealth without force structure or mobilization depth produces almost no material will-to-fight capacity.

Finally, the Indo-Pacific cases are very revealing when isolated from governance. South Korea is the most extreme mobilization state in the entire dataset, with massive reserves, high density, serious defense spending, and nontrivial space investment. Japan, by contrast, looks materially constrained, with moderate forces, low density, and modest defense spending, despite significant space investment. Australia and New Zealand sit clearly as expeditionary-capable but mobilization-light states, while the Philippines shows population mass without economic or technological depth.

Table 2 isolates the social, institutional, and informational substrate of national will to fight. When compared with table 1, the dimensions actively reshape how much of the material capacity identified in table 1 is usable in a sustained conflict.

The United States stands out as a structurally asymmetric case. Education and NCSI are strong, but trust in government and governance effectiveness are only middling relative to peers. Liberal democracy remains high but not exceptional. This confirms an important nuance, the United States scores highly overall because of overwhelming material capacity, not because of institutional

Table 2. Social, institutional, and informational indicators relevant to national will to fight

Country	Net E in (% of use)	NCSI (%)	Education (%)	Social media (%)	DIS (1–3)	Trust in government (%)	CPI (%)	Government efficiency (1–3)	Liberal democracy (%)
United States	-9	84.17	95.4	72.85	1	52.5	64	1.217	74.8
Canada	-90	96.67	89.9	79	2	72.6	75	1.517	74.4
United Kingdom	44	75	80.5	78.79	2	47.7	70	1.161	75.2
France	47	89.17	78	75.62	2	56.3	66	1.145	79.9
Germany	70	90.83	81.9	77.91	2	82	77	1.185	79.2
Italy	80	88.33	55.3	71.35	2	52.3	53	0.611	70.5
Spain	77	89.17	55.7	82.9	3	48.2	55	0.752	74.5
Portugal	77	84.17	48.6	71.94	2	47.7	56	0.988	75.1
Netherlands	87	81.67	74.1	80.67	3	78.5	78	1.626	76.1
Belgium	89	94.17	74.4	76.37	3	54.9	69	1.037	80.5
Luxembourg	110	66.23	77.2	46.59	2	80.81	78	1.914	78.3
Norway	-704	79.17	81.9	77.18	2	94.3	81	1.800	83.9
Denmark	44	89.17	78.1	78.13	3	79.3	89	2.016	88.3
Finland	30	95.83	82.1	78.07	2	80.7	88	1.739	80.2
Sweden	28	75.83	84.7	81.17	2	64.7	80	1.601	84.5
Iceland	20	78.33	80.2	78.59	3	48.62	77	1.555	75.9
Estonia	4	96.67	86.6	73.57	1	56	76	1.263	85
Latvia	34	85.83	89.2	76.07	2	39.6	60	0.697	76.5
Lithuania	71	90	92.5	73.85	1	55.1	65	1.050	73.4
Poland	49	92.5	87.8	76.03	2	33.6	52	0.421	61.6
Czechia	42	98.33	91.4	75.31	1	45.8	59	1.114	81.7
Slovak Republic	58	92.5	90.1	72.7	1	53.5	48	0.230	58.4
Hungary	63	93.33	83.9	73.09	1	48.6	40	0.373	31.8
Romania	28	92.5	72.8	68.75	2	24.3	45	-0.093	44.5
Bulgaria	41	80.83	80.2	65.08	2	40.4	40	0.047	50.8
Greece	89	85	70.1	73.65	2	40.7	50	0.148	57.6
Türkiye	72	71.67	41.1	66.72	2	54.9	31	-0.248	11.7
Croatia	57	82.5	81.4	69.64	1	42	47	0.713	61.9
Slovenia	49	89.17	82.3	74.63	1	48.1	58	1.039	61.9
Albania	23	85	54	50.87	2	41.4	39	0.251	39.6
Montenegro	24	64.17	81.9	64.8	1	43.2	46	0.247	47.8
North Macedonia	64	66.67	68.7	55.13	2	37.2	40	-0.051	37.4
Japan	87	82.5	85.2	78.8	2	49.5	71	1.631	73.4
Republic of Korea	85	83.33	81.5	94.64	2	52.8	63	1.405	63.1
Australia	-214	87.5	79.9	77.48	3	69.5	76	1.590	80.8
New Zealand	32	65	75.1	78.83	3	83.7	81	1.530	80.9
Philippines	54	55.83	34.5	77.75	3	82.9	32	0.154	30.8

Source: based on author's compilation of data.

cohesion. In a will-to-fight framing, the United States is structurally powerful but internally uneven.

A dominant pattern is the Nordic–Baltic coherence cluster. Norway, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, and Estonia perform strongly across trust in government, government effectiveness, liberal democracy, education, and cybersecurity. Even where energy dependence differs, the institutional alignment is tight. Finland and Denmark are particularly striking because they combine high trust, high effectiveness, and strong democratic legitimacy with high education and solid NCSI scores.

The United Kingdom is now clearly exposed by this table. It sits consistently mid-pack on trust, government effectiveness, education, and cybersecurity, with relatively high social media exposure. There are no catastrophic values, but there are no compensating strengths either. Compared to France and Germany, the UK lacks France's democratic legitimacy score and Germany's trust and effectiveness. This table alone explains why the UK is lacking.

Southern Europe forms a coherent governance-fragility cluster. Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and to a lesser extent Belgium show lower trust, weaker government effectiveness, and lower education attainment than northern peers. Social media exposure is high, and disinformation susceptibility is rarely at the lowest category. Greece is particularly notable, its governance and trust indicators are far weaker than its military profile would suggest, reinforcing the earlier finding that force structure does not equate to will to fight.

Eastern Europe displays a split pattern. Estonia, Lithuania, Czechia, and Poland show strong education and cybersecurity, but trust in government and effectiveness drop sharply in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria. Hungary and Türkiye are the most extreme cases, with very low liberal democracy scores and negative or near-zero governance effectiveness. These cases demonstrate how institutional legitimacy becomes a binding constraint even when education or security awareness is present.

Türkiye is again analytically rich. Education attainment is very low relative to peers, governance effectiveness is negative, and liberal democracy is extremely low, yet trust in government is not collapsed. This produces a system that may mobilize politically in the short term but lacks institutional depth for sustained national will to fight under strain.

Luxembourg and Iceland illustrate opposite edge cases. Luxembourg scores extremely high on trust and governance but has weaker cybersecurity and moderate education, while Iceland shows strong governance but lower trust and high social media exposure. Both cases reinforce that governance alone is insufficient without broader social and informational resilience.

The Indo-Pacific cases are revealing. Japan shows strong education, governance, and democracy but only moderate trust and high social media exposure.

Table 3. Mean and overall rankings for each country

Country	Mean	Overall	Country	Mean	Overall
United States	11.15	1	Italy	21.21	20
Finland	11.43	2	Czechia	21.38	21
Norway	12.50	3	Latvia	21.86	22
Germany	13.36	4	Romania	22.36	23
Denmark	13.40	5	Türkiye	23.14	24
France	13.43	6	Greece	23.21	25
Australia	13.53	7	Philippines	23.80	26
Canada	13.79	9	Iceland	24.40	27
Republic of Korea	13.79	9	Hungary	24.77	28
Sweden	14.14	10	Portugal	24.86	29
United Kingdom	16.50	11	Slovak Republic	25.54	30
Estonia	16.92	12	Bulgaria	26.43	31
Japan	16.93	13	Luxembourg	26.71	32
Poland	18.14	14	Slovenia	27.00	33
Netherlands	18.20	15	Croatia	29.15	34
Spain	18.40	16	Albania	29.71	35
Belgium	18.53	17	Montenegro	31.69	36
New Zealand	19.73	18	North Macedonia	31.79	37
Lithuania	20.31	19			

Source: based on author's compilation of data.

South Korea combines high education and cybersecurity with middling trust and democracy, but far stronger than often assumed. Australia and New Zealand score consistently high across governance, democracy, trust, and education, explaining why they punch above their material weight in the combined ranking. The Philippines is the clearest fragility case in the Indo-Pacific, with low education, weak governance effectiveness, low democracy, and high social media exposure, despite high trust levels.

Taken as a whole, table 2 shows that institutional coherence, not just public sentiment, is the key differentiator. High trust without effectiveness does little, high education without legitimacy is unstable, and strong cybersecurity without governance coherence is insufficient. When overlaid with table 1, this table explains most of the "unexpected" rankings, particularly the UK, Greece, Türkiye, and Poland, and clarifies why the Nordics and some Indo-Pacific allies rise so consistently in the overall results.

Table 3 shows how countries compare based on the mean of their rankings across all variables. Lower values indicate a stronger overall position across the set of factors considered. This is not intended as a formal index or predictive

measure. It is a simple way of bringing the variables together so that relative differences between countries can be compared and contrasted.

The top of the table is tightly grouped, with the United States, Finland, and Norway forming a clear leading cluster, followed closely by Germany, Denmark, France, and Australia. The small spread in mean values here suggests that several countries are similarly well positioned across the selected factors rather than there being a single dominant outlier. There is then a noticeable step down into a broader middle group, where countries such as the United Kingdom, Japan, and Poland sit, followed by a more dispersed set extending through Southern and Eastern Europe. Differences in this range are greater, indicating more variation in how countries ranked across the different variables. The lower end of the table shows the largest separation, with countries such as Croatia, Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia clearly distinct from the rest. This widening spread suggests that weaker aggregate positioning is more uneven and less clustered than at the top end.

Discussion

This study set out to address a persistent gap in defense and security analysis; namely, the tendency to conflate national will to fight with material capability, alliance membership, or episodic battlefield performance. The comparative framework developed here demonstrates that national will to fight is best understood as a system-level property emerging from the interaction of material foundations, institutional legitimacy, social cohesion, and informational resilience, all operating within specific strategic contexts. The emphasis on societal and institutional factors aligns with contemporary defense thinking on national resistance, particularly the Resistance Operating Concept (ROC), which highlights the role of civilian populations, governance structures, and societal cohesion in sustaining resistance under external pressure.[46] The "so what" of this analysis lies in what it reveals about alliance resilience, deterrence credibility, and the risks of strategic miscalculation when will to fight is inferred from the wrong indicators.

The results point to a familiar but frequently mishandled conclusion; material capacity matters, but it does not settle the question of sustained national resistance. As table 1 makes clear, allied democracies differ sharply in population size, force structure, industrial depth, and access to strategic capabilities. The data in table 2 complicates the assumption that these differences translate in any straightforward way into endurance. In several cases, states with comparatively modest material profiles, particularly across the Nordic and Baltic

[46] Otto C. Fiala, *Resistance Operating Concept (ROC)* (MacDill Air Force Base, FL: JSOU Press, 2020).

region, combine high governance effectiveness, strong public trust, and resilient information environments. At the same time, a number of materially significant states display institutional weaknesses that would likely constrain their ability to sustain prolonged conflict. The risk is not theoretical. Defense planning that concentrates on force generation while treating institutional coherence as background context is prone to overstating real-world endurance.

A similar caution applies at the alliance level. Alliance membership clearly shapes expectations of support and escalation control, but it does not neutralize domestic legitimacy problems or compensate for weak governance capacity.[47] In practice, several states appear reliant on alliance protection while lacking the social and institutional depth needed for sustained national mobilization. This produces an uneven burden-sharing reality in which a small subset of states contributes not only the bulk of material capability but also much of the alliance's institutional resilience. From a deterrence standpoint, this distinction matters. Adversaries do not assess alliances as abstract collectives.[48] They observe whether individual members can absorb cost, maintain political consent, and persist under pressure.[49] Treating formal commitments as proxies for endurance therefore introduces avoidable strategic risk.

Governance legitimacy and effectiveness emerge as binding constraints rather than background variables. Across the dataset, high levels of public trust do not produce resilience in the absence of administrative competence, and capable bureaucracies do not compensate for deficits in legitimacy. Greece, Türkiye, and parts of Eastern Europe illustrate how misalignment between force structure and institutional quality can generate defense postures that appear robust on paper but are fragile under sustained strain. Rapid mobilization may be achievable in the short term, yet political fragmentation, loss of consent, or institutional overload become increasingly likely as costs accumulate. For planners, this reinforces the need to treat governance indicators as operationally relevant, not merely descriptive.

Information environments further condition these dynamics. In highly digitized societies, will to fight is increasingly sensitive to the interaction between social media exposure, education levels, and cybersecurity capacity. Where high exposure coincides with weaker educational foundations or limited cyber resil-

[47] Earl C. Ravenal, "Extended Deterrence and Alliance Cohesion," in *Alliances in US Foreign Policy: Issues in the Quest for Collective Defense* (New York: Routledge, 2019), e19–40.

[48] Osman Sabri Kiratli, "The Politics of Alliance Cohesion: Experimental Evidence on American Attitudes toward Corrective Measures in Security Partnerships," *Perspectives on Politics* (2025): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592725103071.

[49] Maj Maxwell Stewart, "Revisiting the Global Posture Review: A New U.S. Approach to European Defense and NATO in a Post-Ukraine War World," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (Fall 2023): 77–87, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402004.

ience, vulnerability to narrative disruption and disinformation rises.[50] This does not imply automatic erosion of will, but it does mean that endurance becomes more dependent on effective information governance and institutional trust. Even states with adequate material resources and formal institutions may see resilience degraded through sustained informational pressure. This is particularly relevant in hybrid and gray-zone contexts, where the objective is not battlefield defeat but the gradual erosion of societal consent.[51]

Placing nuclear posture and space capability in this framework as contextual modifiers rather than determinants helps avoid overstatement. Nuclear capability shapes perceptions of survivability, escalation risk, and alliance assurance, but it does not override problems of legitimacy or social cohesion.[52] Space capability similarly reflects strategic-industrial depth and long-term state capacity, reinforcing confidence in endurance and adaptability, yet it cannot stabilize will to fight where governance and trust are weak.[53] In both cases, high-end capabilities reinforce existing strengths rather than substituting for missing foundations. Strategic confidence derived from them remains contingent on credible institutions and durable social consent.

Finally, the comparative approach adopted here has implications for deterrence signaling and for how alliances assess their own resilience. Emphasis on aggregate power or headline defense spending can obscure structural vulnerabilities within individual states. The analysis helps explain why some countries consistently perform beyond what their material profiles suggest, while others underperform relative to expectation. For adversaries, misunderstanding these patterns risks miscalculation. For allies, failing to recognize them risks brittle deterrence and unrealistic assumptions about burden sharing.

Conclusion

This article argues that national will to fight is a structurally conditioned capacity rather than a sentiment, moral quality, or proxy for military power. The comparative analysis shows that material resources and alliance membership

[50] Kai Shu et al., "Combating Disinformation in a Social Media Age," *WIREs Data Mining and Knowledge Discovery* 10, no. 6 (November/December 2020): e1385, https://doi.org/10.1002/widm.1385.

[51] Mikkel Storm Jensen, "Cyberspace Operations, Grey Zone Conflict, and Small States," in *Modern War and Grey Zones: Design for Small States*, ed. Marzena Zakowska and David Last (New York: Routledge, 2025), 170–80; and Sarah Bressan and Mari-Liis Sulg, "Welcome to the Grey Zone: Future War and Peace," *New Perspectives* 28, no. 3 (2020): 379–97, https://doi.org/10.1177/2336825X20935244.

[52] Frank P. Harvey, "The Future of Strategic Stability and Nuclear Deterrence," *International Journal: Canada's Journal of Global Policy Analysis* 58, no. 2 (June 2003): 321–46, https://doi.org/10.1177/002070200305800205.

[53] Samantha Kallen, "Nationalism, Ideology, and the Cold War Space Race," *Constellations* 10, no. 2 (Winter 2019), https://doi.org/10.29173/cons29377.

alone are insufficient to explain national endurance; similar force structures and spending levels translate into very different capacities for sustained resistance once governance legitimacy, institutional effectiveness, social cohesion, and informational resilience are considered.

Nuclear posture and space capability shape the strategic context within which will to fight operates, but they do not substitute for domestic institutional coherence or public consent. High-end capabilities amplify existing strengths but cannot compensate for weak governance or fragile informational environments.

Finally, the central contribution of this study is not to rank national will to fight or predict wartime behavior, but to reframe how will to fight should be assessed in peacetime. National will to fight is neither a latent psychological reserve waiting to be activated nor a direct function of military expenditure. It is a structurally conditioned capacity that must be cultivated through credible governance, institutional effectiveness, social cohesion, and informational resilience. For allied democracies facing protracted strategic competition, recognizing and addressing these enabling conditions is central to the credibility of deterrence.

Beyond Break-Falls
MCMAP and the Will to Fight

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Abstract: Based on the Marine Corps' expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO) concept, small units operating in isolation make individual character operationally imperative. This poses a challenge that weapons cannot solve: sustaining a Marine's will to fight in austere and dispersed conditions. The Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) provides the solution. Established in 2000, MCMAP was designed to forge an indomitable will to fight that transcends weapons and technology. As the program marks its 25th anniversary, it has drifted from that founding purpose—character development has been overshadowed by physical techniques and belt progression. To preserve the modern Marine's will to fight, the Corps must restore MCMAP to its original mission: forging the ethical warrior ethos that defines professional arms. This article examines MCMAP's original design through military history, spiritual fitness research, and Marine Corps doctrine, arguing that MCMAP was built to forge character, not chase belts.

Keywords: Marine Corps Martial Arts Program, MCMAP, will to fight, spiritual fitness, character development, virtue ethics, ethical warrior, expeditionary advanced base operations, EABO

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Introduction

The will to fight wins wars. Recent conflicts demonstrate this truth: Ukrainian troops armed with Cold War-era weapons are defeating a Russian force equipped with modern tanks and artillery. Meanwhile, Afghan National Security Forces collapsed in 2021 despite two decades of American training and billions spent on advanced equipment. The difference? One side had the will to fight. The other did not. These examples affirm a timeless military truth: the will to fight wins wars, not equipment alone. Material capabilities and technological superiority matter, but dismissing the will to fight as a romanticized abstraction ignores what Carl von Clausewitz, Ardant du Picq, George C. Marshall, and George S. Patton understood: wars are won by humans, not hardware.

Today's operating environment magnifies this reality. Based on the Marine Corps' expeditionary advanced base operations (EABO) concept, small teams operate in isolation, far from headquarters support, making dispersed forces the center of gravity for success.[1] A corporal making a call in the field can have strategic implications and shift an entire campaign. The question becomes unavoidable: How does the Marine Corps forge the warriors who will not falter when isolated and who make the right call when nobody is watching?

Recognizing that conventional combat training cannot forge the will to fight required for distributed operations, the Marine Corps created MCMAP in 2000 to deliberately cultivate warrior ethos. The Marine Corps Commandants conceived of MCMAP not as a mere combatives system, but as an ethics-based program with character development at its core, designed to forge the "inner citadel" of moral fortitude, distinguishing professional warriors from mere killers.[2] Yet, as MCMAP marks its 25th anniversary, the program has drifted from its character-centered mission.[3] This drift is a result

[1] *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*, 2d ed. (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2023), 2-1. This document outlines the EABO concept of employing "smaller . . . and more dispersed formations" that must operate "in a distributed environment with limited support and resources." See also, LtCol John T. Quinn II, USMC (Ret), "EABO," *Marine Corps Gazette* 107, no. 2 (February 2023): 8–10. Quinn argues that EABO addresses emerging threats and enhances capabilities in contested environments while affirming its strategic relevance.

[2] The authors use the term *inner citadel* to mean the soul's guiding principle, which cannot be swayed by external events.

[3] A comprehensive empirical study of the Marine Corps Martial Arts Program (MCMAP) has yet to be conducted. Therefore, there is no objective data proving this drift from character development. However, the authors' assertion that MCMAP has drifted from character development in favor of physical techniques required for belt progression comes from decades of experience, officer inputs concerning the topic, and enlisted instructor discussions that all affirm that belt progression comes before character education.

of many competing requirements: unit training priorities, deployments, lack of MCMAP instructors, and a multitude of time consuming administrative tasks. However, to meet EABO's operational demands, the Marine Corps must restore MCMAP from institutional drift toward belt progression to its foundational purpose: forging the inner citadel of character required to sustain the will to fight.

This article traces that recovery, linking MCMAP's moral foundations to empirical evidence that character development is not ancillary to combat readiness but its core. The first section establishes the doctrinal and scientific foundation, presenting evidence that spiritual fitness functions as operational armor, protecting against moral injury and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) while enhancing combat resilience. The second section analyzes MCMAP's original design as a holistic system integrating lethal combatives with character formation, contrasting this with its institutional drift toward belt progression rather than ethical development. It argues that Force Design's emphasis on distributed operations based on concepts like EABO makes this character dimension mission-critical. The article concludes by reaffirming MCMAP's core purpose: forging ethical warriors whose character fuels the indomitable will to fight.

The Inner Citadel: The Spiritual Imperative in Modern Warfare

The will to fight is an intangible, yet critical component of military effectiveness that cannot be replaced by technology. This tension between human spirit and military machinery recurs throughout the study of warfare. Carl von Clausewitz first articulated it, arguing that moral and spiritual forces are the ultimate determinants in war.[4] Christopher Coker illustrates this through General George S. Patton's critique of World War I Germany: despite building the world's most sophisticated war machine, German forces neglected "the battery," or what Patton called the soul, that "implausible something" that dominates material factors.[5] As Coker explains, while the "soul may be intangible [it nonetheless] exercises a powerful influence on our lives. In the case of the warrior it is what makes war an intensely existential experience."[6] Today, this same tension and

[4] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 184–85, argues that moral forces of courage and discipline often prove more decisive than material factors.

[5] Christopher Coker, *The Warrior Ethos: Military Culture and the War on Terror* (London: Routledge, 2007), 16, posits that the intangible warrior soul exercises decisive combat influence, rendering war an existential experience irreplaceable by technology or material advantage.

[6] Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 16, clarifies that Patton used the term *soul* nonreligiously, referring to unconscious emotion rather than spirituality.

question regarding the primacy of the interior will to fight (i.e., the warrior's soul) has intensified as artificial intelligence and autonomous systems (i.e., the military machinery) assume increasingly central roles in determining battlefield outcomes.[7] Four successive Commandants designed MCMAP to cultivate both combatives skills and character in the individual warfighter. By doing so, they implicitly aligned with Clausewitz and Patton's emphasis on moral fortitude as the decisive factor in war. This character-centered design anticipated what the Marine Corps would later formalize as spiritual fitness—that "implausible something" which sustains resilience under fire.[8]

Forging the Ethical Warrior

Designed to weld character development with combatives skills, MCMAP effectively inculcates the will to fight in Marines. It does so by deliberately cultivating three interdependent psychological pillars that sustain combat effectiveness. These pillars form the architecture of the inner citadel, the strength of spirit built on three foundations. First, identity fusion, which is the visceral bond between Marine and unit. Second, trust in the group's leaders and values. Third, spiritual formidability, which is strength of belief in the cause.[9] Together, these elements transform biological self-preservation into what Coker identifies as the "triumph of culture over our biological drive to survive."[10] MCMAP institutionalizes this transformation through integrated training that fuses physical combatives with ethical instruction. Lieutenant Colonel William R. Speigle describes this as a "unique and transformational experience" that instills the character traits of sacrifice and discipline.[11] This approach reflects Don M. Snider, Major John A. Nagl, and Major Tony Pfaff's conception of professional

[7] August Cole, "Ghost in the Machine: Coming to Terms with the Human Core of Unmanned War," *Texas National Security Review* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2025), https://doi.org/10.26153/tsw/59560, asserts that Western reliance on unmanned systems is illusory; under technological parity, only large human armies achieve decisive outcomes.

[8] Cdr David A. Daigle, CHC, USN, LtCol Daniel V. Goff, USMC (Ret), and Cdr Peter N. Ott, CHC, USN, "From Bayonets to Black Belts: The Evolution of USMC Close Combat and MCMAP," *Marine Corps History* 12, no. 1 (forthcoming), traces MCMAP's institutionalization to ground close combat training in character formation rather than physical technique alone.

[9] Ángel Gómez, Alexandra Vázquez, and Scott Atran, "Transcultural Pathways to the Will to Fight," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 120, no. 24 (2023): 2, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2303614120, finds that warrior ethos represents culture's triumph over self-preservation through shared identity and cohesion.

[10] Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 128, argues that warrior ethos represents culture's triumph over self-preservation, enabling soldiers to overcome survival instincts through shared identity and cohesion.

[11] LtCol William R. Speigle II, USMC, "The Marine Corps' Warrior Ethos: Practicality for Today's Operating Environment" (unpublished paper, Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College, 2013), abstract, notes that sacrifice and discipline are forged through entry-level training's transformational experience.

military ethics that links the subordination of self-interest to mission accomplishment and the acceptance of self-sacrificial risk.[12]

MCMAP cultivates a warrior spirit that operates across two critical dimensions that the program addresses simultaneously. The instrumental dimension develops the Marine as a lethal public servant of the state, mastering the physical and tactical skills required for combat effectiveness. The existential dimension addresses the warrior's personal search for meaning and honor through self-trust and sacrifice. Conceptually, MCMAP's integrated design recognizes that these dimensions cannot be separated—technical proficiency without moral foundation produces mere killers, while ethical formation without tactical competence produces ineffective idealists. The deliberate fusion of these dimensions enables MCMAP to build both *spiritual fitness*, defined as "inner strength from higher purposes," and *character*, the moral compass required to wield lethality ethically.[13] This fusion forms the engine that powers the warrior spirit and produces the indomitable will to fight that modern dispersed operations demand.[14] But forging the warrior is only one-half the equation. What happens when that ethical warrior enters the crucible of actual combat?

The Combat-Ready Warrior: Steeled for the Fight

Modern combat immerses the warrior in a paradoxical state of moral peril and savage joy, a crucible where moral resilience depends entirely on a preexisting ethical framework. Combat-decorated Marine Karl Marlantes famously describes this as entering the "Temple of Mars"—a realm where the lines between exultation and terror, humanity and savagery, blur.[15] As a young lieutenant leading a rifle platoon in Vietnam's highland jungle in 1968, Marlantes learned this truth firsthand: the Marine Corps had taught him the ritual of killing but not its meaning. In his book *What It Is Like to Go to War*, Marlantes writes of becoming conscious that he had entered a temple where humans were sacrificed and he served as priest. Yet, this 23-year-old Marine-priest had attended only a

[12] Maj John A. Nagl, Maj Tony Pfaff, and Don M. Snider, *Army Professionalism, The Military Ethic, and Officership in the 21st Century* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 1999), 27, establishes self-sacrificial risk as foundational to military professionalism and moral leadership.
[13] *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, Marine Corps Reference Publication 6-10.1 with Change 1 (Quantico, VA: Training and Education Command, 2024), 1-1, defines *spiritual fitness* as inner strength from higher purposes, derived from sources ranging from personal faith to shared sacrifice and character, that enables Marines to live out the warfighting ethos.
[14] Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 7, distinguishes between instrumental and existential dimensions of warrior identity, with most soldiers inhabiting only one.
[15] For further analysis on what it is like to enter the Temple of Mars, see Cdr David A. Daigle, CHC, USN, LtCol Daniel V. Goff, USMC (Ret), and LtCol Christopher Reardon, USMC, "Entering the Temple of Mars: Why There Is No Substitute for the Spiritual in War, *Expeditions with MCUP* (4 November 2024): 45–46, https://doi.org/10.36304/ExpwMCUP.2024.08, which argues that entering the Temple of Mars without spiritual grounding to navigate blurred lines between humanity and savagery leaves warriors vulnerable to moral injury.

seminary called The Basic School, which trained him in lethal technique without preparing him for the profound moral and psychological weight of taking human life.[16] Marlantes and the young Marines he led were ill-prepared for the psychological and spiritual crucible of combat and its aftermath.

Of his time in combat, Marlantes writes of a "deep savage joy in destruction . . . a joy beyond ego enhancement," an ecstasy he likens to "religious ecstasy."[17] His experience is not a modern anomaly but an ancient component of the warrior experience, or what the Greeks called *charmê*—a "rejoicing in the joy of battle."[18] As Coker explains, this sensation is an intensely existential experience, an "adrenaline rush" where warriors feel most alive.[19] This response is driven by the sympathetic nervous system releasing chemicals such as adrenaline and cortisol, which heighten alertness and prepare the body for survival.[20] In combat, this physiological response serves its evolutionary purpose. But this same response, when chronically activated in garrison through overtraining, poor nutrition, and inadequate sleep, transforms into a destructive force that erodes a Marine's health, readiness, and spirit.[21]

But this transcendent state of combat is a double-edged sword. When a warrior enters the Temple of Mars with a "spiritual vacuum," having been taught the ritual of killing but not its meaning, the experience can be catastrophic.[22] When paired with grief and rage, moral inhibitions collapse, leading to what psychologist Jonathan Shay calls the "berserk state." This state enables warriors to dehumanize their enemy, but it leads to the dehumanization of themselves—a state in which they often feel "godlike," without moral limit or fear.[23] Modern training methods can override humanity's innate resistance to killing, but without an ethical framework to process this act, the psychological costs are profound and lasting.[24] Modern combat immerses warriors in a "savage

[16] Karl Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2011), 63, describes combat as intensely spiritual, while noting the Marine Corps taught killing's ritual without providing ethical framework to process its moral weight.
[17] Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War*, 63, characterizes combat's "savage joy" as religious ecstasy where warriors feel intensely alive, but without ethical grounding collapses into moral injury.
[18] Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 27, invokes Homer's *charmei gethosunoi* to show this savage exhilaration is ancient and universal, not modern.
[19] Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 66, observes that warrior memoir captures war's intoxication, making warriors feel intensely alive despite institutional efforts to discourage such rejoicing.
[20] GySgt Miguel Zeran, USMC (Ret), "The Marine Corps Must Locate, Close with, and Destroy Stress," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 144, no. 11 (November 2018): 2, explains stress response physiology while arguing Marine Corps culture enables chronic stress through overtraining, poor nutrition, and inadequate recovery, undermining readiness.
[21] Zeran, "The Marine Corps Must Locate, Close with, and Destroy Stress."
[22] Marlantes, *What It Is Like to Go to War*, 63.
[23] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Atheneum, 1994), 84–86.
[24] Dave Grossman, *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1995), 149.

joy" that mirrors religious ecstasy, but this transcendent state demands ethical grounding. Only a deliberately cultivated framework, rooted in communal accountability and sacred duty, can prevent this experience from collapsing into the moral injury of the berserk state. Combat, however, retains a paradoxical kinship with mystical experience: an awareness of death, focused presence, and profound sense of both self-sacrifice and communal belonging. Coker identifies this as the "awesome" experience of battle found in Leo Tolstoy's work, where a warrior discovers his "affinity with other men" and finds a brotherhood "in the midst of carnage and the chaos of battle."[25]

This paradox demands a sense of purpose to navigate the crucible of combat. The commitment to overcome fear is rooted less in self-preservation but in accountability to fellow warriors and a sense of sacred duty—a search for meaning even within chaos and destruction. Beyond loyalty or ideals, the will to persevere is often fueled by what Eyal Lewin identifies as "collective optimism," a psychologically cultivated belief in victory that builds resilience and determination in the face of overwhelming odds.[26] The will to fight is profoundly strengthened when purpose, whether grounded in comradeship or national ideals, acquires what Lewin calls a spiritual dimension. Lewin describes this "spiritual transcendence" as a unique motivational force that empowers human action across multiple life domains, enabling warriors to fight for shared goals beyond their immediate survival.[27]

Spiritual Fitness as an Evolving Concept in the Department of Defense

During the past 15 years, the Department of Defense and Marine Corps have elevated spiritual fitness from peripheral wellness program to doctrinal combat readiness requirement, formalizing what commanders like Lieutenant General John A. Lejeune intuitively understood: spiritual strength determines victory. In 2011, responding to the unprecedented psychological and moral strains of prolonged post-9/11 warfare, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff released the Total Force Fitness (TFF) framework as a holistic initiative designed to create a "methodology for understanding, assessing, and maintaining service members' well-being and sustaining their ability to carry out missions" in or-

[25] Coker, *The Warrior Ethos*, 82, uses Tolstoy to show that combat's transcendent "affinity with other men" unites, rather than dehumanizes, but only when grounded in shared purpose.
[26] Eyal Lewin, "The Secret Weapon of Optimism," in *Military Psychology: Concepts, Trends and Interventions*, ed. Nidhi Maheshwari and Vineeth V. Kumar (New Delhi: SAGE Publication, 2016), 189–90, https://doi.org/10.4135/9789353885854.n10.
[27] Lewin, "The Secret Weapon of Optimism," 196.

der to "optimize performance and build and sustain resilience."[28] The connection between spiritual fitness and combat effectiveness becomes explicit in the framework's definition. It characterizes spiritual fitness as "the ability to adhere to beliefs, principles, or values needed to persevere and prevail in accomplishing missions."[29] By defining spiritual fitness in terms of its direct contribution to mission accomplishment, the TFF establishes institutional precedent for treating spiritual readiness as mission-critical rather than merely a wellness initiative.[30] This values-centric approach mirrors Rand's definition of the *will to fight*, which is "the disposition and decision to fight, to act, or to persevere when needed."[31] The TFF remains belief-neutral, allowing each servicemember to develop their own foundation for inner strength and ethical action. Rather than prescribing specific beliefs or a specific religion, it focuses on the internal spiritual or philosophical framework that enables perseverance under extreme conditions.

The Marine Corps has championed this approach through institutional directives. Three consecutive Commandants affirmed spiritual fitness as essential to combat readiness. General Robert B. Neller initiated this emphasis with his 2016 *Spiritual Fitness* All Marine Corps Activities (ALMAR).[32] General David H. Berger reinforced it through his 2020 *Resiliency and Spiritual Fitness* ALMAR.[33] General Eric M. Smith continued this trajectory in his 2024 *Spiritual Fitness* ALMAR, framing it as an essential component of Marine Corps Total Fitness (MCTF), an integrated framework that incorporates physical, mental, spiritual, and social fitness as interconnected domains of combat readiness.[34]

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[28] *Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 3405.01, Chairman's Total Force Fitness Framework* (Washington, DC: Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1 September 2011), 1, 9, establishes eight fitness domains including spiritual fitness as foundational for optimizing warfighter performance and resilience and defines the framework's purpose as optimizing servicemember performance and sustaining mission accomplishment capacity under physical, psychological, and moral demands.

[29] *CJCSI 3405.01, Chairman's Total Force Fitness Framework*, A-2.

[30] *CJCSI 3405.01, Chairman's Total Force Fitness Framework*.

[31] Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Analyzing, Modeling, and Simulating the Will to Fight of Military Units* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2018), 6, https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2341.

[32] *ALMAR 033/16, Spiritual Fitness* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 3 October 2016), establishes spiritual fitness as a command responsibility and core readiness requirement, recognizing spiritual development as essential to combat effectiveness.

[33] *ALMAR 027/20, Resiliency and Spiritual Fitness* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 3 December 2020), reinforces earlier emphasis while linking spiritual fitness to force-wide resilience, positioning spiritual development as essential to both individual readiness and organizational capacity to withstand operational stress.

[34] *ALMAR 020/24, Spiritual Fitness* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 19 July 2024), reframes spiritual fitness as "inner strength from higher purpose" and mandating it as a command-owned warfighting requirement; and *Marine Corps Total Fitness Strategic Plan* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2023), 1–2, establishes MCTF as the science-based framework integrating physical, mental, spiritual, and social fitness to enhance warfighting readiness.

Smith's ALMAR reinforced command ownership through the directive that "commanders own spiritual fitness," positioning chaplains as key advisors who help commanders steward this responsibility. This consistent focus on spirituality from the modern Commandants echoes the foundational belief of General John Lejeune, who argued that victory depended on the spiritual strength of his Marines. In his memoirs, Lejeune wrote: "There is no substitute for the spiritual in war. Miracles must be wrought if victories are to be won, and to work miracles, men's hearts must be afire with self-sacrificing love for each other, for their units, for their division, and for their country."[35] Lejeune's principle serves as the foundation for the modern Marine Corps' approach to spiritual readiness. Beyond the recent ALMARs and MCTF, the *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, Marine Corps Reference Publication (MCRP) 6-10.1, acts as the operational bridge, translating Lejeune's vision into a practical framework for every Marine leader.[36]

Whereas Lejeune spoke of hearts "afire with self-sacrificing love," the *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide* provides a belief-neutral toolkit to cultivate that same inner strength and cohesion. It redefines the "spiritual," expanding it beyond a religious matter to become the core of the warfighting ethos, equipping leaders to foster the virtues Lejeune deemed essential for victory.[37] While the ALMARs establish strategic purpose the *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide* provides an operational method, equipping every leader from corporal to colonel with a standardized framework including definitions, discussion points, and self-assessment tools to develop Marines' spiritual fitness.[38] To this end, the publication institutionalizes spiritual fitness as a core warfighting competency and command responsibility at all echelons, positioning it as an integral element of Marine Corps leader development rather than solely a chaplain function.[39]

This modern approach to spiritual fitness is formally mandated by *Marine Corps Order (MCO) 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, which establishes the official framework for a leader's holistic responsibility. The order directs leaders to ground all training in a concept of "fitness" that encompasses the "[p]hysical, mental, spiritual, and social health and well-being" of their Ma-

[35] Gen John A. Lejeune, *The Reminiscences of a Marine* (Philadelphia, PA: Dorrance, 1930), 307, asserts that spiritual strength, not material superiority, determines victory, a principle animating the modern Marine Corps' approach through consecutive Commandant ALMARs and TFF.

[36] *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide* provides commanders with a belief-neutral framework defining spiritual fitness as "inner strength from higher purpose" and operationalizing it as a measurable leadership responsibility.

[37] *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, Foreword, 1-1, 1-7, 4-1.

[38] *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, 1-1, 3-1, 4-1.

[39] *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, 1-7, establishes spiritual fitness as a command-owned, measurable warfighting competency integrated into leader development.

rines.[40] In this way, spiritual health is directly integrated into the framework of character development, and is officially defined as the "ability to adhere to beliefs, principles, or values needed to persevere and prevail in accomplishing missions."[41] The stated purpose of the *MCO 1500.61* framework is "[t]o provide a common framework and practical tools to assist leaders in developing all Marines and Sailors to achieve their full potential and be successful."[42] With the three ALMARs, the *Spiritual Fitness Leader's Guide*, MCTF, and *MCO 1500.61*, the Marine Corps has institutionalized spiritual fitness as a core leadership function, ensuring that the development of a Marine's inner strength is not left to chance, but is a deliberate and essential component in the forging of a resilient warrior.

Spiritual Fitness: Empirical Evidence of Protective Outcomes

The focus on spiritual fitness stems not just from tradition but from extensive scientific research demonstrating its profound impact on resilience and well-being. The neuroscientific basis for this protection was revealed in a study published in *JAMA Psychiatry*, which found that a strong personal importance of spirituality is correlated with a thicker cerebral cortex in regions of the brain associated with reflection. This neurological marker corresponds to a 90-percent "reduction in relative risk for depression during a 10-year period."[43] Research from Harvard University reinforces this study. The study demonstrates that religious involvement during adolescence, including religious service attendance and prayer or meditation, is associated with better health and well-being in early adulthood, including lower rates of marijuana use, early sexual initiation, and fewer lifetime sexual partners, as well as greater character strengths and life satisfaction. The study explicitly positions religious upbringing as a "protective factor" against various risks during adolescence, a critical developmental window often linked to vulnerabilities like mental health challenges, substance

[40] *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 28 July 2017), 3, mandates spiritual fitness as one of four integrated dimensions of Marine total fitness alongside physical, mental, and social health, establishing holistic leader responsibility for developing Marines across all domains.

[41] *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, 3, connects spiritual fitness to mission accomplishment, codifying it as operationally necessary, and establishes the doctrinal foundation for MCMAP's character development.

[42] *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, 2, completes the institutional architecture by providing standardized tools that integrate spiritual fitness into leader responsibilities, positioning it as essential for combat readiness.

[43] Lisa Miller et al., "Neuroanatomical Correlates of Religiosity and Spirituality: A Study of Adults at High and Low Familial Risk for Depression," *JAMA Psychiatry* 71, no. 2 (February 2014): 133, https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2013.3067.

use, and behavioral issues.[44] Using an "outcome-wide" prospective analysis, the study tracked how adolescent religious involvement predicts positive outcomes into early adulthood (ages 20–28), precisely the age range when most Marines are recruited.[45]

This evidence is especially relevant given that most Marines join during late adolescence, a period of development when they are uncertain of themselves and vulnerable to stress. In fact, the Marine Corps fields the youngest force, recruiting a disproportionately higher concentration of 17-to-24-year-olds than any other Service. For instance, in fiscal year (FY) 2021, 96.8 percent of Marine Corps recruits fell within this age range.[46] This aligns with the broader DOD trend, with the majority of recruits 17 to 20 years old.[47] For the Marine Corps, however, this skew is even more pronounced, with the 17–18-year-old cohort accounting for approximately 50 percent of all new recruits.[48] The Army, by contrast, relied less heavily on this specific age group, with the 17–18-year-old cohort accounting for approximately 33 percent of its new recruits.[49]

The data on the protective effects for this specific age group are conclusive. Clinical psychologist Lisa Miller finds that spirituality is "the most protective factor against depression and substance use and abuse during adolescence known to medical science."[50] Her decades of research show that an active spiritual life dramatically reduces risk-taking behaviors, providing a 40–80 percent decreased risk of addiction to alcohol or drugs and an 80 percent decreased risk for developing depression.[51] This aligns with recent research in *JAMA Psychiatry*, which found that regular religious service attendance correlates with a lower risk of "death from despair" (suicide, drugs, or alcohol), though the results differed by gender. For female nurses, attending services at least weekly was linked to a 68 percent lower risk of death from despair and a 75 percent lower risk of

[44] Ying Chen and Tyler J. VanderWeele, "Associations of Religious Upbringing with Subsequent Health and Well-Being from Adolescence to Young Adulthood: An Outcome-Wide Analysis," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 187, no. 11 (November 2018): 2355–64, https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kwy142.

[45] Chen and VanderWeele, "Associations of Religious Upbringing with Subsequent Health and Well-Being from Adolescence to Young Adulthood."

[46] *Population Representation in the Military Services: Fiscal Year 2021 Summary Report*, Report Number 2024-010 (Washington, DC: Office of People Analytics, U.S. Department of Defense, 2024), 13.

[47] *Population Representation in the Military Services*.

[48] *Population Representation in the Military Services*, 14.

[49] *Population Representation in the Military* Services.

[50] Lisa Miller, "Spiritual Awakening and Depression in Adolescents: A Unified Pathway or 'Two Sides of the Same Coin'," *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* 77, no. 4 (2013): 335, https://doi.org/10.1521/bumc.2013.77.4.332, asserts that adolescent spiritual awakening protects against depression, substance abuse, and risk-taking, with studies suggesting shared biological basis for resilience.

[51] Lisa Miller, *The Awakened Brain: The New Science of Spirituality and Our Quest for an Inspired Life* (New York: Random House, 2021), 51, 61–62.

suicide specifically.[52] For male health professionals, the same level of attendance was associated with a 33 percent lower risk of death from despair and a 48 percent lower risk of suicide.[53]

This protective effect extends beyond clinical populations to the general public. Evan M. Kleiman and Richard T. Liu's study of more than 20,000 Americans found that frequent religious service attendance proved to be a long-term protective factor against suicide; even after controlling for other risk factors, those who attended services at least twice a month were 67 percent less likely to die by suicide than those who attended less frequently.[54] Harold G. Koenig's 2023 research shows that spiritual engagement operates at multiple interconnected levels. At the individual level, it correlates with greater happiness, psychological wellbeing, and life satisfaction.[55] It also fosters a stronger sense of meaning and purpose.[56] This internal foundation manifests in prosocial behavior: spiritual involvement fosters increased altruism, gratitude, and forgiveness, alongside reduced delinquency and crime.[57] These individual and behavioral benefits extend to the relational domain, where greater spiritual engagement strengthens social support networks and interpersonal relationships.[58] Collectively, these factors provide measurable protection against psychological pathology; spiritual engagement consistently links to lower rates of depression,

[52] Ying Chen et al., "Religious Service Attendance and Deaths Related to Drugs, Alcohol, and Suicide among US Health Care Professionals," *JAMA Psychiatry* 77, no. 7 (2020): 737, 742, https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.0175, analyzes the Nurses Health Study II cohort, establishing gender-specific effects.

[53] Chen et al., "Religious Service Attendance and Deaths Related to Drugs, Alcohol, and Suicide among US Health Care Professionals," 737, 742, analyzes the Health Professionals Follow-up Study, finding male health professionals attending services weekly demonstrated significantly lower death-from-despair and suicide risk versus nonattenders, confirming protective effects across genders though with reduced magnitude in males.

[54] Evan M. Kleiman and Richard T. Liu, "Prospective Prediction of Suicide in a Nationally Representative Sample: Religious Service Attendance as a Protective Factor," *British Journal of Psychiatry* 204, no. 4 (2014): 263, https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.113.128900.

[55] Cdr David A. Daigle, CHC, USN, LtCol Daniel V. Goff, USMC (Ret), and Harold G. Koenig, MD, MHSc, "Holistic Health as a Twenty-First-Century Military Strategy: Stoic Philosophy and Spiritual Fitness for Optimizing Warfighter Readiness," *Expeditions with MCUP* (31 March 2023): 30, https://doi.org/10.36304/ExpwMCUP.2023.03, provides a systematic review finding that 79 percent of 326 studies link spiritual involvement with improved psychological well-being and life satisfaction.

[56] Daigle, Goff, and Koenig, "Holistic Health as a Twenty-First-Century Military Strategy," 30, substantiated by systematic review—42 of 45 studies—correlating spiritual involvement with greater meaning and purpose, demonstrating near-universal empirical support.

[57] Daigle, Goff, and Koenig, "Holistic Health as a Twenty-First-Century Military Strategy," 31, documents that spiritual engagement correlates with increased prosocial behaviors, establishing spirituality as protective against negative outcomes.

[58] Daigle, Goff, and Koenig, "Holistic Health as a Twenty-First-Century Military Strategy," 31, notes that 80 percent of studies show spiritual involvement correlates with greater social support, strengthening interpersonal bonds critical for resilience.

substance abuse disorders, and suicide risk.[59] In operational terms, Koenig's findings underscores why moral and spiritual foundations remain indispensable to sustaining the will to fight.

In the military context, this neurological resilience translates directly to warfighter readiness. A pivotal 2010 study in *Military Medicine* confirmed that spiritual fitness positively correlates with resilience and recovery from trauma, prevention of moral injury, and the unit cohesion required for peak performance. David J. Hufford, Matthew J. Fritts, and Jeffrey E. Rhodes list four operationally relevant outcomes: "(1) resilience and recovery from deployment- and combat-related trauma, (2) optimized prevention and/or resolution of moral injury, (3) cohesive unit climate supportive of peak performance, and (4) mature and engaged spirituality that fosters finding meaning/purpose and effective coping."[60]

This research is validated by studies on veteran populations. In a national study of 3,151 U.S. military veterans, Vanshdeep Sharma et al. found that a high level of personal religion/spirituality (R/S) was associated with a decreased risk for lifetime post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depressive disorder, and alcohol use disorder, and was strongly linked with positive psychosocial characteristics such as gratitude, purpose in life, and post-traumatic growth.[61] While programs like combat and operational stress control (COSC) effectively return Marines to duty following acute stress events, systematic reviews indicate these reactive interventions fail to prevent long-term mental health issues, suggesting that proactive spiritual fitness development offers protective benefits that crisis intervention alone cannot provide.[62]

Spiritual fitness, therefore, is not a wellness program; it is operational armor against psychological casualties. The mechanism matters as much as the metrics—spiritual engagement builds neurological resilience and provides a framework for processing trauma before it occurs. Reactive spirituality proves insufficient when Marines face extreme moral and psychological stress. This is critical for the Marine Corps, which recruits during the developmental window

[59] Daigle, Goff, and Koenig, "Holistic Health as a Twenty-First-Century Military Strategy," 32–33, summarizes evidence that spiritual involvement correlates with lower negative mental health outcomes, establishing it as a powerful protective factor for young military populations.

[60] David J. Hufford, Matthew J. Fritts, and Jeffrey E. Rhodes, "Spiritual Fitness," *Military Medicine* 175, no. 8 (August 2010): 78, https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-10-00075.

[61] Vanshdeep Sharma et al., "Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health of US Military Veterans: Results from the National Health and Resilience in Veterans Study," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 217 (August 2017): 197, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.03.071.

[62] Mark C. Russell and Charles R. Figley, "Do the Military's Frontline Psychiatry/Combat Operational Stress Control Programs Benefit Veterans? Part Two: Systematic Review of the Evidence," *Psychological Injury and Law* 10, no. 1 (2017): 24–71, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12207-016-9279-x.

of late adolescence when such protective factors take deepest root. Programs like COSC treat symptoms after a crisis, whereas spiritual fitness fortifies character before combat demands it. It is, therefore, foundational, not peripheral, to combat readiness.

MCMAP: The Institutional Bridge to the Ethical Warrior

MCMAP bridges the gap between individual spiritual strength and collective ethical accountability, transforming personal conviction into the unit-wide moral frameworks that prevent ethical collapse under combat stress. It is anchored in the deliberate cultivation of character and spiritual resilience, an inner citadel forged long before adversity strikes. However, individual spirituality, while important for personal resilience, cannot guarantee ethical behavior in the crucible of combat. History offers many stark examples—from fanatical units of Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany during World War II to the violent extremists of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria today—where profound spiritual or ideological conviction, absent a common ethical framework and shared unit values, fueled destructive actions rather than moral restraint. To safeguard against this, individual spirituality must be tempered and shaped by the collective *esprit de corps* or a deep sense of belonging anchored by collective values. This shared identity cultivates mutual trust, accountability, and a sense of sacred duty to one another and the mission, reinforcing ethical norms amid the chaos of war. This doctrinal approach establishes the "character" discipline as foundational to unit *esprit de corps*, directly linking it to the formation of "ethical warriors."[63] The Marine Corps recognized this imperative decades ago. It built an institutional system to fuse individual spiritual strength with collective values and ethical constraints, ensuring that the warrior's spirit serves justice rather than descent into savagery. That system is MCMAP.

As the section titled "Spiritual Fitness as an Evolving Concept in the Department of Defense" established, the Marine Corps institutionalized spiritual fitness, a core warfighting attribute through MCMAP. It embedded the concept in promotion requirements, formal training, and unit culture. The program fuses individual conviction with collective moral purpose, building both resilience under adversity and restraint in the use of force. This fusion keeps the will to fight from becoming fanaticism or cruelty. It channels that will toward disciplined, lawful lethality. Yet, MCMAP's effectiveness depends on fidelity to its founding purpose. The program was designed to forge Marines whose moral and spiritual resilience matches their physical prowess—producing warriors whose character transforms raw aggression into disciplined strength. The sec-

[63] *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 2011), chap. 1.

ond part of this article addresses whether MCMAP continues to fulfill that purpose and how its current implementation measures against its original design.

Character and Leadership: Maximizing MCMAP

Institutional Drift: When Belt Progression Obscures Purpose

MCMAP is the forge for building a Marine's inner citadel—a holistic system intentionally designed through the efforts of four Commandants to ensure ethical strength is honed alongside physical prowess. The physical discipline of MCMAP demands resilience that serves as the foundation against adversity. The mental discipline trains Marines to remain calm and tactical under pressure. The character discipline instills the core values that bind physical and mental strength into unit cohesion and the will to fight. When faced with the moral and physical shocks of combat, Marines draw on this inner citadel they have painstakingly constructed. This is MCMAP's design–a comprehensive system where combatives training and character formation reinforce one another. Yet, design and execution are not the same. While MCMAP's architecture remains sound, its implementation at the unit level has drifted from the Commandants' original intent.

Understanding that the inner spirit of the warrior could not be left to develop organically, the Marine Corps created MCMAP as an institutional mechanism to deliberately cultivate the warrior ethos in every Marine. As Jack E. Hoban explains, MCMAP was conceived not merely as a combatives system, but as the primary vehicle for creating an "ethical warrior," with ethics training forming the very core of the program.[64] It is "an ethics-based combatives program consisting of three main elements: character (ethical warrior training), mental (military skills and mindset training), and physical (martial combatives and combat conditioning). Notably, the ethical warrior training is considered to be the core of the program."[65] Its core purpose is to instill a warrior ethos grounded in a respect for life distinguishing a professional warrior from a mere killer.[66]

MCMAP's drift from character development to belt progression has measurable consequences: a 2022 study documented acute declines in moral function following combatives training as evidence that physical technique without ethical formation produces not warriors, but liabilities. This drift ignores what *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B, explicitly defines: *character discipline* as "the spiritual aspect of each Marine and the collective spirit of the

[64] Jack E. Hoban, "The Ethical Marine Warrior," *Marine Corps Gazette* 91, no. 9 (September 2007): 36, posits MCMAP's "ethical warrior" focus, grounded in the intrinsic value of life, produces more effective and humane warfighters capable of acting as "defender-protectors."
[65] Hoban, "The Ethical Marine Warrior."
[66] Hoban, "The Ethical Marine Warrior."

Marine Corps," designed to "instill the warrior spirit in every Marine."[67] To forge the will to fight as the program's architects intended, an enhanced focus on the leadership and character aspects of MCMAP is more than beneficial—it is mission-critical.

MCMAP teaches Marines to destroy the human body with brutal efficiency; stomp and crush an enemy's neck and skull, smash in an enemy's teeth with the butt of a rifle, and thrust a bayonet into the enemy's chest. The brutality of warfare must be ethically constrained and conducted by warriors of character. If not, excesses will result, inflicting unnecessary suffering upon combatants and civilians alike. A 2022 study of 55 active duty, newly enlisted Marines concluded that MCMAP training resulted in an acute decline in moral function. The research found that during a six-week period, "both moral intention and moral judgment worsened over the visits suggesting a chronic impairment related to time in training and indicating a functional change in ethical decision-making following acute bouts of MCMAP."[68] This study demands intensified focus on MCMAP's character and leadership components, not reduced training. To counteract the documented decline in moral function, character development requires more robust and frequent reinforcement.

This degradation of moral function underscores a deeper truth—no matter how advanced warfare becomes, its outcome still turns on the human will. Despite advances in standoff weaponry and autonomous systems, MCMAP's hand-to-hand combat training remains doctrinally essential; not as anachronism, but as the crucible where lethal technique and ethical restraint must be forged together. To situate this enduring reality in the digital age, the following analysis examines the relationship between technology and the warrior's character. The combative techniques taught in MCMAP are essential to the work of a Marine and offer a glimpse into the horrors of hand-to-hand combat that are still relevant today. Despite profound advancements in technological innovation that have changed the character of warfare, the fundamental nature of war remains centered on human beings exerting their will over one another. History is replete with examples where the best-trained and educated soldiers made the most effective use of disruptive new technologies, such as the longbow, musket, iron ship, airplane, machine gun, tank, and aircraft carrier, to defeat their enemies. Military technology is constantly evolving and requires a properly prepared force to make the most effective use of modern technologies to win the next war. Indeed, drones, cyber, and artificial intelligence will be no different. Given the particularly ferocious form of violence taught, situating this

[67] *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B, 1-3.

[68] Jacob A. Siedlik et al., "Change in Measures of Moral Function Following Acute Bouts of Marine Corps Martial Arts Training," *Stress and Health* 38 (2022), 534, https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.3109.

training within a strong ethical framework is critical to ensuring it is wielded by disciplined warfighters. However, George Raudzens argues that "technological determinism" (the belief that superior weapons win wars) is not supported by historical evidence. He concludes that "although technological superiority can be very important in war, technology on its own will seldom decide a war."[69] Thus, warfighters possessing the most advanced technology along with a superior will to fight, represent the best opportunity to win wars. Additionally, warfighters imbued with character can help guard against violent excesses in combat and ensure Marines remain military professionals and not well-trained thugs.

Strong character, instilled and reinforced by ethical leaders, fosters the development of resilient Marines and directly contributes to the individual Marine's will to fight. Their character, defined by mental and moral fortitude, better enables them to withstand spiritual, moral, mental, physical, and social challenges. A solid spiritual foundation and a clear sense of purpose, combined with the active support of chaplains and small unit leaders, can help Marines recover from various hardships, such as the loss of a parent, infidelity in a relationship, setbacks at work, or, in extreme cases, the death of a fellow Marine. To this end, commanders should use all resources available and take every available opportunity to cultivate a Marine's character, as it is a lifelong endeavor and not merely a guaranteed byproduct of Marine Corps accessions training.

Virtue Ethics: Character Development and the Will to Fight

Aristotelian virtue ethics provides the philosophical framework MCMAP needs to recover its character-development mission: virtue as practiced habit, forged through repetition until ethical action becomes instinctive—precisely the methodology MCMAP already applies to physical combatives. Aristotle taught that virtues, such as courage, represent the mean between two extremes (vices): in the case of courage, between cowardice (deficiency) and recklessness (excess). Moreover, he described courage as an expression of a noble intent, arguing that a "courageous man faces the dangers and performs the actions appropriate to his courage" for the right reasons.[70] This virtue is not innate; it must be practiced. As Aristotle noted, just as men become builders by building, "we become just by doing just acts."[71] The intentional habituation of virtues forges habits

[69] George Raudzens, "War Winning Weapons: The Measure of Technological Determinism in Military History," *Journal of Military History* 54, no. 4 (October 1990): 432.
[70] Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thomson (London: Penguin Classics, 1976), 129, offers a foundational practical work on ethics exploring "how to best live" not merely to understand the good, but to achieve it.
[71] Aristotle, *The Ethics of Aristotle*, 91–92.

that lead to an elevation of one's character.[72] For Aristotle, habits form the foundation of our identity and are pivotal to shaping our future. Will Durant summarized Aristotelian ethics: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit."[73] This principle already underpins MCMAP's approach to physical combatives, where Marines master techniques through repetitive drilling until movements become instinctive. The same methodology applies to ethical formation: Marines become virtuous warriors not through lectures on abstract principles, but through repeated practice of ethical decision-making in realistic scenarios where character is tested and reinforced.

MCMAP already applies Aristotelian methodology in its physical training. Marines drill techniques through thousands of repetitions until muscle memory replaces conscious thought. Extending this proven habituation principle to character development is not innovation but logical consistency: ethical warriors are forged through repeated practice of right action, not lectures on abstract principles. The Marine Corps and other Service branches must promote character by adopting an Aristotelian approach that focuses on practical habits rather than abstract principles. Chaplain of the Marine Corps rear admiral Carey H. Cash advocates for this "virtue tradition," which he describes as "the study of behaviors and the consequences they bring."[74] Instead of beginning with complex philosophical debates, leaders can ask a simple question about a Marine's habits: Do they produce a life that flourishes or do they lead to a life that is coming unraveled at the seams? This focus on tangible outcomes makes the classical tradition of character education immediately relevant to the challenges Marines face.

General James N. Mattis and Admiral James B. Stockdale, eminent philosophers of the Department of the Navy, present a unique perspective in this regard, worthy of consideration by all commanders. They view Marines and sailors as both warfighters and philosophical moral agents with the power to choose to act virtuously while also being aware of their susceptibility to vices (bad habits). This perspective empowers Marines and sailors to understand that choosing the right path is not just a decision, and it has a profound transformative power. It can reshape, sharpen instincts and values, embed faithful actions, and fortify the inner citadel as Marines operate in the moral battlespace.

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[72] RAdm Carey H. Cash, CHC, USN, "Character Education in the USMC" (presentation, General Officer Symposium, Quantico, VA, 2 October 2023), 2, argues for a return to classical Aristotelian character education, defining virtue as the habit of excellence resulting from making good decisions repeatedly.

[73] Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the World's Greatest Philosophers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1926), 74.

[74] Cash, "Character Education in the USMC," 1–2.

One example using the life experience of Stockdale involves his time at the infamous Hanoi Hilton, where he spent seven years and endured multiple rounds of torture. Stockdale relates a story regarding a fellow prisoner, who, after release, died under suspicious circumstances that strongly suggested suicide.[75] Of the prisoner, Stockdale writes, "He was obsessed with success . . . a classic opportunist. He befriended and worked for the enemy to the detriment of his fellow Americans. In time, out of fear and shame, he withdrew; we could not get him to communicate with the American prisoner organization."[76] The man survived the ordeal and was released with the others. However, only months after his release, he was killed in an accident that strongly resembled suicide. Stockdale's remarks are instructive:

> He was right out of Aristotle's book, a good man with a flaw who had come to an unjustified bad end. The flaw was insecurity: the need to ingratiate himself, the need for love and adulation at any price. He reminded me of Paul Newman in *The Hustler* . . . he knew how to make a deal. He was handsome, he was smart, he was attractive to everybody; but he had to have adulation, and therein lay the seed of tragedy—he's all skill and no character.[77]

Stockdale survived the ordeal to earn the Medal of Honor and attain vice admiral rank, but his most enduring contribution was insisting that all leaders study ethics *lest they become casualties of character*. As his story underscores, character is critical to all members of the military, whether in combat or not.

MCMAP must therefore function as a vital platform for developing a Marine's character, going far beyond its role as a sparring ground to teach Marines combat skills. It has a vital role in a Marine's transition from civilian to an ethical warfighter, a process that continues long after recruit training. As stated in *Sustaining the Transformation*, MCTP 6-10A:

> Once Marines earn the right to wear the Eagle, Globe, and Anchor, each one must continue the transition process, each growing in character and abilities as they strive to become more than just someone who meets the requirements to be a Marine, but to be the Marine needed for the future mission.

[75] As quoted by RAdm Carey H. Cash, CHC, USN, "Recovering the Classical Tradition: The Chaplain's Role as Ethics Educator in the New Moral Battlespace" (paper presented at the National Defense University conference "1918-2018: Lessons from the Great War—Ethical Imperatives for the Contemporary Profession of Arms," Washington, DC, 30 July 2018), 2, argues that military ethics programs suffer "institutional paralysis" and advocates Aristotelian virtue ethics to preempt moral failures.

[76] Cash, "Recovering the Classical Tradition," 2.

[77] Cash, "Recovering the Classical Tradition."

> This transformation must be intentional and continuous to ensure the Marine Corps remains a force in readiness.[78]

Marine Corps Martial Arts Program, MCRP 3-02B, articulates how character factors into the mythos of the Marine Corps, stating that "this legacy includes not only our fighting prowess but also the character and soul of what makes us unique as Marines. During these early years, the leadership and core values training that are our hallmark today developed in concert with the martial skills."[79] Accordingly, the focus on character is best understood in the context of other Marine Corps publications and orders, which demonstrate the Corps' commitment to developing morally and ethically sound Marines, rather than skilled killers proficient in the application of violence. This understanding and expectation are supported in *Learning*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 7, in which the importance of character is linked to intellect:

> A Marine's mindset, values, ethics, and experiences impact his or her learning, decisions, and actions. Character, will, and intellect, they're interrelated, and they're inextricably linked. Now character is about moral character, and it's . . . about the capacity and the sense of the rightness of your decision: to be able to make that decision quickly. The will is about having the strength to execute the decision, and the intellect undergirds it all by giving you the context, the intellectual context, to be able to make the decision.[80]

In *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, the combination of one's character and skill within their military occupational specialty (MOS) builds the glue of unit cohesion: trust. To this end, the document notes that "leaders of high moral character and professional competence who are not just technically and tactically proficient but who earn and breed trust among subordinates. These leaders in turn form the foundation of effective warfighting units characterized by mutual understanding, implicit communication, and esprit de corps."[81] MCMAP transcends mere hand-to-hand combat training. It forges unit cohesion, moral strength, and the will to fight. *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program* states as much, saying, "The true value of Marine Corps Martial Arts Program is enhancement to unit training. A fully implemented program can

[78] *Sustaining the Transformation*, MCTP 6-10A (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2024), 1-5.
[79] *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B, 1-1.
[80] *Learning*, MCDP 7 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 2020), 1-10.
[81] *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development*, 2.

help instill unit esprit de corps and help foster the mental, character, and physical development of the individual Marine in the unit."[82] It is time for MCMAP to fulfill its original intent in Marine character development efforts. Failing to fully leverage this program is a missed opportunity for the Marine Corps.

Marine Corps doctrine articulated above establishes character development as central to the profession of arms. *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program* grounds it in institutional mythos, *Learning*, MCDP 7, links it to decision-making under pressure, and *MCO 1500.61, Marine Leader Development* connects it to unit trust and cohesion. MCMAP was designed as the institutional mechanism to operationalize this doctrine, forging ethical warriors whose character produces the will to fight. Yet, the program's drift toward belt progression represents more than a missed training opportunity. Under Force Design distributed operations, where Stockdale's individual character failure in a prisoner of war camp becomes the strategic corporal's ethical collapse in the field, character transcends unit cohesion to become a combat multiplier. What happens when that strategic corporal operates beyond command oversight, armed with MCMAP's lethal techniques but lacking its ethical foundation?

Character as a Combat Multiplier for EABO and Distributed Maritime Operations

Force Design's distributed operations transform character from desirable trait to mission-critical requirement: the strategic corporal operating beyond oversight, armed with MCMAP's lethal techniques, represents either decisive advantage or catastrophic liability depending on ethical formation. Those serving as stand-in forces (SIF) supporting EABO sea-denial concepts that create antiaccess/area-denial of defense (A2/D2) "envelopes" to control maritime terrain, will have a high level of autonomy and be responsible for positively interacting with host nation militaries and civilians.[83] The warrior ethos, defined by traits of discipline and selfless sacrifice, must be deliberately cultivated to remain operative in modern operating environments where the tactical actions of junior Ma-

[82] *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B, foreword.

[83] Maj Pat Hassett, USMC, "Bringing Clarity to Stand-in Forces: How Operational Art and Science Provide the Linkage between Stand-in Forces, Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations, and Reconnaissance/Counter-reconnaissance Operations" *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 15, no. 2 (2024): 79–100, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20241502005, clarifies the "amorphous" linkage between SIF, EABO, and reconnaissance/counter-reconnaissance operations (RXR) by positioning SIF as the overarching operational concept; Jim Lacey, "The 'Dumbest Concept Ever' Just Might Win Wars," *War on the Rocks*, 29 July 2019, argues that EABO is a sea-denial concept designed to deter a peer adversary by creating land-based antiaccess envelopes); and *Tentative Manual for Expeditionary Advanced Base Operations*, 2–12, notes that stand-in forces require high autonomy and must maintain positive relations with host-nation forces and civilians to enable effective sea-denial within contested maritime terrain.

rines can have strategic implications.[84] Thus, while the Marine Corps' operating concept has evolved during the last decade, the focus on a Marine's character having an outsized impact is not new. General Charles C. Krulak's concept of the Three Block War emphasized that when conducting humanitarian, peacekeeping/stabilization, and combat operations simultaneously, the actions of a Marine corporal can have a strategic impact.[85] Krulak identified three priorities for developing strategic corporals: instilling Marine Corps ethos to address battlefield "moral quandaries," providing professional military education for technical proficiency, and modeling quality leadership to inspire Marines to similar excellence.[86] The Three Block War and the current distributed operations concepts highlight the necessity of leadership and character at all levels. In the modern distributed maritime operations (DMO) and EABO frameworks, Marines will disperse across a wide geographical area, far away from the watchful eyes of senior leaders at the "flagpole." This situation will require junior Marines to make character-based decisions that greatly influence the care of their fellow Marines, relationships with Joint and partner forces, and the execution of offensive and defensive operations.

The Marine Corps must seize every opportunity to develop Marines' character, which is a lifelong endeavor, not a guaranteed byproduct of recruit training. Failure carries strategic consequences: poor judgment by Marines lacking character development produces costly operational and tactical setbacks. General Krulak directly equated character with military readiness, stating,

> The Corps is a ready force, not a force that when called on must struggle to get ready. Our challenge is to be a Corps of men and women who consistently represent the highest moral character in and out of uniform. Character creates a foundation on which successful military units are built. From this foundation, Honor, Courage, and Commitment will always be evident, providing the perfect description of a United States Marine.[87]

[84] Speigle, "The Marine Corps' Warrior Ethos," 1, contends that the warrior ethos must be intentionally developed through leadership and education to stay effective amid strategic-level junior actions.

[85] Franklin C. Annis, "Krulak Revisited: The Three-Block War, Strategic Corporals, and the Future Battlefield," *Modern War Institute at West Point*, 3 February 2020, argues that Krulak's positive "strategic corporal" philosophy became "distorted" into a "toxic" misinterpretation focused on negative strategic impacts of tactical failure.

[86] Annis, "Krulak Revisited."

[87] *ALMAR 248/96, Character* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 9 July 1996), equates character with readiness, defining it as the foundation of military units and shield against despair developed daily through right habits.

To this end, Krulak states:

> Character is developed everyday in garrison, on deployment, aboard ship, on duty or on liberty, wherever we are around the world. We are not born with character. It is developed by the experiences and decisions that guide our lives. Neither can we borrow the character or reputation of another. Each individual creates, develops and nurtures their own. That is why each one of us must learn to make good moral decisions in our lives. When the right course of action is unclear, only the habit of doing the right thing, as practiced everyday in all areas of our lives, can be counted upon. Well-developed character is our shield against fear and despair. That's why Napoleon said that in war, the importance of the moral, relative to the physical, is three to one.[88]

Examples from military history reinforce General Krulak's belief that character can have dire military implications with strategic consequences. The My Lai massacre, which involved the killing of women, children, and elderly villagers in Vietnam, severely damaged America's trust in its soldiers fighting in the Vietnam War and contributed to the growing antiwar sentiment in the United States.[89] In 1995, two Marines and a sailor raped a 12-year-old Okinawan girl. Regarding the implications of that event, Krulak said, "When [they] raped a little girl in Okinawa, that had massive strategic importance," he says. "We've never gotten over it."[90]

During the Global War on Terrorism, incidents of detainee abuse severely undermined the entire counterinsurgency mission in Iraq by validating enemy propaganda and alienating populations the United States needed to win over. The horrific treatment of prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison, for example, was not an isolated event but resulted from a systemic U.S. policy to circumvent

[88] *ALMAR 248/96, Character*.

[89] See, for example, Fred L. Borch, "A Look at the My Lai Incident Fifty Years Later," *On Point* 23, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 41; Kent A. Russell, "My Lai Massacre: The Need for an International Investigation," *California Law Review* 58, no. 3 (May 1970): 703, 708, https://doi.org/10.2307/3479613, analyzes the leadership failures and cover-up of My Lai, noting the event's shock to the public and its role in spurring Army ethics and values reforms; and Mark D. Carson, "F. Edward Hébert and the Congressional Investigation of the My Lai Massacre," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 37, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 61–79, argues that Hébert's ideological bias and deference to military policy limited the My Lai inquiry's depth and findings.

[90] Tobias Naegele, "Want to Understand the Future of War? Talk to Chuck Krulak," *Defense One*, 3 February 2018, notes the 1995 Okinawa rape incident triggered mass protests, operational halt, Status of Forces Agreement revision calls, and lasting antibase sentiment.

international law.[91] Moreover, the killing of 15 innocent civilians during an incident at Haditha also damaged American credibility in Iraq and enraged the local population Marines were supposed to protect.[92]

Additionally, the "Fat Leonard" Navy scandal called the integrity of military personnel into question, challenging whether members could be trusted to carry out their mission with honor when officers, including an active-duty admiral, were willing to redirect military vessels in exchange for cash and luxury gifts.[93] In 2024, an airman stationed in Okinawa was charged with raping a minor, and the episode triggered an immediate resurgence of local opposition to the U.S. military presence on an island widely regarded by the Pentagon as critical to regional deterrence against China.[94] As in the 1995 rape incident, the resulting public outcry underscored the persistent civil–military tensions surrounding the U.S. presence in Okinawa and its strategic necessity.[95] These cases illustrate lapses in character that proved highly detrimental to military efforts, undermined public trust, and eroded the collective will to fight. Indeed, they demonstrate that the individual character of servicemembers will play a decisive role in future battles as the Marine Corps pivots to the Pacific and conducts EABO and DMO.

Conclusion

MCMAP's drift from character development to belt progression has eroded the Corps' capacity to forge the ethical warriors that Force Design demands. As the program marks its 25th anniversary, the evidence is unambiguous: when the Corps separates combatives training from ethical formation, it produces measurable harm to combat effectiveness and moral function. Force Design's distributed operations demand character-centered training and they depend on it entirely. MCMAP represents the Marine Corps' systematic answer: an institutional program that fuses combat skills with ethical formation. Yet, institutional drift threatens that design, precisely when dispersed operations make it essen-

[91] Reed Brody, *The Road to Abu Ghraib* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2004), 1, argues that Abu Ghraib stemmed from systemic policy circumventing international law, including torture memoranda and imported interrogation methods.

[92] Tom Engelhardt, "Collateral Damage and the 'Incident' at Haditha," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 9, no. 1 (2007), https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.1015, argues that Abu Ghraib stemmed not from isolated acts but a systemic U.S. policy to circumvent international law.

[93] Associated Press, " 'Fat Leonard,' Navy Scandal Mastermind, Sentenced to 15 Years," *Navy Times*, 5 November 2024, reports on Leonard Francis's 15-year sentence for a $35 million bribery scheme where Navy officers traded classified information and ship movements for gifts.

[94] Joel Guinto, "US Soldier Charged in Japan for Rape of Minor," *BBC News*, 26 June 2024.

[95] "Restoring Trust and Preserving the U.S.-Japan Alliance: The 1995 Okinawa Rape Incident," Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, 28 July 2021, summarizes the 1995 rape incident, diplomatic response, and its implications for U.S.–Japan relations.

tial for warriors whose character sustains success under isolation and stress. To ensure character is reinforced at the unit level, commanding officers and senior leaders should view MCMAP as their character laboratory. MCMAP is an excellent vehicle to pass "sea stories," character lessons, and leverage guest speakers such as chaplains to reinforce ethical expectations and moral decision making.[96] From an institutional perspective, the Marine Corps should commission a comprehensive study to determine where MCMAP can best be changed to integrate the physical requirements with character development.[97]

The first section of this article demonstrates that spiritual fitness is not a peripheral wellness program but operational armor and deliberately cultivated spiritual foundations provide documented protection against moral injury and PTSD while strengthening combat resilience. Four successive Commandants designed MCMAP as an integrated system where physical, mental, and character discipline reinforce one another, not as separable components, but as unified warrior formation. Section two revealed the consequences of abandoning this design. When MCMAP implementation prioritizes belt progression over character development, harm follows: combatives-only training produces measurable declines in moral function. Historical examples from My Lai to Abu Ghraib illustrate the strategic consequences when character fails.

These findings return to the fundamental principle: the will to fight wins wars. In an era when adversaries can acquire technology but struggle to build cohesive fighting forces, character becomes the decisive advantage. Nations can purchase hardware. They cannot purchase the will to fight. Recent conflicts reaffirm this truth: Ukrainian forces show how a superior will to fight can stall or even defeat a larger invading military while imposing heavy costs on the enemy. Meanwhile, Afghan National Security Forces collapsed in 2021 despite two decades of American training and billions in advanced equipment. MCMAP's founding Commandants understood what these conflicts now confirm: wars are won by character, not hardware alone. The Corps built MCMAP to develop that decisive advantage. Distributed operations make it even more mission-critical. The Marine Corps must reclaim MCMAP as its doctrine demands.

[96] For ideas to help create guided discussions, see Daigle, Goff, and Reardon, "Entering the Temple of Mars," appendix and scenarios 1–4.

[97] Authors' note: any revisions to *Marine Corps Martial Arts Program*, MCRP 3-02B, should be accompanied by significant data from a comprehensive study such as studies by Rand or Center for Naval Analyses necessitating a change.

Becoming, Not Joining
Belongingness as the Core Driver of Will to Fight

Tomas Villegas

Abstract: This analysis argues that belongingness is the most durable driver of will to fight. While will to fight is often attributed to nationalism, ideology, religion, or political legitimacy, these factors alone cannot explain why individuals continue fighting despite fear, deprivation, and self-preservation. Drawing on psychology, sociology, and military studies, the analysis identifies combat motivation as rooted in an individual's fused identity with a small, tightly bonded group. Belongingness is examined as a fundamental human need and as an organizational product that generates cohesion, resilience, and combat effectiveness. The U.S. Marine Corps serves as the central case study, illustrating how identity transformation, shared hardship, institutional culture, and leadership climate sustain enduring combat motivation. The analysis also addresses how strategic narratives can distort external assessments of adversary will to fight, emphasizing the need to focus on internal cohesion and perceived obligation. The analysis concludes that in battle it is not abstract allegiance, political rhetoric, or symbolic identity that most reliably compels action, but the unbroken bond to the person fighting beside you. How military institutions cultivate, sustain, or erode that bond remains essential to understanding combat endurance, organizational retention, and battlefield effectiveness.

Keywords: will to fight, belongingness, combat motivation, unit cohesion, military culture, U.S. Marine Corps, social identity, leadership climate, retention, combat effectiveness

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Introduction

The concept of the will to fight has long occupied a known, yet abstract position in military theory and practice. Strategists routinely acknowledge its importance, often elevating it above logistical advantages, mathematical manning superiority, or technological dominance. Yet despite these very tangible items, will to fight remains difficult to define, measure, and deliberately develop, especially when trying to account for requirements that must be built into a training routine readily scalable in the event of a major conflict. Most frequently, will to fight is framed in terms of nationalism, ideology, religion, or political correctness. While these factors undeniably influence motivation, they do not adequately explain why individuals continue to fight when survival instincts, rational cost-benefit calculations, and loyalties fail.[1]

To succeed on the modern battlefield, military forces must cultivate a sense of belonging that assures high unit cohesion, resilience, and ultimately sustained combat effectiveness. Belongingness, not merely ideology or rhetoric, provides the most durable foundation for will to fight because it fuses individual identity with the group, gives hardship meaning, and sustains action when fear, uncertainty, and scarcity would otherwise prompt withdrawal. In that sense, the will to fight is best understood through three reinforcing levels: the psychological need of the individual to belong, the sociological power of the community to bind self-identity, and the military responsibility to create cultures and leaders capable of preserving that bond in a time of conflict or war.

This argument matters because combat motivation does not emerge in the abstract. It emerges in human beings shaped by relationships, trust, and shared experience. Humans are not primarily motivated to fight for flags, governments, or ideologies at the moment of violence. They fight for the people beside them in the trenches or foxhole. This phenomenon is not by accident, but rather an expression of deeply embedded human social psychology.[2]

Using interdisciplinary research from psychology, sociology, and military studies, the following analysis treats belongingness as a core human need and demonstrates that organizations that intentionally cultivate belonging produce

[1] S. L. A. Marshall, *Men against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command* (New York: William Morrow, 1947); Dmitry (Dima) Adamsky, *The Russian Way of Deterrence: Strategic Culture, Coercion, and War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023); Samuel A. Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949); and Sebastian Junger, *War* (New York: Twelve, an imprint of Hachette Livre, 2010).

[2] A. H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954); Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, "The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497–529; Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior," in *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, ed. Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986), 7–24; Robin Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); Marshall, *Men Against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.

disproportionately high cohesion, resilience, and combat effectiveness. The U.S. Marine Corps is presented as a primary case study for institutionalized belongingness. Through deliberate identity destruction and reconstruction, the Marine Corps does not merely socialize recruits into an organization but transforms them into members of a distinct warrior culture. The summary that would best explain these experiences would be: "Marines do not join the Marine Corps. They become Marines."[3]

This article also addresses a related strategic problem: the tendency to misread will to fight during time of war. Prevailing interpretations of will to fight in modern conflicts, particularly those that characterize Russia's performance in Ukraine as evidence of national weakness or moral failure, often drift toward narrative convenience rather than disciplined assessment. While such interpretations may be politically convenient, they obscure the powerful influence of narrative framing, strategic communication, and tactical information operations in shaping public perception. The potential analytical error is subtle but significant: observers begin to treat tactical friction, flawed execution, or divided setbacks as proof of a weak adversary, rather than as characteristics of a complex campaign conducted under political constraints and organizational tradeoffs within an evolving operational environment. Once the narrative manifests into a "Russia is weak" hypothesis, it is no longer an analytical conclusion but a filtered perception. Rather than offering insight into the adversary, it produces a distorted strategic understanding of the conflict.[4]

Taken together, these observations suggest that will to fight cannot be fully understood through material assessments, moral framing, or external narrative interpretation alone. It must be examined where motivation is actually formed and sustained, which can be characterized and summarized by the bond between individuals and the groups to which they belong. The sections that follow proceed accordingly, beginning with the psychological roots of belongingness, then turning to its sociological and organizational implications, and finally showing how the Marine Corps has historically converted belonging into combat effectiveness.

Belongingness as a Fundamental Human Need

The argument that belongingness reinforces the will to fight begins with the

[3] Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 4th ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, an imprint of John Wiley & Sons, 2010).

[4] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, "The Russian 'Firehose of Falsehood' Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It," Expert Insights, Rand, 11 July 2016; and Jonathan Morley-Davies, Jem Thomas, and Graham Baines, *Russian Information Operations Outside of the Western Information Environment (Revised Version)* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2024).

recognition that humans are inherently social beings. Psychological research consistently identifies the need to belong as a fundamental human motivation. Abraham H. Maslow placed belongingness immediately after physiological and safety needs in his hierarchy, emphasizing its centrality to human functioning and well-being. Subsequent scholarly publications have refined and reinforced this insight.[5]

Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary's seminal work on the "need to belong" argues that humans possess a pervasive drive to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships. This need is not merely emotional but cognitive and behavioral, influencing perception, decision-making, and risk tolerance. When belongingness is threatened or denied, individuals experience anxiety, reduced self-regulation, and diminished resilience. Conversely, when belongingness is strong, individuals demonstrate increased willingness to endure hardship and personal risk.[6]

Social identity theory further explains how group membership becomes integrated into self-concept. Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner argue that individuals derive a significant portion of their identity from the groups to which they belong, particularly when those groups are important, distinctive, and emotionally meaningful. When group identity is strong, threats to the group are experienced as threats to the self. In such conditions, self-preservation and group preservation become psychologically inseparable.[7]

Anthropological and evolutionary perspectives reinforce these findings. Early human survival depended on group cohesion for protection, resource acquisition, and reproduction. Those who prioritized group loyalty over individual safety were more likely to survive and pass on their genes. This evolutionary legacy persists, manifesting in modern contexts as a readiness to sacrifice for one's group, particularly under conditions of shared danger.[8]

Then, at the psychological level, belongingness is not a sentimental add-on to combat motivation. It is the tool that makes sustained sacrifice possible. Belongingness operates most prominently at the small-group level. While individuals may identify conceptually with large collectives such as nations or religions, emotional intensity and personal obligation are strongest within immediate social units. This distinction has profound implications for understanding will to fight. While national narratives may initiate participation in conflict, sustained combat motivation emerges from bonds formed within units.[9]

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[5] Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*; and Baumeister and Leary, "Need to Belong."
[6] Baumeister and Leary, "Need to Belong."
[7] Tajfel and Turner, "Social Identity Theory," 7–24.
[8] Dunbar, *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*.
[9] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.

Belongingness, Culture, and Organizational Performance

Organizations that intentionally cultivate belongingness consistently outperform those that rely solely on formal authority, motivations, or ideology. Sociological research demonstrates that high-performing teams exhibit strong shared identity, mutual trust, and a sense of collective purpose. These characteristics bolster coordination, adaptability, and resilience under stress.[10]

In military contexts, unit cohesion has long been recognized as a critical factor in combat effectiveness. Studies from World War II onward reveal that soldiers' primary motivation for continued fighting is loyalty to comrades rather than ideological commitment or fear of punishment. Samuel Stouffer's research on American soldiers during World War II found that men fought primarily to avoid letting down their fellow soldiers. Similar conclusions emerged from later conflicts, including Vietnam, where small-unit cohesion often sustained combat motivation even when strategic objectives were unclear or unpopular.[11]

This sociological element is essential. Individuals do not merely carry private motivation into war; they are shaped by communities that define what is honorable, expected, and worth enduring. A military organization therefore does more than issue orders or assign missions. It establishes the shared language and expectations that transform isolated individuals into a successful fighting unit.

Belongingness-driven cultures also demonstrate greater tolerance for hardship and uncertainty. When individuals perceive themselves as integral members of a group, they are more willing to endure discomfort, risk, and doubt. This dynamic is particularly relevant in modern warfare, where operational environments are increasingly complex, morally ambiguous, and psychologically demanding.[12]

Equally important, organizations that fail to cultivate belongingness often struggle with morale, discipline, and retention. The collapse of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces provides a contemporary example. Despite significant investment in training and equipment, Afghan forces frequently lacked cohesive identity and loyalty at the unit level. Allegiance to local, tribal, or familial networks often superseded commitment to the state or military institution, especially when those commitments were funded and driven by Western

[10] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

[11] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Richard A. Gabriel and Paul L. Savage, *Crisis in Command: Mismanagement in the Army* (New York: Hill and Wang, an imprint of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978).

[12] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*; and Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*.

influence. Without a unifying culture of belonging, will to fight proved weak and situational.[13]

These observations suggest that will to fight cannot be manufactured through material investment alone. It must be cultivated through deliberate cultural practices that bind individuals to one another and to the institution they serve.[14]

The Marine Corps as a Culture of Belonging

The U.S. Marine Corps represents one of the most deliberate and effective examples of institutionalized belongingness. Unlike many organizations that emphasize functional integration or contractual obligation, the Marine Corps prioritizes identity transformation. From the moment a recruit enters training, the goal is not simply to teach skills or enforce discipline, but to dismantle civilian identity and reconstruct it around a shared Marine identity.[15]

This process begins with separation. Recruits are physically and psychologically removed from familiar social networks, stripped of personal markers of individuality, and immersed in an environment governed by Marine Corps norms, language, and core values. This initial breakdown serves a critical function. By destabilizing prior identity structures, the institution creates psychological space for new identity formation.[16]

Recruits are then systematically exposed to Marine Corps history, mythology, and tradition. Battles, heroes, and sacrifices are not presented as abstract historical facts but as a shared lineage to which recruits are now connected. The message is clear: you are not learning about Marines, you are becoming one.[17]

The transformation is reinforced through shared hardship. Physical exhaustion, stress, and adversity are experienced collectively, forging bonds through mutual suffering. Research indicates that shared adversity accelerates group cohesion by increasing emotional reliance and mutual trust. During recruit training, hardship is not incidental but intentional, serving as a catalyst for belongingness. Incidentally, the Marine Corps inherently continues this shared misery into active service, furthering and strengthening the bond among Marines; however, this can be detrimental to retention, as addressed later in this article.[18]

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[13] Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
[14] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[15] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[16] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[17] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[18] Victor Chung et al., "Social Bonding through Shared Experiences: The Role of Emotional Intensity," *Royal Society Open Science* 11, no. 10 (2024): 240048, https://doi.org/10.1098/rsos.240048.

Language plays a critical role in this process. Recruits are consistently referred to as "recruit" until they earn the title Marine. The moment of transition is ritualized, marking not merely the completion of training but the adoption of a new identity, a shared identity. This distinction reinforces the idea that being a Marine is not a profession but an actual state of existence.

This is why Marines do not describe their affiliation in transactional terms. One does not join the Marine Corps in the same way one joins an organization or vocation. One becomes a Marine. The distinction is subtle but profound. Becoming implies permanent transformation and collective identity fusion. That is why if you ask any Marine, active duty or not, what their birthday is, more often than not you will get the obligatory 10 November 1775. Joining implies an association or choice that has the safety net of reversibility.

The result is a baseline will to fight that exists prior to combat exposure. Even before entering battle, Marines possess a deeply ingrained sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, yet intimate enough that the feeling is almost tangible. This baseline does not guarantee tactical success, but it provides a psychological foundation upon which combat motivation can endure.[19]

The historical record strengthens the point of Marine cohesion, belonging has been the difference maker in warfighting across the Corps' history; whether the defensive posture that was upheld at Belleau Wood, the shared hardship and endurance of the Chosin Reservoir campaign, or the small-unit cohesion that characterized urban combat in Fallujah. In each case, material conditions mattered, training mattered, and leadership mattered, but the force multiplier was the same: Marines continued to act under extreme pressure because identity and belonging had already fused the individual to the unit. The Marine Corps' warfighting reputation, then, is not merely a product of lore. Lore survives because it has been repeatedly validated in combat by cohesive Marines fighting for one another.[20]

The Marine Corps Retention Challenge

While the Marine Corps is exceptionally effective at creating belonging, it is less immune to losing it than Marine Corps lore would sometimes suggest. Retention challenges across eras point to a critical truth. Belongingness, once established, must be continuously reinforced within the operating forces. When Marines encounter leadership environments characterized by neglect, disgrace,

[19] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.
[20] Steven Pressfield, *Gates of Fire* (New York: Bantam Books, 1998); James M. McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (New York: Viking Press, 1976); Marshall, *Men against Fire*; and Junger, *War*.

or persistent disregard, the sense of connection that once bound them to the institution can erode. In such cases, the identity that was carefully constructed during initial training and continued service becomes strained, and the will to fight may narrow from institutional commitment to an oversimplified, mere obligation.

This reality places an unavoidable responsibility on small-unit leaders. Noncommissioned officers (NCO) and company grade commanders become the most immediate custodians of belongingness after the transformation process is complete. Through their daily conduct, consistency, and treatment of subordinates, they either reinforce the Marine identity or gradually fracture it. Yet, this burden does not rest on them alone. The Marine Corps as an institution bears equal responsibility for the conditions in which Marines and their leaders operate, from NCOs and staff noncommissioned officers (SNCO) to company grade and field grade officers alike. Belongingness is therefore not sustained by leadership presence alone, but by the combined effect of leader behavior and an institution willing to support the environments in which that identity can endure.

When living conditions deteriorate, barracks fall into disrepair, food quality becomes persistently substandard, and daily life begins to resemble confinement rather than service, the cultural lore of the institution alone cannot withstand those pressures.[21] In such environments, belongingness erodes not because Marines lack resilience, but because the organization fails to reinforce the very identity it seeks to preserve. Under these conditions, the willingness to fight narrows from collective commitment to individual endurance.

In this sense, the willingness to fight does not reside solely in doctrine, training pipelines, or institutional values. Nor can it be sustained by NCOs, SNCOs, and commanders acting in isolation. It is sustained, or degraded, through the combined effect of leadership behavior and institutional stewardship, expressed daily in the lived experiences of Marines. When the Marine Corps fails to provide environments that support dignity, connection, and purpose, even the strongest leaders are forced to compensate for systemic shortcomings. Belongingness, and the will to fight it produces, must therefore be treated not only as a leadership responsibility, but as an organizational one.

For leaders, the implication is both simple and sobering. The environments they create matter. They can be the reason Marines flourish, remain committed, and are willing to endure hardship for their respective units and the mission. They can also be the reason Marines disengage, detach, and ultimately choose

[21] See, for example, Riley Ceder, "Barracks 2030 Isn't a 'Fix It and Forget It' Effort, USMC Leaders Say," *Marine Corps Times*, 1 May 2025; and Carla Babb, "A New Barracks Task Force Aims to Improve Military Living Conditions," *Military Times*, 10 October 2025.

to leave the institution entirely. In extreme cases, the erosion of belonging does not merely affect retention. It undermines the very cohesion on which will to fight depends.

If belonging is the psychological engine of combat motivation, then leadership climate is the fuel that keeps it running. Leaders who fail to recognize this relationship risk becoming the decisive factor not in why Marines fight, but in why they stop.

Will to Fight and Narrative Framing in Contemporary Conflict

Modern assessments of will to fight often rely on external observation filtered through political and media narratives. While such assessments can identify trends, they risk oversimplification when separated from cultural and emotional context. The characterization of Russia's performance in Ukraine as evidence of inherently poor will to fight illustrates this risk.[22]

Western discussion frequently frames the conflict as a moral binary between good and evil, democracy and authoritarianism. While this framing serves political and informational purposes, it can obscure the complex strategic, historical, and geopolitical factors driving Russian behavior. More importantly, it merges perceived legitimacy with actual motivation.[23]

Will to fight is not determined solely by moral alignment with external observers. It emerges from internal cohesion, identity, and perceived obligation. Russian forces operate within a different cultural and institutional framework, one shaped by conscription, hierarchical distance, and varying degrees of identity union. These factors influence unit cohesion and combat motivation in ways that simplistic moral narratives fail to capture.[24]

Additionally, strategic communication and information operations play a significant role in shaping public perception, with direct downstream effects on individual will to fight. In the modern information environment, images of retreat, internal conflict, or abandonment can be amplified and disseminated globally at the speed of an individual's internet connection, while equally consequential acts of resilience, cohesion, and sacrifice receive comparatively little attention. This imbalance does more than distort external narratives and perceptions. It bleeds back into the force, influencing how servicemembers interpret their effectiveness, legitimacy, and prospects for success. When unchecked, this constant exposure to "world noise" via an individual's social networking

[22] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*.
[23] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*.
[24] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; and Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*.

timeline can erode confidence, weaken collective identity, and quietly undermine the psychological foundations on which will to fight depends.[25]

A more useful starting point is to separate moral preference from strategic explanation. Russia's decisions can be interpreted, in part, through a security competition framework: the belief that its strategic prowess is shrinking, that it is slipping into defeat, and that time is not on its side. In this view, the question is not about virtue or villainy, but about perceived encirclement, lack of buffer space, homeland/regime security, and the acceptable balance of risk. Whether any single individual accepts that rationale is irrelevant to the point being made here. What matters is that nation states often act most aggressively when they perceive their strategic position deteriorating. That observation is useful not because it excuses aggression, but because it cautions strategic leaders against confusing moral preference with analytic rigor. Essentially, their belongingness becomes the catalyst of will to fight to preserve those elements among their citizenry. If analysts dismiss that logic as mere incompetence or evil, they risk misunderstanding what the adversary thinks it must do to survive.[26]

The broader lesson is not that one must accept Russian claims, but that will to fight in any conflict should be assessed objectively and in relation to the bonds, identities, and narratives that sustain a force internally. The earlier examples in this article, from World War I to Vietnam to urban combat in Iraq, point in the same direction: under fire, forces endure not because outside observers find their cause compelling, but because belonging, cohesion, and shared obligation make endurance possible. This hypothetical does not excuse Russian behavior, nor does it require agreement with Russian claims. It does something more important for the strategic reader: it forces an objective shift in perspective. When analysts treat Russia as weak because they have accepted a morally clean storyline, they risk confusing "how we want to understand the war" with "how the adversary is actually reasoning through it." That confusion produces misclassification. It assigns the enemy a smaller appetite for risk, a lower endurance capacity, and a lesser ability to adapt than may be true in reality.[27]

The warning is straightforward. If you are strategic enough to recognize how narratives can shape perception, you would be foolish to ignore the operational impacts and consequences. Seeing an adversary through a minds-eye of weakness encourages complacency, invites miscalculation, and creates the classic conditions for underestimation. In war, underestimating the enemy is not simply an academic mistake, it can lead to a complete tactical failure where

[25] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Paul and Matthews, *Firehose of Falsehood*; and *Russian Information Operations Outside of the Western Information Environment (Revised Version)*.
[26] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*.
[27] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*.

loss of life is realized on a large scale. It is one of the oldest ways militaries lose.

Ultimately, this article returns will to fight to its most elemental truth. In battle, belongingness to the unit is the decisive motivator. At the point of contact, it is not theoretical allegiance but shared identity, mutual dependence, and loyalty to comrades that sustain the will to fight. Understanding and cultivating this reality remains essential for modern military organizations to evolve while confronting increasingly complex and ambiguous conflicts.[28]

Belongingness at the Point of Contact

At the point of violence, abstract motivations shrink at a rapid pace. When rounds are exchanged and survival is uncertain, individuals do not calculate geopolitical implications or ideological purity. They act based on immediate social bonds and obligations. This reality has been documented across conflicts and cultures for quite some time. Combat veterans consistently report that their primary motivation in battle was loyalty to their fellow men. Fear of letting the ones around you down outweighed fear of death or punishment. This phenomenon persists regardless of nationality, ideology, or era. Whether in the trenches of World War I, the jungles of Vietnam, or the clearing of buildings from town to town in Iraq, the pattern remains consistent.[29]

Belongingness operates as a psychological anchor in chaos. When cognitive overload and fear threaten decision-making, the presence of trusted comrades and appropriate training provides stability and purpose. Fighting becomes an act of mutual preservation rather than required duty.[30] Importantly, this dynamic does not weaken the importance of national or ideological narratives. Such narratives often initiate participation in conflict and sustain public support. However, they do not replace the immediate, visceral bonds that sustain individuals in combat. At the most basic level, war is fought by small groups of humans relying on one another for survival.[31]

This is where the psychological, sociological, and military elements of the argument meet. Psychologically, belonging reduces fear's isolating effect. Sociologically, it binds the individual to a community of obligation. Militarily, it gives commanders and units a durable basis for action under stress. This reality has implications for force design, training, and leadership. Units that prioritize cohesion, shared identity, mutual trust, and training are more likely to sustain will to fight under stress. Leadership that understands and reinforces belong-

[28] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.
[29] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; Gabriel and Savage, *Crisis in Command*; and Junger, *War*.
[30] Marshall, *Men against Fire*.
[31] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.

ingness enhances combat effectiveness more reliably than leadership that relies solely on authority or rhetoric.[32]

Implications for Military Leadership and Strategy

Understanding belongingness as the core driver of will to fight carries significant effects for military leadership and strategy. First, it suggests that investments in technology and training must be matched by investments in culture. Advanced weapons systems cannot compensate for fractured identity or weak cohesion. This principle is echoed in how the U.S. Air Force articulates its force structure ethos. The Service often emphasizes that its most important weapon system is not aircraft or missiles, but its airmen, referring to airmen as the human weapon system whose performance, resilience, and cohesion ultimately determine operational success. This perspective reinforces that no platform, no matter how capable, can substitute for a force whose members have strong connectedness and commitment to each other.[33]

Second, it underscores the importance of leader behavior at all levels. Leaders shape belongingness through consistency, fairness, and shared hardship. When leaders are perceived as part of the group rather than above it, trust and loyalty increase. Conversely, perceived distance or hypocrisy erodes cohesion and motivation. However, leadership behavior alone is not sufficient. The organization bears responsibility for enabling leaders to succeed in this role.[34]

Belongingness cannot be sustained in environments where leaders are expected to compensate for systemic shortcomings. Training, equipping, and caring for units must extend beyond readiness metrics and material capability to include the human length of service. Units are not interchangeable components but collections of individuals whose motivation, identity, and resilience are shaped by how they are supported. When organizations invest in the development of leaders, resource units appropriately, and demonstrate institutional care for the well-being of their people, they reinforce the conditions under which belongingness can thrive. In this way, the will to fight becomes not only a function of individual leadership, but a reflection of how seriously the institution treats its units as human systems rather than abstract force elements.[35]

Third, it highlights the risks of rapid force expansion or integration without sufficient cultural grounding. Organizations that grow faster than their ability to teach identity risk weakening belongingness and diminishing the cohesion

[32] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[33] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*; and SSgt Mikaley Kline, "Command Chief Outlines Top Priorities, Shares Leadership Philosophy," U.S. Air Force Life Cycle Management Center, 8 August 2024.
[34] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.
[35] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*.

on which will to fight depends. This challenge is particularly acute during large-scale mobilization, rapid force regeneration, or partner strength development efforts. In such contexts, training is often treated as a static requirement to be completed rather than a dynamic process designed to shape identity, reinforce belonging, and adapt to evolving mission demands.[36]

Training should not be viewed as a fixed curriculum or a one-time gate to operational employment. It is a living, iterative system that must continuously evolve alongside mission requirements, operational environments, and the composition of the force. When training stagnates, units internalize outdated practices, shared meaning becomes meaningless, and confidence is lost in their relevancy. Conversely, when training is intentionally designed, regularly assessed, and deliberately adapted, it becomes a primary mechanism through which belongingness is reinforced. Well-designed training creates shared experiences, shared language, and shared standards that bind individuals to the unit and to one another.

Finally, it underscores the necessity of maintaining an objective stance when assessing the will to fight of any adversary. Reliance on external indicators alone risks misrepresenting internal cohesion, motivation, and endurance. When analysis is shaped by narrative preference rather than disciplined assessment, adversaries are more easily underestimated. History repeatedly demonstrates that strategic failure often follows not from a lack of capability, but from misjudging an opponent's capacity for sacrifice and cohesion when belongingness within their force is strong.[37]

Conclusion

Will to fight is not an abstract quality inherited through biological lineage, imparted by philosophy, or transferred through a training plan alone. It is a deeply human phenomenon rooted in belongingness. Humans fight hardest when their identity is bonded to the group in shared experience, when survival is a collective effort, and when loyalty transcends self-interest.[38]

The U.S. Marine Corps demonstrates the power of institutionalized belongingness. By transforming individuals rather than merely enrolling them, it establishes a baseline will to fight that endures under extreme conditions. Marines do not fight because they were told to. They fight because they belong.[39]

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[36] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*; and Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*.

[37] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; and Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*.

[38] Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*; Baumeister and Leary, "Need to Belong"; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.

[39] Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.

More broadly, the lesson for warfighters and commanders is plain: belonging cannot be assumed once created. It must be cultivated, protected, and renewed through culture, leadership, training, and institutional care. Contemporary conflict analysis must move beyond simplistic moral virtues and material metrics. Understanding the psychological and cultural foundations of belonging can provide pieces to analyzing a more accurate and actionable framework for assessing an adversary's will to fight.[40]

At the end of the day, wars are not won by national flags, holy scriptures, or ambiguous moral merits. They are fought and endured by individuals in close proximity to one another, bound by shared identity and mutual obligation. In foxholes, trenches, and buildings clouded by indistinguishable insurgency, it is not the nation's flag, religious belief, or even the instinct for self-preservation that ultimately compels action, but the unbroken bond to the person fighting beside you.[41]

[40] Adamsky, *Russian Military Strategy and Doctrine*; Marshall, *Men against Fire*; and Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*.
[41] Marshall, *Men against Fire*; Stouffer et al., *The American Soldier*; and Junger, *War*.

The Secret of the Ukrainian Resilience
National Identity and Will to Fight

Nazar Syvak, PhD

Abstract: This article examines Ukrainian national identity as the foundational driver of the nation's will to fight against Russian aggression during the Russo-Ukrainian War. Drawing on identity frameworks and will-to-fight models, the author traces the historical and cultural dimensions of Ukrainian identity that underpin national resilience, including collective society, self-organization, existential struggle, and a "return to Europe" social purpose. The article demonstrates how these identity dimensions have shaped Ukrainian policymaking, civic engagement, and national resilience, offering broader lessons for small states seeking to build resilience against revisionist major-power aggression.
Keywords: will to fight, national identity, Ukraine, Russo-Ukrainian War, Ukrainian resilience

Kostiantyn Maltsev spent 23 February 2022, celebrating his wife's birthday with his family in their hometown of Kherson, a southern Ukrainian port city. The next morning, Maltsev woke to the sounds of explosions and a new nightmare reality—Russia's full-scale invasion had begun, and enemy forces were already at the city gates. A working-class civilian with no prior military service, Maltsev snapped into action. He evacuated his family from the city and then stayed behind to help resist the Russian onslaught. He single-handedly built

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barricades and conducted reconnaissance missions to support local Ukrainian military units. Despite his lack of training, he even took part in combat, fighting with a discarded rifle that he had picked up after a local battle. Kostiantyn Maltsev died on 1 March 2022. Armed with his rifle, he was riding his bicycle when a Russian armored vehicle spotted him.[1]

More than four years have passed since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Despite the hybrid aggression in Eastern Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, continuous information operations, and the eventual full-scale invasion in February 2022, the Ukrainian nation continues to stand in its fight for Ukrainian freedom. Despite a numeric disadvantage against the Russian Army and the presumed historical connection of the Ukrainian and Russian nations, the Ukrainians chose not to surrender and prevented the collapse of the Ukrainian state. Why has such resilience manifested, and what lessons can be gained from the Ukrainian example?

This article argues that the secret of the Ukrainian will to fight can be uncovered not through a mere analysis of policy initiatives, but by studying Ukrainian identity and its history. National identity and cultural dimensions are often cited as factors in national resilience. Yet, they are often neglected in analytical frameworks, and their effects are rarely considered in analyses of the will to fight. This article fills this gap and examines how Ukrainian national identity strengthens resiliency by first establishing key analytical frameworks of will to fight, then analyzing the historical and cultural dimensions of Ukrainian identity that enable national resolve, exploring how these identity aspects have shaped defense policy, and finally assessing national identity's broader role in bolstering will to fight.

Analyzing Will to Fight

Will to fight is integral to the military, political leadership, and the nation they serve, enabling them to achieve their political objectives through war as politics by other means. History has shown that nations and groups determined to fight have successfully resisted and defeated opponents with much higher military capabilities but lesser determination and morale.[2] This led many military leaders and researchers to conclude that the "will to fight" can be considered as one

[1] Anastasia Ivantsiv, "За Херсон До Останнього. Історія Подвигу Та Загибелі Оборонців Бузкового Парку" [For Kherson until the End. The Story of the Heroism and Death of Defenders of Buzkovy Park], Suspilne, 24 August 2023.

[2] Patricia L. Sullivan, "War Aims and War Outcomes: Why Powerful States Lose Limited Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51, no. 3 (2007): 496–524, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002707300187.

of the cornerstone factors of military engagements and war.[3] The United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies' strategic documents have outlined breaking the enemy's will to fight as the ultimate goal in war.[4]

Despite a broad consensus on the importance of fighting resolve, the United States and its allies lack a generally accepted definition, conceptualization, or model of will to fight.[5] Assessing will to fight is also challenging, prompting military leadership, policymakers, and the intelligence community to focus on more material aspects of warfare, thereby missing an integral aspect of military capabilities: the intertwined relationship between a nation's will to fight and its capability to fight.[6] However, there is academic and policy literature that addresses such a lack of conceptualization and proposes will-to-fight analysis frameworks.

Two primary analytical frameworks that offer both classificatory taxonomies and evaluation methodologies can be noted. Benjamin A. Okonofua, Nicole Laster-Loucks, and LtCol Andrew Johnson outline three analytical elements of will to fight: *physical*, encompassing the material capability to conduct warfare; *psychological*, reflecting morale, leadership, and esprit de corps that contribute to mental strength and cognitive determination; and *ideological*, a belief system that motivates individuals and groups to continue fighting.[7] Ben Connable's research group at Rand present a comprehensive, foundational framework for understanding will to fight, building models that explain the elements of fighting resolve from the individual to the national level.[8] Their 2019 report focuses on two categories of will to fight: *military unit and organizational* will to fight, defined as the disposition and decision to fight, act, or persevere as needed; and *national* will to fight, defined as the determination of a national government to conduct sustained military and other operations for some objective, even when the expectation of success decreases or the need for

[3] *Operations*, Field Manual (FM) 100-5 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1993); Ben Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2019), https://doi.org/10.7249/RB10040; and Benjamin A. Okonofua, Nicole Laster-Loucks, and LtCol Andrew Johnson, " 'Will to Fight': Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War," *Military Review* 104, no. 3 (2024).

[4] *Operations*; *Army Doctrine Publication: Operations* (London: Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, British Army, Ministry of Defence, 2010); and Michael Shurkin, "Modern War for Romantics: Ferdinand Foch and the Principles of War," *War on the Rocks*, 8 July 2020.

[5] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*; and Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, " 'Will to Fight': Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War."

[6] Josh Cheatham, "Intelligence and Intangibles: How to Assess a State's Will to Fight," Modern War Institute at West Point, 27 July 2022; and Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, " 'Will to Fight': Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War."

[7] Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, " 'Will to Fight': Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War."

[8] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*.

significant political, economic, and military sacrifices increases. The academic and policy literature provides a comprehensive, foundational understanding of will to fight, capturing its primary aspects and key elements. However, while outlining a foundational framework, these works either negate the influence of national identity as a foundation of will to fight or call for further exploration of national identity as an aspect of will to fight.[9]

While scholars have begun examining will to fight in the Russo-Ukrainian War, these analyses have fallen short in explaining the deeper foundation of Ukrainian resilience, rooted in its history and national identity. This limitation reflects a broader deficiency in will-to-fight scholarship: the systematic neglect of cultural dimensions in analytical frameworks.[10] Nevertheless, understanding culture and identity often proves to be essential to making substantive conclusions about a nation's will to resist. As Janis Berzins argues, Ukraine exemplifies a case in which the willingness to fight is fundamentally shaped by national identity rather than by institutional attachment to the state and its political and economic model.[11] Without incorporating these cultural and historical foundations, existing analyses cannot adequately account for the sustained Ukrainian resistance that has surprised many observers and defied conventional predictions based on material power asymmetries.

This article focuses on three main objectives. First, it will explain the historical background and manifestations of Ukrainian identity as the foundation of its will to fight. The second objective is to explain how Ukrainian identity fostered the Ukrainian will to fight and, thus, to expand existing frameworks by introducing and exploring an additional variable that contributes to fighting resolve. Third, the article will demonstrate how national identity operates as an aspect of will to fight across policymaking, civic engagement, and national resilience.

Identity Foundations of Will to Fight

There was a famous video circulating on the internet during the first days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.[12] An ITV News reporter asked one of the Ukrainian military volunteers when he expected the Russians to reach the center of Kyiv. "Never" was the answer. This best illustrates an overview of Ukrainian

[9] Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*.

[10] Ben Connable, "Structuring Cultural Analyses: Applying the Holistic Will-to-Fight Models," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, SI (2022): 153–67, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.2022SIstratcul009.

[11] Janis Berzins, "Ukraine and the Willingness to Fight for One's Country," *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 33, no. 4 (2025): 1–15, https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2025.2503945.

[12] ITV News, "ITV News Witnesses Fighting between Ukrainian and Russian Troops Closing in on Kyiv," YouTube video, 25 February 2022, 3:11.

identity, including their resolve to resist. Such identity can be considered the backbone of the Ukrainian will to fight and can be traced through the history of the Ukrainian resistance and fight for self-determination.

Historical Background of the Ukrainian Resistance

The foundational elements of Ukrainian identity and will to fight are rooted in the history of the Ukrainian nation. Ukraine's geographic position between east and west has historically placed it at the intersection of competing imperial powers: the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Austro-Hungarian Empire to the west, and the Ottoman Empire and the Tsardom of Muscovy to the east. This strategic location subjected the region to persistent conflict, with Ukrainian-populated territories repeatedly partitioned among major powers. Despite its land being divided and many Ukrainians emigrating, the idea of Ukrainian identity persisted, carried by people who strongly identified with the Ukrainian land.[13]

This powerful notion of identity and lack of statehood defined the Ukrainian resistance movements throughout the centuries. From the Cossacks of the fifteenth century to the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (*Ukrainska Povstanska Armiia* or UPA) during World War II, Ukrainian resistance movements tended to be decentralized, bottom-up, self-organized, defiant of foreign authoritarian rule, and strongly reliant on the civilian population as their base. Ukrainian national ideals—encompassing religious identity, self-determination, and language—formed the foundation of these movements. The grassroots, autonomous, and inclusive nature of this resistance to foreign occupation, however, transcended ethnic boundaries, attracting non-Ukrainian populations in Ukrainian land who not only joined the struggle but also adopted the Ukrainian national idea. The Ukrainian liberation movements of the early and mid-twentieth century often included ethnic units composed of Russians, Jews, Belarusians, and up to 28 other ethnic groups, united in their struggle.[14] Overall, the idea of national unity and belonging became the overarching theme among Ukrainian freedom fighters who resisted foreign rule.

The history of the Ukrainian fight for self-determination has deeply rooted notions of Ukrainian resilience and can be summarized in two primary factors. First, the Ukrainian resistance to occupation tended to be self-organized and

[13] Iryna Teleuz and Andrii Teleuz, "Українська Ідентичність у Часі Та Просторі: Історична Пам'ять, Інтерпретація Минулого Та Сучасні Виклики Війни," *Scientific Papers of the Vinnytsia Mykhailo Kotsyiubynskyi State Pedagogical University Series History*, no. 51 (March 2025): 79–87, https://doi.org/10.31652/2411-2143-2025-51-79-87.

[14] I. V. Bihun and A. V. Kentii, "Ukrainska Povstanska Armiia (UPA)" [Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA)], in *Entsyklopediia Istorii Ukrainy: Ukraina—Ukraintsi* [*Encyclopedia of the History of Ukraine: Ukraine—Ukrainians*], vol. 2, ed. V. A. Smolii (Kyiv, Ukraine: Naukova Dumka, 2019).

autonomous. Ukrainians fought for a national idea rather than for a leader against an occupying government, giving authority to local stakeholders who controlled areas they perceived as their land. This decentralized, volunteer-based structure, which also facilitated the formation of various factions, led to general hesitancy toward a central authority, as self-organization promoted self-sufficiency and grassroots agency.[15]

Second, the Ukrainian century-long struggle for self-determination blurred the lines between civilian and military life. Ukrainians historically identified as a farming nation with deep connections to their land as a means of survival, but they were ready to take up arms and resist, transitioning from farmers to warriors, an aspect that is frequently highlighted in Ukrainian traditional songs and tales, including Taras H. Shevchenko's "Заповіт" (Testament) and one of the most famous Ukrainian resistance songs of the early twentieth century "Ой у лузі червона калина" (Oh, the red viburnum in the meadow).[16] Importantly, women were actively involved in the Ukrainian resistance, not only keeping the homes safe while the men were fighting, but also directly engaging as medics, intelligence and communication liaisons, and soldiers.[17] The most famous Ukrainian resistance song of UPA, "Лента за лентою" (Belt after belt), tells a story of a Ukrainian female medic who, after a male machine gunner got wounded, treated him and took on the machine gun to continue fighting. This historical legacy reflected elements of a comprehensive defense and a whole-of-society approach to resistance in which the civilian population and family members of resistance fighters are engaged in the fight for national self-identification.[18]

The historical experience that shaped Ukrainian identity has shaped and continues to shape Ukraine's geopolitical reality. Ukraine is situated between Europe and Russia, ultimately existing between Western civilization and Russia's self-perceived imperial sphere of influence. The Ukrainian Soviet legacy and russification policy during the Soviet occupation have obscured some of the historic resistance traits.[19] Decades of Soviet integration, intermarriage, and cultural overlap led many Ukrainians to perceive armed conflict with Russia as

[15] Anastasiia Kudlenko, "Roots of Ukrainian Resilience and the Agency of Ukrainian Society before and after Russia's Full-Scale Invasion," *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 4 (2023): 513–29, https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2023.2258620.

[16] Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine* (New York: Basic Books, an imprint of Hachette, 2015).

[17] Лілія Володимирівна Трофимович, "З ІСТОРІЇ УЧАСТІ ЖІНОК В УКРАЇНСЬКОМУ ПІДПІЛЬНО-ПОВСТАНСЬКОМУ РУСІ (Середина 1940-х–Початок 1950-х Років)," Військово-Науковий Вісник, no. 38 (November 2022): 131–48, https://doi.org/10.33577/2313-5603.38.2022.131-148.

[18] Kudlenko, "Roots of Ukrainian Resilience and the Agency of Ukrainian Society before and after Russia's Full-Scale Invasion."

[19] Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*.

unthinkable, even after Vladimir Putin's 2007 Munich speech and the Russian invasion of Georgia. However, once Russia's 2014 invasion of Crimea and subsequent 2022 full-scale invasion shattered this assumption, Ukraine's deeply rooted historical foundations of autonomous resistance reasserted themselves, prompting nationwide mobilization that drew on centuries-old patterns of grassroots opposition to foreign domination.

Contemporary Ukrainian Identity and Will to Fight

What are the contemporary aspects of the Ukrainian identity that underpin the nation's will to fight? To analyze the influence of Ukrainian identity on the resilience of the Ukrainian nation, this article examines the Ukrainian identity employing Rawi Abdelal et al.'s *Measuring Identity* framework.[20] The approach classifies a collective identity as a social category characterized by its content and contestation. The content outlines the meaning of identity and includes constitutive norms (rules within a group), social purpose (the goals of a group), relational comparisons (definition of the group by what it is not), and cognitive models (worldview). Contestation refers to the degree of agreement within a group regarding its content.

When asked about their identity in July 2022, 85 percent of Ukrainians selected "citizen of Ukraine" as their main social identity characteristic, among other available options, such as residents of a particular city or village, their ethnicity, etc. This has risen drastically since the 1990s, when less than one-half chose "citizen of Ukraine" as their main identity marker, and preinvasion, with 60–65 percent selecting this identity marker.[21] The threat and the subsequent Russian invasion became a unifying event in the Ukrainian society, reinforcing its identity. For many, this identification buries a unique and essential set of characteristics that define them as Ukrainians, many of which are directly linked to Ukrainian resilience and will to fight.

Viktor Kotygorenko, a Ukrainian scholar of ethnonational studies, argues that the Ukrainian nation comprises individuals for whom the vital values are the state independence of Ukraine, patriotism, a sense of pride in belonging to the community of Ukrainian citizens, and respect for Ukrainian culture and the Ukrainian language.[22] Ukrainians are a collective society without strong individualistic principles, which promotes the need to support its fellow citizens and condemns the pursuit of egoistic self-interests at the expense of the collec-

[20] Rawi Abdelal et al., ed., *Measuring Identity: A Guide for Social Scientists* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[21] "Indicators of National-Civic Ukrainian Identity," Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 16 August 2022.

[22] As discussed in Artur Hmyria, "Ідентичність: Як Зрозуміти, Що я – Українець?" [Identity: How to Understand That I Am a Ukrainian?], Radio Svoboda, 25 July 2022.

tive good. The main obligations or unwritten rules for Ukrainians are derived from these notions—Ukrainians feel a sense of obligation to serve their country. In terms of resiliency, this includes military service, paramilitary service, volunteering, and army support from the rear.

Such notions reflect the Ukrainian historical legacy of resistance and its key aspects of self-organization and a whole-of-society approach. In February, before the invasion, around 60 percent of Ukrainians expressed their determination to actively resist the Russian occupational forces, which rose from 50 percent in 2021 despite the escalating Russian aggression.[23] The Russian invasion strengthened the Ukrainian will to fight through the rally-around-the-flag effect. Nevertheless, this commitment has proven remarkably durable: even in 2024, 62 percent of Ukrainians were willing to fight for their country, while only 31 percent of citizens in European Union and G7 countries expressed a similar willingness.[24]

More than 100,000 Ukrainians joined the armed forces during the first weeks of the full-scale war.[25] One-half of Ukrainians have volunteered, and three-quarters have donated and financially supported the Ukrainian military.[26] Ordinary Ukrainians managed to support their army with military gear, first-person view drones, medical aid, and even a satellite purchased through a fundraiser. Such behavior is seen as the norm and duty of any Ukrainian citizen and has laid the foundation for a resilient society.

It is important to note that this dedication to serving the country stems from Ukrainian society's devotion to the nation and the idea of the motherland, rather than from loyalty to the government or political leadership. Similar to their historic resistance fighters, Ukrainians are motivated by the idea of national unity and fight for their self-determination, without a strong dedication to a political ideology or leader. This differentiates the Ukrainian and Russian motivations, with Russians associating their fight with their leader, such as fighting for the emperor in Word War I, for Joseph Stalin in WWII,

[23] "В Україні Зростає Готовність Чинити Опір Російським Інтервентам: Результати Телефонного Опитування, Проведеного 5–13 Лютого 2022 Року" [Ukraine's Readiness to Resist Russian Invaders Is Growing: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted February 5–13, 2022], Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 25 February 2022.

[24] "Fewer People Are Willing to Fight for Their Country Compared to Ten Years Ago," Gallup International, 25 March 2024. G7 refers to the Group of Seven countries that represent the leading industrialized democracies: Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

[25] Olena Bohdahiuk, "В Міноборони Розповіли, Скільки Добровольців Пішли До Тероборони у Перші Тижні Повномасштабної Війни," Suspilne, 14 March 2023.

[26] "Ukraine's Resilience Formula: The Essential Components during War and Post-War (6–11 June 2023)," Rating Group, 27 June 2023; and Ilona Hromliuk, "Українці Стали Менше Донатити На ЗСУ: Пояснюємо Причини" [Ukrainians Have Begun Donating Less to the Armed Forces: Explaining the Reasons], BBC News Україна, 25 April 2024.

or for Putin in the Russo-Ukrainian War.[27] Moreover, Ukrainians are typically distrustful of the government, a distinct aspect of the Ukrainian identity, and often prefer to take matters into their own hands without relying on the government to lead.[28] Ukrainians did not wait for the government to establish the resistance, adequately supply troops with military gear, or organize logistics. They stepped up and self-organized to meet those needs, serving as a strong rear for Ukrainian soldiers, much as the civilian population supported resistance fighters during the twentieth century. While in the later stages of the war, the Ukrainian government has become efficient in performing those duties, this Ukrainian self-organization proved crucial during the first weeks of the war and the initial chaos caused by the Russian invasion.

The main social purpose of Ukrainians, as with most European nations, is the prosperity and security of their country and its citizens. Although more importantly, Ukrainians are also fighting for the survival of their national identity. This was especially critical during the first months of the full-scale Russian invasion. The Russo-Ukrainian War was perceived as a battle for survival, often invoking the Ukrainian "Воля або Смерть" (Freedom or Death) slogan from the early twentieth century and building on the legacy of Ukrainian resistance fighters.[29]

As the war entered its attritional phase, however, perceptions changed. Once the imminent existential threat diminished, the nationalist boost inevitably waned, and Ukrainian society began to feel exhausted by the war. Ukraine has faced challenges with recruitment, ammunition shortages, and unstable support from its Western allies, hindering the Ukrainian ability to fight. Despite this change, no defeatist ideas are floating in Ukrainian society, and the will to fight remains robust. Ukrainians understand that Russians are waging a genocidal war with the main aim of absorbing or even fully eliminating the Ukrainian nation, and, thus, the notion that reinforces Ukrainian resilience and maintains morale despite the dragging of the war.

Up to 90 percent of Ukrainians believe that Ukraine will eventually win the war, and three-quarters are ready to endure the war for as long as it takes.[30] An

[27] Håvard Bækken, "Merging the Great Patriotic War and Russian Warfare in Ukraine: A Case-Study of Russian Military Patriotic Clubs in 2022," *Political Research Exchange* 5, no. 1 (2023): 2265135, https://doi.org/10.1080/2474736X.2023.2265135.

[28] Kudlenko, "Roots of Ukrainian Resilience and the Agency of Ukrainian Society before and after Russia's Full-Scale Invasion."

[29] Mariia Spaliek, "Документальний проєкт «Воля або смерть» позбавляє глядачів рятівних ілюзій" [The documentary project "Freedom or Death" deprives viewers of saving illusions], Detector Media, 31 July 2023.

[30] "Сприйняття Перебігу Війни Росії Проти України Через Майже Два Роки Широкомасштабного Вторгнення" [Perception of the Course of Russia's War against Ukraine After Almost Two Years of Full-Scale Invasion], Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 21 February 2024.

overwhelming majority of Ukrainians reject any territorial concessions, even if this means that the war will last longer.[31] These figures remained relatively stable throughout the first two years of the war, though with a declining trend in 2024–25, with a majority still rejecting any territorial concessions, indicating that these cognitive models are deeply embedded in society.[32] To fight until the sovereignty is restored and Ukraine joins the Western world in the EU and NATO is the only accepted option, as any territorial concessions would mean the elimination of Ukrainians on those territories, and any unjust "peace" would give Russia time to recover and strike again. Ukrainians witnessed the war-crime atrocities committed by Russian forces in Bucha and Irpin, the complete annihilation of Ukrainian cities, and rocket terror on civilians. These atrocities are perceived as the continuation of the Russian attempts to subjugate Ukrainians, erase their national identity, and commit genocide.[33] Continuing to fight until sovereignty is secured and security guarantees are in place is thus the only acceptable choice, and despite the growing attrition, there is no major push in Ukrainian society for defeatism or an unjust settlement with Russia.

Since the 2013–14 Revolution of Dignity in Kyiv and the start of the Russian hybrid aggression in 2014, Ukrainian society has been undergoing a transformation, moving from the Soviet past to the European future. Such cultivation of European society is an end in itself. Ukrainians are experiencing the "return to Europe" purpose, characterized by a desire to detach from the Russian sphere of influence and rejoin the European sociopolitical world, a phenomenon also observed among other post-Soviet states that have already joined the EU and NATO.[34] A strong willingness to fight and resist Russia is thus perceived by Ukrainians as integral to both completing the social transformation and preserving identity, as well as moving toward European integration. At the same time, Ukrainians have been rediscovering their historical roots of resistance, with many parallels being drawn between past resistance movements and the current struggle. It is especially prominent in how Ukrainians perceive

[31] "Динаміка Готовності До Територіальних Поступок Для Якнайшвидшого Завершення Війни: Результати Телефонного Опитування, Проведеного 26 Травня–5 Червня 2023 Року" [Dynamics of Readiness for Territorial Concessions for the Fastest Possible End to the War: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted May 26–June 5, 2023], Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, 9 June 2023.

[32] "Динаміка Готовності До Територіальних Поступок Для Якнайшвидшого Завершення Війни: Результати Телефонного Опитування, Проведеного 26 Травня–5 Червня 2023 Року" [Dynamics of Readiness for Territorial Concessions for the Fastest Possible End to the War: Results of a Telephone Survey Conducted May 26–June 5, 2023].

[33] Gregg W. Etter and David H. McElreath, "Why the Ukrainians Fight: The Holodomor (1932–33)," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 16, no. 1 (2025): 96–108, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20251601005.

[34] Abdelal et al., *Measuring Identity*.

the Russo-Ukrainian War not as a conflict that began in 2022 or a confrontation that has lasted since 2014. It is viewed as a part of the broader Ukrainian fight against Russian imperialism, spanning more than four centuries.

The Russian full-scale invasion and the war crimes committed by the Russian forces have shattered all perceived closeness, cultural connections, and even family ties between the Ukrainian and Russian nations. An overwhelming majority of Ukrainians believe that Ukrainians and Russians are no longer culturally and historically united, as only 3.8 percent of Ukrainians view Russians as a brother nation, which is a significant drop from 27.2 percent in 2017.[35] Moreover, 98 percent of Ukrainians view Russia as an enemy, and only 5 percent disapprove of Ukrainian accession to the EU and NATO.[36] There is a high level of contestation and agreement on the outlined principles within the Ukrainian nation, which is not only fighting against another country but also against another identity that is opposed to theirs and represents the "other" that is characterized by notions of aggressive reimperialization and barbaric aggression.[37]

Applying Abdelal et al.'s *Measuring Identity* framework to Ukrainian national identity reveals specific content and contestation dimensions that underpin the Ukrainian will to fight. The primary constitutive norms include the notions of a collective society without strong individualistic principles, hesitancy to rely on the government, and a tendency toward self-organization, which all facilitated Ukrainian proactiveness and engagement in society. The Ukrainian identity's social purpose is two-fold: to win the fight for national survival and achieve prosperity and security of their country and its citizens through Euro-Atlantic integration. The relational comparison is characterized by de-Russification, de-Communization, and decolonization, or detachment from the so-called "Russian world" with a "return to Europe" social purpose, positioning Russians as the "other," adversarial culture. Since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the Ukrainian foundational cognitive model has been the notion of a war of survival, an existential struggle against the "other," and the pursuit of integration with the West. Most importantly, however, there is a high level of contestation in Ukrainian society over its content, reinforcing the primary aspects of Ukrainian identity.

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[35] "Війна Росії Проти України Остаточно Розвіяла Міф Про Братерство Російського Та Українського Народів–Соцопитування [Russia's War Against Ukraine Finally Dispelled the Myth of Brotherhood Between Russian and Ukrainian Peoples–Poll]," Інтерфакс-Україна [Interfax-Ukraine], 21 August 2023.

[36] "The Fifth National Poll: Ukraine during the War (March 18, 2022)," Rating Group, 20 March 2022; and "Ukraine's Resilience Formula: The Essential Components during War and Post-War (6–11 June 2023)."

[37] Andrew Wilson, "Ukraine at War: Baseline Identity and Social Construction," *Nations and Nationalism* 30, no. 1 (2024): 8–17, https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12986.

Policy Implications of the Ukrainian Identity

After 2014, Ukraine implemented national defense reforms that not only began the transition from the Soviet military style to NATO standards but also targeted resilience-building. The escalating Russian hybrid aggression and the subsequent full-scale invasion prompted the Ukrainian government and civic initiatives to develop new policies and approaches to national defense, many of which were shaped by aspects of national identity. To examine the influence of the Ukrainian identity on key aspects of its nation's will to fight, this article will employ Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson's three analytical elements of will to fight: physical, psychological, and ideological, augmented based on Connable et al.'s typology of outlining the two classification levels of will to fight: military unit and organizational and national will to fight.[38]

Physical Will to Fight

Military resources, including personnel and equipment, are critical for initiating and sustaining military operations. Without adequate material capabilities and reinforcements, even the most motivated forces cannot engage in protracted conflicts. Traditional national defense policies, such as national mobilization and state development of the military-industrial complex, and massive military and economic support from Ukraine's Western allies, proved vital in building Ukrainian physical capacity to defend against the Russian invasion. However, policy decisions and civic initiatives that exemplified aspects of Ukrainian identity have also proved instrumental, especially during the initial stages of the war and in critical areas that were not adequately addressed by traditional national defense policies or by Western support. Four primary national-level policies reflect how Ukrainian identity shaped these efforts: the establishment of the Territorial Defense Forces (TDF), the integration of volunteer brigades, innovative approaches to recruitment, and civic-led support for the armed forces of Ukraine.

The conscription service in Ukraine proved ineffective and failed to establish a pool of trained personnel before the invasion.[39] More than 500,000 Ukrainians held veteran status before the Russian invasion in February 2022, but many of them left military service due to systematic problems, low pay, and

[38] Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, "'Will to Fight': Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War"; and Connable et al., *Will to Fight: Returning to the Human Fundamentals of War*.

[39] Volodymyr B., "Строкова Служба: Пережиток Минулого Чи Потреба Майбутнього?," *Militarnyi*, 19 December 2023.

inadequate management.[40] Ukrainian security benefited greatly from a substantial reserve of citizens with combat experience. Still, it failed to use this advantage to the fullest extent possible due to institutional issues, attrition among experienced personnel, and slow, inefficient reforms in the Ukrainian military. As the Russian troops crossed the Ukrainian border, however, many of them, in addition to tens of thousands of other Ukrainian men and women, stood up to protect their homeland.

The TDF of Ukraine were established in 2014 following the Russian hybrid aggression in Eastern Ukraine.[41] One TDF brigade was created in each of the 25 Ukrainian administrative regions and, after the start of the Russo-Ukrainian War, the TDF is estimated to have totaled 350,000 servicemembers, although official figures are not publicly available.[42] While the TDF was initially established to serve the conventional military as a support force in the rear, many TDF brigades now operate on the front lines and have become a recruiting base for other units of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF).[43] TDF units played an integral part in the initial phase of the Russian invasion, in some cases even being the first to engage in unequal battle with the invader in their territorial defense zones. They continue their service on the front line, showcasing the ability to adapt to the ever-changing nature of the Russo-Ukrainian War.[44] The TDF brigades' connection to a specific region or city from which servicemembers were recruited played on Ukrainians' historical connection to their land, their determination to protect their families, and the idea of national unity and belonging.

The Ukrainian tendency toward self-organization, coupled with a slow government response, prompted the creation of many volunteer battalions. The phenomenon of volunteer formations can be traced throughout the history of the Ukrainian resistance, from the Ukrainian war of independence of the twentieth century to the initial phase of the Russian hybrid aggression in 2014–15, and is a direct outcome of the unique aspects of the Ukrainian national identity. The 10-year experience fighting in Eastern Ukraine also allowed Ukrainian

[40] Yulia Zabielina, "За Тих, Хто у Бою. Міністерка Ветеранів—Про Гроші і Квартири Фронтовикам, «негативний» Звіт Рахункової, Мобілізацію Та Своє Звільнення" [For Those Who Are in Battle. The Minister of Veterans—About Money and Apartments for Frontline Soldiers, the 'Negative' Report of the Accounting Chamber, Mobilization and Her Dismissal], New Voice, 22 January 2024.

[41] "Історія ТРО [History of TDF]," TDF, 2024.

[42] *The Military Balance 2024* (Washington, DC: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2024).

[43] "Работы Много, Людей Мало": ВСУ Не Хватает Бойцов и Снарядов | Донбасс Реалии [There's a Lot of Work, Few People: The Armed Forces Lack Fighters and Shells | Donbas Realities], YouTube video, 21 April 2024.

[44] Anatoliy Barhylevych, "Територіальна Оборона: Уроки Війни, Поточні Виклики, Шляхи Їх Вирішення," Армія *Inform*, 1 December 2023.

veterans and TDF to serve as an invaluable force-multiplying resource for Ukraine, supplementing the national will to fight among civilians with a core cadre of battle-tested troops who effectively mentored these passionate but untrained volunteers during their first days of battle. This tendency toward self-organization also led to a high degree of agency and decision-making at lower levels, including among noncommissioned officers, in contrast to the Russian military, where decision-making tends to be highly centralized.[45]

It is also important to note the integral role of women during the Russo-Ukrainian War, as they comprise 15–20 percent of the UAF and 5,000–7,000 women serve directly on the frontline.[46] Ukrainian women serve as medics, snipers, infantry, assault troops, and drone operators, building on the historical legacy of Ukrainian women's active engagement in armed resistance.[47] This allowed Ukraine to broaden its recruitment pool, enlist highly motivated and specialized servicewomen, and address personnel shortages. The number of women in UAF continues to grow, in part due to the Ukrainian notion of collective society fighting together and the history of women's armed resistance.[48]

Ukrainian hesitancy on the part of the government and a tendency toward self-organization prompted the Ukrainian government to modernize its recruitment approaches. Skepticism toward governmental processes and distrust of state service centers discouraged many Ukrainians from enlisting in the military. To address these concerns, the Ukrainian government modernized recruitment procedures by enabling online completion of administrative steps and permitting direct brigade recruitment, allowing volunteers to join units of their choosing rather than being randomly assigned. This approach also enabled the development of innovative recruitment strategies and marketing techniques. Brigades that demonstrated strong unit cohesion, treated soldiers well, and maintained lower casualty rates proved most successful in attracting volunteers.[49] Conversely, recruitment initiatives that violated aspects of Ukrainian identity frequently provoked social backlash. For example, in 2025, the Ukrainian government released an advertising campaign targeting 18–24-year-olds that emphasized financial incentives by illustrating how many

[45] Gilbert W. Merkx, "Russia's War in Ukraine: Two Decisive Factors," *Journal of Advanced Military Studies* 14, no. 2 (2023): 13–33, https://doi.org/10.21140/mcuj.20231402001; and SgtMaj Boerre Langum, "Adapt, Lead, Win: NCO Lessons from Ukraine," *NCO Journal* (October 2024).

[46] Maksym Kalnyk, "Скільки Жінок в ЗСУ: Актуальна Статистика 2025 Року Та Історичний Огляд, " Nfront, 22 November 2025.

[47] "Понад 5 500 Жінок Сьогодні Служать На Передовій–Сергій Мельник," Ministry of Defense of Ukraine, 8 March 2026.

[48] "Понад 5 500 Жінок Сьогодні Служать На Передовій–Сергій Мельник."

[49] "«Людині Треба Дати Впевненість у Собі»: Як Третя Штурмова Білецького Рекрутує Добровольців" ["People Need to Be Given Confidence in Themselves": How Biletsky's Third Assault Recruits Volunteers], TSN, 8 November 2024.

cheeseburgers could be purchased with the enlistment bonus.[50] While financial motivation is vital to motivate recruits, this materialistic framing contradicts the Ukrainian ideological framing of military service as a sacred duty, prompting widespread public criticism.

Despite implementing NATO standards and modernizing Ukrainian military equipment, at the start of the Russian invasion, the Ukrainian military still faced shortages of adequate gear and weaponry, further exacerbated by the need to equip hundreds of thousands of recruits. In this critical moment, when even supplying basic gear like uniforms became a challenge, the Ukrainian society quickly mobilized to take on a leading role in areas where the government lacked capacity and activity. The established civic initiatives and volunteer organizations not only supplied basic gear but also acquired sophisticated, expensive equipment, from drones to heavy military machinery. One of the most prominent stories is the People's Satellite project, by which a charity foundation raised funds to purchase the satellite, which was donated to the Ukrainian Defence Intelligence directorate.[51] Ukrainian cultural predispositions toward self-organization and civic duty proved instrumental to these efforts, revealing national identity as the fundamental driver of voluntary civic engagement that prompted Ukrainian citizens to volunteer, donate funds to support their armed forces, and establish organizations to manage these efforts.

Psychological Resilience

Psychological factors are an important aspect of national resolve, incorporating morale, leadership, sense of purpose, motivation, and national determination. Cognitive resilience equips nations and their armed forces to withstand protracted conflicts, overcome material disadvantages, and achieve victory against larger adversaries. Ukrainian psychological will to fight was rooted in and heavily influenced by Ukrainian identity. The Ukrainian perception of the war as an existential conflict against the "other," imperial aggressor, combined with hope for a prosperous European future following victory, motivated Ukrainian civilians and troops to endure the brutal war conditions.[52] Though devastating, Ukrainians accept power outages, deliberate targeting of civilian infrastructure by Russia, and substantial casualties as necessary costs of resistance, recognizing that surrendering and a subsequent Russian occupation represent a far worse option, characterized by mass atrocities and genocidal violence evident in liberated territories.

The policy initiatives and communication campaigns thus integrated as-

[50] "Контракт 18-24 [Contract 18-24]," Ministry of Defense of Ukraine [@ministry_of_defense_ua], TikTok post, 20 March 2025.
[51] "People's Satellite," Prytula Foundation, 18 August 2022.
[52] Wilson, "Ukraine at War."

pects of Ukrainian identity, including its social purpose, relational comparisons, and cognitive model, to build Ukrainian cognitive resilience before the full-scale invasion through paramilitary-patriotic education and to reinforce it as the conflict began through strategic communication and information campaigns.

Paramilitary and patriotic education became one of the foundational aspects of the Ukrainian national defense strategy. Building national resilience was among the primary objectives of Ukrainian paramilitary-patriotic education, as it was integrated into Ukrainian secondary education.[53] Additionally, grant funding was allocated to nongovernmental organizations working on national-patriotic education and the affirmation of the Ukrainian national and civil identity of youth, allowing for self-organization and detachment of the government from such efforts in accordance with Ukrainian constitutive norms.[54] Paramilitary and patriotic education was deeply grounded in appeals to Ukrainian history, culture, and identity, with its integral mission being the consolidation of the Ukrainian nation and strengthening the level of contestation over identity markers in Ukrainian society.

The Ukrainian government and civic initiatives have conducted a variety of information campaigns that appeal to aspects of Ukrainian identity to reinforce the Ukrainian psychological will to fight, both at the national and military unit levels. Ukrainian government officials and President Volodymyr Zelensky frequently referenced Ukrainian historical struggles and the fight for self-determination, positioned Russians as the "other," emphasized the existential nature of the battle for survival, and appealed to a sense of duty to the nation in their addresses to Ukrainians. For example, "Slava Ukraini" (Glory to Ukraine), a historic greeting used by Ukrainian resistance fighters in the twentieth century, became widely adopted in government and military communication, serving as a slogan that reinforced the historical legacy of Ukrainian resistance.[55]

However, several governmental strategies failed to achieve their objectives because they conflicted with core elements of Ukrainian identity. For example, the 24-hour news marathon "Єдині новини #UAразом" (Single News #UAtogether), which was established to ensure the Ukrainian information security at the start of the war, failed to gain credibility among the Ukrainian public due

[53] Ivan Beh et al., З Україною в Серці (Тренінг з Патріотичного Виховання Дітей Та Молоді): Посібник [With Ukraine in the Heart (Training on Patriotic Education of Children and Youth): Manual], no. 2 (Національна академія педагогічних наук України, Інститут проблем виховання, 2016), 140.

[54] "Проект Державного Бюджету України 2024: Фінансування Молоді і Спорту Збільшать Удвічі" [Draft State Budget of Ukraine 2024: Funding for Youth and Sports Will Double], Parliament of Ukraine, 18 September 2023.

[55] "Про Внесення Змін До Деяких Законів України Щодо Вітання 'Слава Україні!—Героям Слава!': Закон України № 2587-VIII," Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine, 4 October 2018.

partly to the civic distrust in government-led communication channels, with more Ukrainians getting their news and updates through civic-led Telegram channels.[56]

The Ukrainian civic initiatives took on a leading role in informing and boosting the morale of Ukrainian society during the initial stages of the Russian invasion. Telegram channels became a primary source of updates for many Ukrainians, and it was primarily in cyberspace that Ukrainian civic activists and social groups ran information campaigns to boost morale and psychological resilience. By dissecting these social media and information campaigns, clear patterns in their foundation in Ukrainian identity emerge, which framed the war narrative and mobilized society. Even unconventional tools such as memes appealed to Ukrainian heroism by referencing historical struggle, mocked Russian leadership, in part through a type of relational comparison, and used self-irony to reflect on governmental shortcomings and build cohesion and unity.[57]

These governmental and civic efforts greatly influenced the Ukrainian psychological will to fight. By appealing to and being grounded in aspects of Ukrainian identity, policy initiatives and communication campaigns not only resonated more with Ukrainian society to reinforce its will to fight but also bolstered the level of contestation over the content of national identity. As a result, at the national level, society became more resilient in the face of war conditions, more engaged in supporting the military, and more tolerant of government-imposed restrictions. At the military unit level, it boosted soldiers' morale and cohesion, though the effects have waned as the war dragged on and army reforms have not been adequately implemented.

Ideological Conviction

Ideological convictions transcend material calculations, grounded in political or religious belief systems that imbue the struggle with more profound significance and motivate the nation and its troops by situating their fight within a larger historical or moral narrative. Grounded in ideology, a war becomes sacred as the nation fights not for mere political or economic gains, but for a higher purpose. Religious conquests or expansive and imperialist political ideologies are often brought up as examples of ideologies that motivate people to stand till the end. The Russian ideological convictions based on its imperialist past, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Soviet Union's WWII legacy are well

[56] N. Syvak, "Politics by Other Memes: Ukrainian Memetic Warfare During the Russo-Ukrainian War," *Journal of Information Warfare* 24, no. 3 (2025): 65–88.
[57] Syvak, "Politics by Other Memes: Ukrainian Memetic Warfare During the Russo-Ukrainian War."

researched.[58] However, an ideology rooted in national spirit and the fight for national identity is often overlooked, especially in Ukrainians' ideological convictions during the Russo-Ukrainian War.

Ukrainians view their war against Russia as a fight for their collective identity, incorporating their culture, language, and the right to self-determination. The goal goes beyond the Ukrainian victory over its adversary. It is seen as a continuation of a century-long struggle of the Ukrainian nation to free itself from the grasp of the so-called "Russian world" and "return to Europe" as its social purpose.[59] This serves as the foundation of the Ukrainian ideological conviction—a sacred fight passed down through generations and a pursuit of a long-awaited, hard-earned future. In this fight, Ukrainian troops often associate themselves with Cossacks and UPA freedom fighters, fighting against an imperialist enemy in the final war for national survival.[60]

This war goes beyond the battlefield, as Ukrainians are actively detaching from the so-called "Russian world" culturally, religiously, historically, and linguistically. De-Russification, de-Communization, and decolonization became important aspects of this fight, as the Ukrainian government and civic initiatives are implementing policies, information campaigns, and cultural initiatives to promote Ukrainian national identity separate from Russian imperial and Soviet legacies. This ideological struggle is rooted in Ukrainian patriotism and historical legacy, having an immense influence on the Ukrainian will to fight.

The Lessons Learned

Several nations are currently under threat of a potential invasion by a major power, including the Baltic states, Poland, and Taiwan. While these states are small and lack a conventional numerical military advantage over their potential adversaries, building a resilient population and its will to fight could not only bolster their military capacity in the event of war but also deter a potential aggressor from invading. How can the lessons learned from Ukraine's will to fight be applied in other countries, and what are the broader implications of the study of Ukrainian identity as an aspect of its will to fight?

Many states have already implemented military reforms using the Ukrainian experience during the Russo-Ukrainian War. Estonia and Poland have developed their Territorial Defense Forces and successfully implemented the Ukrainian

[58] Okonofua, Laster-Loucks, and Johnson, " 'Will to Fight': Twenty-First-Century Insights from the Russo-Ukrainian War."
[59] Wilson, "Ukraine at War."
[60] Volodymyr Viatkovych, "Чому Український Націоналізм Потрібен Україні Та Світу?," Ukrinform, 18 June 2022.

example.[61] Lithuania, Latvia, and Sweden are reintroducing conscription, modernizing it to reflect the demands and challenges of the twenty-first century.[62] Besides military reforms, NATO states have also integrated lessons drawn from the civilian components, with Sweden assessing and developing initiatives to foster the participatory culture of Ukraine's war effort in its society, Poland and Finland integrating paramilitary and preparedness training into the school curriculum, and EU countries, more broadly, integrating the Ukrainian experience into their civic resilience-building.[63] Nevertheless, it is even more important not just to copy the Ukrainian example, but to understand why such measures were successful and the underlying foundation of the Ukrainian will to fight.

The Ukrainian identity plays a crucial role in its determination to fight, as demonstrated by the fierce Ukrainian resistance against Russian forces. The collective nature of Ukrainian society, a sense of duty and obligation toward the country, the notion of a war of survival, and the fight against the "other" as aspects of Ukrainian identity had a tremendous effect on the Ukrainian ability to resist the invasion. The impact of Ukrainian identity was prominent at the military unit, organizational, and national levels across the physical, psychological, and ideological realms. The Ukrainian government and civil society capitalized on aspects of Ukrainian identity by developing policies and approaches grounded in identity's foundations and by fostering prominent traits to bolster Ukrainian resilience.

Examining national identity as a dimension of will to fight reveals three main conclusions about national identity and its resilience. First, identifying prominent aspects of national identity is a critical part of evaluating a nation's will to fight. Analyses often neglect the cultural and ideological dimensions, but an evaluation of identity aspects reveals national potential and helps explain social resilience. Second, national identity considerations should be incorporated into the development of national security and defense policies and approaches. The example of Ukraine shows the value of capitalizing on identity features, but it also illustrates how neglecting them can lead to policy failures. Third, a high level of contestation in society over the content of identity reinforces

[61] Thorir Gudmundsson, "10,000 Reservists Hone Their Skills during Estonia's Biggest Military Training," NATO Multinational Corps Northeast, 12 October 2023; and Waldemar Skrzypczak, "Poland's Territorial Defence Force–Its Role, Significance and Tasks," Casimir Pulaski Foundation, 10 April 2017.

[62] Štěpánka Šťastníková, "Rethinking Conscription: The Scandinavian Model," Security Outlines, 13 July 2023.

[63] Eric Adamson and Jason Moyer, "In from the Cold: Rebuilding Sweden's Civil Defense for the NATO Era," *War on the Rocks*, 9 April 2024; Alicja Ptak, "Poland to Add Civil Defence Elements to School PE Classes," Notes From Poland, 12 March 2025; Veronika Slakaityte and Izabela Surwillo, "Strengthening Civil Preparedness in the Baltic Sea Region," Danish Institute for International Studies, 29 August 2025; and *War in Ukraine: Lessons Identified and Learned* (Prague, Czech republic: European Values Center for Security Policy, 2023).

its elements and results in a strong national will to fight. After identifying the critical aspects of national identity for resilience-building, states should focus on strategic communication, awareness campaigns, and educational reforms to strengthen the level of contestation and capitalize on these aspects.

As most analyses of national defense capabilities and resilience primarily focus on material aspects of warfare, further research is needed on the topic of identity and will to fight. Each nation has its unique elements, and by understanding and considering its strong and weak identity factors, a more well-rounded resilience-building strategy can be developed to ensure a coherent national defense policy and deter potential invasion.

Fighting for Someone Else

Captain Caleb Miller, Chaplain, USA

> *A Soldier's Life: A Black Woman's Rise from Army Brat to Six Triple Eight Champion*. By Edna W. Cummings. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2025. Pp. 280. $29.95 (hardcover and ebook).
> *Counting on Death: A Marine Infantryman's Journey from the Front Lines of Combat to the Fight for Peace*. By Joshua Shores. Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2025. Pp. 160. $32.95 (hardcover); $19.95 (ebook).

I know of no coordinating effort between the authors of *A Soldier's Life* and *Counting on Death*. When placed side by side, however, the books form a sort of duality. Even the color schemes on the sleeves contrast. The lively blue and silver cover of *A Soldier's Life* depicts confident and defiant faces of Black women marching during a victory parade in an overcast yet liberated European town. The deep gold and black cover of *Counting on Death* shows a solitary faceless rifleman in full battle rattle against a dark backdrop, perhaps glaring back at the reader from across a bed of sunflowers (an image that proves pivotal later). Is he deciding whether to point and shoot? Is he alone? Is this supposed to be the author or is it someone else?

The authors of these contrasting books at first glance have very little in common. Edna Cummings' work is part of a scholarly series, complete with appendices and a subject index. Joshua Shores' account is a raw and part-autobiographical sketch. Cummings writes as a Black woman of the boomer generation. Joshua Shores writes as a millennial White man. Cummings

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remembers 11 September 2001 as a recent U.S. Army War College graduate attending a funeral 48 kilometers from the Pentagon. Shores remembers the same day in Wisconsin as a student in an art class drawing a picture of a sniper overlaid with the Afghani flag.

Cummings can speak of her decades of service as a rise out of obscurity. She served in the U.S. Army during the Cold War and Gulf War and retired as a colonel. Shores speaks of his years overseas as a journey through a horrific crucible. He served in the U.S. Marine Corps during the Global War on Terrorism and ended his enlisted time as a corporal. Cummings insists she has no regrets about her military service despite years of hardship as an ethnic minority and a widow. Shores struggles to express his mixed sense of honor and shame at his service, especially as he rehearses some fateful decisions on his first deployment.

Cummings wants to record the grace and dignity that can inform a soldier's life. Shores wants to relay what it is like to stare death in face. That both stories can be told with detail and conviction from within the same military is remarkable. There is so much diversity of experience within the unity of standards. Senior military leaders have always known there is quite a lot that could divide the force from within: gaps of generation, rank, specialty, experience, temperament, beliefs, sense of purpose in life, morality, extent of liberty, or the pursuit of happiness.

These authors remind readers that the military changes a person with its many subcultures; no single person can represent the entirety of a military because even if demographics were similar across the board, differences would persist. A woman who enlists out of high school will likely have trouble relating to her identical twin who struggled to graduate top of her class at a Service academy and commissioned. Life in the barracks is not life in the field, and neither resembles the suburbia of military housing nor the chaos of a combat zone. There is probably no single posture or platitude any civilian can adopt to thank everyone for their service even if limited to veterans of the same campaign of the same war, as if an intelligence analyst, a mailroom clerk, a sniper, a paratrooper, a medic, a tanker, an aide de camp, a nuclear submarine technician, and a fighter pilot have had the same share or type of suffering and sacrifice.

If there is a coordinating effort that can result from reading these two markedly different memoirs side by side, whether it is between these authors or just their readership, it is a chance for mutual understanding. It is not just that both Cummings and Shores volunteered and now possess DD-214s after rendering their service to support and defend the same nation—as if their shared bond went no deeper than an opportunity to salute the same flag in civilian attire during the national anthem at a ball game. All these years removed, both have decided not to keep their stories to themselves.

To dig a bit more into their biographies, both had fathers who commanded

their respect, who served before them in their respective branches, and provided a role model. Both had spouses who were supportive and patient through trials. Both quite vulnerably describe long and winding grieving processes and a yearning for the way things are supposed to be.

A closer reading reveals what Cummings and Shores ultimately have in common: a sense of altruism—a concept echoing the Italian *altrui*, or "someone else." Their books are not about them, not really. The stories are not intended to pass on advice or trite life lessons either. They spend the bulk of their memoirs considering someone else, first in how their stories would look to another person, and in their epilogues, advocating for others. Their willingness to fight endures, though the fight has drastically changed.

For all the inward focus that can often result from a memoir, Cummings and Shores remain squarely focused on people outside of their immediate social circle. Whether championing the past or fighting for the future, they reflect on the deep distortions and degradations of racism. Cummings laments the treatment of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps in the era of segregation and "Double V" campaign.[1] Shores laments the treatment of nameless Iraqi civilians caught in the crossfire on the streets of ar-Ramadi, Iraq. Cummings sees a need for representation. Shores identifies a lack of specialized training or ethical reflection for young immature infantrymen pushed straight into combat.

Both writers tap into why some causes seem more worthwhile to the everyday person than others, even if they know they probably fight on the losing side. Both help readers understand that the most intense day of military service, whether in the form of combat or crippling administrative burdens amid tragedies in one's personal life, is preceded by a thousand routine decisions and formative experiences, advances and setbacks, and followed by a thousand ways during the course of a lifetime to reflect on what happened. Both offer an account, in their own words, of how the decision to fight for one's country (not just for its defense, but for its reputation and well-being) is at its most powerful, compelling, and dangerous when it is rooted in a genuine concern for someone else.

Both writers remind their readers that the surges of adrenaline or dopamine that come with an accomplishment or hair-raising experiences are short lived, and that true courage is, to paraphrase C. S. Lewis, virtue at the testing point.[2] For Cummings that virtue is equity. For Shores, it is discretion. The question for any present or future conflict is whether the U.S. military, precisely because it is so diverse, might be poised to embody both virtues at once.

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[1] Double V or Double Victory refers to a slogan and campaign by the *Pittsburgh Courier* launched in 1942 to fight against fascism overseas and racism/segregation at home.

[2] C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942), 148.

BOOK REVIEWS

Beyond Black Hawk Down: Intervention, Nation-Building, and Insurgency in Somalia, 1992–1995. By Jonathan Carroll. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2025, Pp. 464. $54.99 (hardcover); $54.99 (ebook).

To most contemporary observers, U.S. involvement in Somalia during the 1990s brings images of U.S. military servicemembers engaging Somali warlords and their militias in seemingly constant armed conflict over the fate of the Somali people. Images of intervention in Somalia inevitably conjures scenes such as a Delta Force operator explaining his version of weapons safety, 75th Ranger Regiment soldiers fighting their way through tight alleys against armed militiamen, and unruly, and extremely violent, Somalis converging on Chief Warrant Officer Michael Durant after shooting down his Black Hawk helicopter—all culminating in the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia in a failed peacekeeping mission.[1] However, these images in the average mind depict simply the Battle of Mogadishu in October 1993. Most analyses of the United Nations intervention in Somalia, which in the 1990s was the first among many to receive the label of "failed state," focus on the Battle of Mogadishu in an attempt to understand what ultimately went wrong in the international community's efforts in Somalia. Jonathan Carroll, a former infantry officer in the Irish Defence Force and associate professor at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, in *Beyond Black Hawk Down* provides a systematic analysis of UN intervention and nation-building efforts in Somalia before, during, and after the Battle of Mogadishu to understand what caused an intervention that started off with numerous successes, only to end in a deadly and embarrassing withdraw of numerous UN military and nonmilitary organizations.

A real first-of-its-kind analysis of Somalia, Carroll pulls no punches when criticizing the literature and general understanding of what we know, or fail to accurately remember, about the intervention, and the UN's early attempts at nation-building in the post-Cold War world. Arguments pervasive in the literature include the UN's changing and vague mandates, lack of consent of the Somali population and faction leaders, Somali faction leaders buying time until UN military missions departed before carrying out greater attacks, and the "Mogadishu Line" being crossed leading to an impartial UN mission losing credibility among the Somali population were all on the chopping block within Carroll's detailed analysis. Through his well-researched text, Carroll

[1] These images refer to *Black Hawk Down*, directed by Ridley Scott (Los Angeles, CA: Columbia Pictures, 2001), based on Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War* (New York: Signet Books, 1999).

greatly adds to the literature of conflict and stability operations, nation building, and military operations of the 1990s.

Each chapter of the book goes into excruciating detail, drawn from painstaking archival research among all players in the UN intervention to include Somalia, to reframe, critique, and demonstrate the failures of scholars of Somalia. With such detail devoted to his overall argument, and with the numerous personalities and decisions that took place during the entirety of the UN intervention, Carroll guides the reader through the nuances and new archival records in a readable and understandable manner, making the deficiencies in the literature apparent and obvious. Addressing the notion that violence was a prevalent issue that persisted throughout the duration of the UN intervention in Somalia, Carroll demonstrates that violence was not the norm and typically occurred sporadically during the intervention, with the Battle of Mogadishu being the most notable exception. Through his analysis of the entirety of the two-and-a-half-year intervention and drawn from firsthand accounts of various faction leaders and their interactions during each stage of the UN mission, Carroll demonstrates that consent of the intervention was given, albeit sometimes reluctantly, to UN efforts in Somalia. *Beyond Black Hawk Down* provides a point of departure in the literature and in Hollywood from the characterization of Somalia's clan dynamics and faction leaders as war lords hellbent on waging armed conflict against anyone that stood in the way of their grasp on ultimate power in Somalia.

Using previously unseen records, Carroll depicts faction leaders in a different light and demonstrates that both of the main faction leaders in Somalia worked, sometimes reluctantly, with UN forces to advance stability, security, and nation-building efforts. Lastly, Carroll shows that the Battle of Mogadishu was not the critical juncture in the failure of the Somalia intervention by systematically demonstrating the successes of post Battle of Mogadishu, UN efforts, and reframing the Battle of Mogadishu as a setback, not the point of no return. Through Carroll's systematic analysis, he ultimately concludes that failure in Somalia resulted not in a structural or systemic problem of nation-building, but in the failures in decision making, imperfect information, and the role of negative influences from fleeting national interests and personal prejudice. The strength of such a conclusion rests with Carroll's archival research efforts that places the reader on the ground, so to speak, not just in Somalia, but in the United Nations, the White House, and in coalition partner's home countries.

Beyond Black Hawk Down stands as an excellent study for historians, political scientists, policymakers, military leadership, and avid readers seeking to understand the complexities and nuances of foreign intervention, nation building efforts, and counterinsurgency operations. Carroll highlights the negative effects of embarking on these activities without a clear understanding of social, political, and cultural dynamics, intervening with a lack of adequate plans and goals, and imparting personal bias in regions with differing worldviews. With the prevalence of intrastate conflict, Carroll's work stands as a reminder of the beneficial role military forces can play in nation building efforts, while highlighting the necessity of proper planning, understanding local and regional dynamics, and acknowledging the time, logistics, and financial requirements of international actors engaging in such activities. *Beyond Black Hawk Down* is essential

reading for undergraduate students of international relations and security studies, and for graduate students at command and staff colleges.

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Blue Helmet: My Year as a UN Peacekeeper in South Sudan. By Edward H. Carpenter. Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2025. Pp. 408. $34.95 (hardcover); $19.95 (ebook).

Having served twice as a United Nations peacekeeper, I approached Edward H. Carpenter's *Blue Helmet* with a strong familiarity with the challenges inherent in multinational peace operations. This memoir of his 2020 service with the United Nations Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) offers a vivid, often troubling account of the UN's struggle to fulfill its mandate during one of South Sudan's most volatile periods. Personal in tone yet grounded in operational detail, Carpenter's work provides a practitioner's insight into both the possibilities and the severe limitations of contemporary peacekeeping.

Carpenter structures his narrative around the cycles of intercommunal violence that swept across Jonglei and the Greater Pibor Administrative Area of South Sudan. He describes repeated indicators of large-scale mobilization by armed groups, only to encounter hesitation and inaction at the senior levels of the UN command structure. In one key episode, an intelligence officer informs him that despite clear early warnings of impending attacks, UNMISS leadership "is not going to authorize your action. The mission doesn't want to get involved" (p. 241). When a small reinforcing element was eventually sent to Pibor, Carpenter remarks that it was "too little too late to stop the killing" (p. 242). Scenes such as these illustrate the central tension that runs through the book: a mission equipped with considerable capabilities yet constrained by bureaucratic caution and political sensitivity.

The memoir's strongest sections are Carpenter's accounts of his interactions with civilians and local leaders. One visit to a town named Likaungole captures the desperation felt by communities who saw the UN as their last line of protection. The local chief's pointed question—whether UN personnel "see me as a ghost, or . . . a human being?" (p. 272)—underscores the profound expectations placed upon peacekeepers. Carpenter contrasts such appeals with instances in which the mission appeared out of step with events on the ground. His description of attending a medal ceremony while "armed men were marching with murder on their minds" (p. 228) nearby illustrates the disconnect he perceived between ritual and reality.

The second half of the book turns toward institutional analysis. In "For the Record," Carpenter recounts completing a 19-page report on the Jonglei violence, identifying ignored early warning indicators, stove-piped information-sharing practices, and the mission's refusal to authorize aerial reconnaissance despite its own risk assessments deeming such flights acceptable. He concludes that "had the Mission and the Force

actually acted in a 'proactive, robust, and nimble' manner . . . significant death and damage could have been avoided" (p. 293).

Carpenter also critiques how UNMISS portrayed events in its official reporting. In "Changing the Guard, Rewriting the Histories," he examines a Joint OHCHR/UNMISS report that documented more than 700 killings but offered no recommendations for changes in UNMISS's own approach. He disputes claims that road conditions prevented peacekeeper deployment, noting that roads he personally traveled during the attacks were "certainly not impassable" (p. 304). These assessments align with broader scholarly debates regarding the interpretation of mission mandates, risk aversion, and the political dynamics of UN command structures.

Despite his critiques of leadership, Carpenter draws a clear distinction between institutional shortcomings and the professionalism of the peacekeepers. In the chapter, "Good Offices," he documents the scale of their efforts: "51,708" patrols conducted, "3,100 miles" of roads maintained, and "188,000 displaced people" protected in UN-administered sites (p. 310). He emphasizes that when troops were authorized to establish forward operating bases in remote areas, they "did so uncomplainingly," creating pockets of security in otherwise lawless environments.

The concluding chapters broaden the perspective beyond South Sudan. Carpenter provides frank reflections on his difficulties transitioning upon returning home, his post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosis, and the continuing feeling of "unfinished business" (p. 297). He frames the failures of UNMISS within a global context of declining peacekeeping effectiveness, noting other setbacks in Sudan, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. "The crisis in peacekeeping," he asserts, "has grown even direr" (p. 327). In the chapter, "Slow-Moving Crisis," he compares the extensive attention given to Ukraine to the muted response to mass killings in South Sudan, concluding that "human life and dignity in Africa seemed to have very different value" (p. 313). These reflections extend the memoir beyond personal narrative into a broader critique of international humanitarian priorities.

As someone who has served on UN missions, I recognized many of the systemic obstacles Carpenter describes. My own experiences followed a similar path—initial optimism that eventually gave way to the realization that individual officers, in spite of their best efforts, could influence only so much within the UN's rigid bureaucratic frameworks. From that standpoint, Carpenter may have exercised some literary license when assessing the impact his own actions had on the mission's overall conduct; given the scale of the machinery involved, the influence of any single officer is often limited. Nevertheless, *Blue Helmet* remains a candid and valuable practitioner's account. I recommend it to scholars of peacekeeping, students of modern military operations, and professionals preparing for multinational service—especially those seeking a realistic portrayal of what UN missions can and cannot achieve.

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Cyber Warfare and Navies: Digital Conflict in the Maritime Domain. Edited by Chris C. Demchak and Sam J. Tangredi. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2025. Pp. 416. $44.95 (hardcover).

Cyber Warfare and Navies contends that contemporary maritime power, both military and commercial, is now inseparable from digital networks, rendering it susceptible to large-scale cyber disruptions that can reverberate throughout the global economies. The editors anticipate a grim truth: as approximately 85 percent of the world's trade and 70 percent of liquid fuels transit by sea, any assault on ships, port-handling equipment, shipping firms, and maritime suppliers can disrupt manufacturing and retail supply chains across the globe. The book argues that neither navies nor commercial shipping can sail out of cyber threats, and preconditions a programmatic analysis of vulnerabilities, organizations, doctrine, and defense in the maritime domain.

The editors represent a powerful indicator of the book's ambitions. Chris C. Demchak is the Grace Hopper Chair of Cyber Security and senior cyber scholar at the Cyber and Innovation Policy Institute at the U.S. Naval War College. He has vast experience of working on the topic of wars of disruption and resilience and great-systems conflict in the digital era as an intellectual toolkit that would be well-suited to the systems-level approach of the book. As a retired U.S. Navy surface warfare officer and current Leidos Chair of Future Warfare Studies in the Naval War College, Sam J. Tangredi is a practitioner-scholar who has been informed by experience as a commanding officer at sea and as a strategic planner at the Pentagon. They offer a volume that integrates organizational diagnostics with operational realism and looks to shift the debate past slogans toward the structure, powers, and human capital required to implement a maritime cyber defense.

The book considers both naval and commercial maritime cyber dangers, as an interconnected ecosystem, rather than separate spheres, is one of its strongest characteristics. Explicitly covering the naval fleet (U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard) and the digital logistics chains that support global shipping, the volume places cyber defense not as a specialty but as a necessity that should be addressed both as part of fleet operation and as part of national economic security planning. The book not only covers the navies of allied and adversarial powers with comparable attention but also gives equal attention to the organizational relationship between the U.S. sea Services and the U.S. Cyber Command. Moreover, the book also presents a composite view of the manner in which various navies are organizing, preparing, and codifying doctrine to conduct cyber operations at sea.

Another organizational reality that the book faces is that naval leaders initially found it challenging to recognize cyber warfare as a fleet issue, primarily due to the belief that physical isolation of vessels and the maritime domain provided some form of protection. That presumption has withered away because afloat platforms and port systems are now strongly networked. The description indicates that the U.S. Navy created Fleet Cyber Command with Tenth Fleet forming its operational element. As the Navy portion of the U.S. Cyber Command, those initiatives have not provided the degree of integration and warfighting impact foreseen.

Considering its edited nature, the volume appears to be aimed at bringing several specialist lenses together, between critical maritime infrastructure and at-sea operations, and between allied doctrine and adversary tactics and strategy. Interestingly, one of the contributors to the chapter on subsea communications cables and conflict is Dr. Camino Kavanagh (King's College London), who confirms that the book highlights the undersea fiber networks that convey data around the world quietly and that act as strategic arteries during crisis and war. This issue aligns perfectly with the framework of maritime and cyber matters, encompassing both commercial and military assets.

Concerns have increased during the past few years, as the U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings highlighted that the U.S. Navy, in particular, lacks a coherent, scalable strategy for integrating information warfare and cyber operations with fleet maneuver, with perceived gaps in vision, force structure, authorities, and resilient architectures. The synopsis of the book, which focuses on organization, doctrine, and practical recommendations, is consistent with that criticism and expands the range to include allied and adversarial opinions, as well as the commercial maritime context.

The book has successfully filled a long-standing gap between academic and cyber discourse and the demands of fleet operations and ports. A gap that has too frequently reduced "cyber" to risk registers that are abstract, lacking any connection to the force package, to electromagnetic maneuver, and to logistics. Second, the focus on the organization and equipping of navies to perform cyber operations, as well as the doctrines thereof, is comparative in nature and helpful to practitioners by design, not description. Third, the plans to include opponents like China and Russia, as well as allied navies, place the debate in a real strategic competition environment and do not limit it to a U.S.-centric mirror. This is what makes the book particularly applicable to warfighters and leaders in the maritime industry, who currently seek actionable frameworks rather than a simple threat list.

Perhaps the most obvious criticism that can be applied to edited volumes is that coherence requires a heavy editorial hand to bring together chapter methods, terminology, and prescriptions. According to the synopsis, the report will provide recommendations on enhancing maritime cyber operations. However, the value of these recommendations to practitioners will depend on whether they are prioritized, resourced, and effectively implemented within realistic chains of command and acquisition schedules. Proceedings commentary has identified precise requirements, ranging on the one hand to the creation of Navy-owned, Service-retained maritime cyber teams under fleet commanders and, on the other hand, to the further expansion of cyber warfare engineer billets, and the modernization of networks and the development of tools and readers will seek to find evidence and cases in point either to support, or to refine, or to dispute such prescriptions.

Another possible disconnect, based on the specific chapters, is the extent to which the volume delves into the specifics of operational technology and industrial control systems at sea and on land, as well as the hybrid types of cyber-physical threats they present. There is a lack of clear understanding of how to identify the weaknesses of port-handling equipment and supply chains, as well as the organizational interfaces between the U.S. Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and USCYBERCOM. The mar-

itime audience will be interested in case studies or vignettes relating fleet functions to terminal operations, shipboard engineering control systems, and the realities of multivendor legacy equipment.

The book is best suited for naval officers, information warfare practitioners, and cyber engineers, as it provides a cross-sectional analysis of organizational design and doctrinal evolution across various navies within the context of the geopolitical realities of great power competition. Coast Guard authorities and maritime regulators can use its information to identify commercial maritime weaknesses and civil-military coordination requirements in the maritime domain. Port operators, shipping executives, and terminal operators will recognize their risk landscape in the litany of related systems now vulnerable to sabotage, disruption, and exploitation, as described.

Cyber Warfare and Navies is unique because it discusses the maritime cyber risk as a civil-military operating issue, rather than a collection of security controls. Demchak and Tangredi utilize their cross-functional strengths to produce a volume, as the official description unequivocally notes, which maps threats, surveys how navies are preparing and equipping to counter cyber operations, and provides recommendations to enhance maritime cyber defenses. Including more specialized subjects, such as the use of subsea communications cables and autonomous vessels, points to the practical concerns with the infrastructure and platforms on which future conflicts at sea will be made possible. Although the final test of any edited set is continuity and particularity, the framing and authors apparent in the public domain suggest that a reference may guide the development of doctrine, design of exercises, and investment decisions at fleet and port scales.

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Cyber Wargaming: Research and Education for Security in a Dangerous Digital World. Edited by Frank L. Smith III, Nina A. Kollars, and Benjamin H. Schechter. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023. Pp. 240. $164.95 (hardcover); $54.95 (paperback and ebook).

In *Cyber Wargaming: Research and Education for Security in a Dangerous Digital World*, Frank Smith, Nina Kollars, and Benjamin Schechter offer one of the best and most accessible treatments of cyber wargaming for military professionals to date. Released in 2023 from Georgetown University Press, the book provides a prescriptive, practice grounded framework linking the disparate realms of cyber education, decision-theory, and operational readiness. In an age when cyber competition sits at the heart of great-power rivalry, the authors offer a prescient approach to crafting wargames that reflect the realities of contemporary cyber conflict—messy, ambiguous, cognitively demanding, and profoundly interwoven with other domains. Their work is important for cyber operators, but also for Marines, airmen, soldiers, guardians, and coast guardsmen seeking to harden Joint, multidomain decision-making.

The heart of the book's thesis is straightforward: cyber wargaming is essential to prepare warfighters and policymakers to excel in a domain obscured by uncertainty, deception, and rapid escalation. Without kinetic movement, cyber wargames must account for unseen adversaries, intelligence gaps, ambiguous attribution, unforeseen cascading effects, and the underlying difficulty of modeling cyber capabilities. As Smith, Kollars, and Schechter explain in their insights, good cyber wargaming provides more than technological insight, it also provides critical human insight—it reveals cognitive biases, organizational vulnerabilities, and forges a force's digital will to fight. Their point is self-explanatory, yet noble—cyber wargaming is not merely a pedagogical tool but a strategic one that shapes the modern warfighter mindset.

The book is divided into four large parts. Part 1 illustrates the intellectual backdrop by explaining what cyber wargaming is and is not. The authors clarify that cyber wargames are different from cyber exercises or simulation. A wargame is a decision laboratory where human judgment—not technical precision—is the goal. By surfacing players' choices and the adversarial dynamic, cyber wargaming aids leaders in facing uncertainty, friction, and partial information. This section also contextualizes cyber wargaming in a broader history, emphasizing parallels with naval *Kriegspiel*, Cold War nuclear gaming and today's Joint wargaming enterprise.

Part 2 has a recipe for designing a cyber wargame. Here, the book excels. They explain how to engineer believable enemy action, build a plot, layer in friction, and create adjudication work that emphasizes ambiguity rather than determinism. Their design principles focus on inclusivity—games must be available to leaders of all technical backgrounds. Moreover, such exercises emphasize modularity, enabling professors or planners to tailor games to Marine expeditionary forces, Air Force wings, cyber protection teams, or Coast Guard maritime cyber units. This pragmatism distinguishes *Cyber Wargaming* from more academic methods.

Part 3, by far the longest and meatiest section, offers case studies from universities, the military and government agencies. These examples show how cyber wargaming can be localized for different audiences—undergrads, senior joint officers, national security fellows and technical cyber operators. Particularly useful is its investigation of how wargames expose organizational blind spots–teams think they're better at detecting them, misinterpret adversary intent, make escalation errors, or overwhelm in an information blizzard. These case studies provide one of the book's greatest gifts: illustrating how cyber wargaming can uncover human and institutional weaknesses well before an adversary.

Part 4 concludes with implementation guidance for institutions, PME schools, and operational units. The writers argue that cyber wargaming should not be an infrequent activity but rather a continuous component of training and leader development. They require an experimentation culture in which units hone their tactics, techniques, and procedures from wargame lessons learned. This argument aligns with recent Department of Defense efforts such as JADC2, Joint Fires Networks, and the Marine Corps' Force Design 2030 initiatives that rely on human-machine teaming and rapid adaptation.

From a criticism point of view, the book scores a hard-hitting yet readable exposé

of a significant problem. Methodological clarity is among its virtues: the book's authors reject the pseudo-precision that infects so much cyber babble, instead anchoring their inquiry in the disciplines of decision theory and cognitive psychology. Nicely structured, the book flows naturally from conceptual underpinnings, to design guidelines, and closes with case studies. The prose is short and approachable, avoiding jargon unless necessary.

Source usage is robust. They call up defense research and wargaming manuals and educational psychology and cybersecurity. Their references to Rand and Naval War College wargaming traditions and cognitive science ground their argument in both historic and contemporary practice. The addition of case studies, specifically from military PME institutions, adds credibility and relevance to the book.

There are, though, moments where the book could press harder. First, it's multi-domain integration handling is limited. Even though the authors concede that cyber rarely strikes by itself, the case studies are heavily biased toward cyberspace-only scenarios. Cyber effects in modern conflict are woven together with space systems, ISR architectures, maritime networks, logistics nodes and command and control infrastructure. Cyber attacks could also downgrade navigation systems and satellite architecture, Coast Guard port operations or Air Force air operation centers. A deeper dive into these interactions, would make the book even more useful for Joint Force planners.

Second, the book may illuminate more of the enemy cultures and doctrines. China, Russia, and Iran all do cyber conflict very differently, mixing cyber, psyops and electronic warfare in different mixes. Wargames are often elevated when players encounter enemy mindsets as well as enemy implements. While the authors do hint at this, more granularity would have been nice for PME schools.

Third, wargames might not scale up to large force-on-force interactions or it might not be obvious. Cyber wargames are excellent for small-group decision scenarios, but large-scale exercises require different adjudication and narrative. If nothing else, cracking this puzzle might help out planners at the theater-level for INDOPACOM, EUCOM, SOUTHCOM, or NORTHCOM.

Despite these limitations, cyber wargaming is very important to the Marine Corps, to the joint force, and to the broader defense community. For Marines, the book dovetails nicely with tactical decision games, red-teaming, and the Corps' emphasis on cognitive agility. It provides functionality to MEF-level operations, cyber defense of maritime systems, and integration with Marine littoral regiments. For the Air Force, cyber wargaming supports AOC-level decision-making, electromagnetic spectrum operations, and JADC2 cyber effects integration. To the Space Force, the book's principles are relevant for orbital decision-gaming, satellite defense simulations, and resilience engineering. For the Coast Guard, cyber wargaming might improve port security readiness and secure seaborne networking. Through all these services, the book supports a culture of experimentation and adaptive learning necessary for contemporary battle across active duty and auxiliary or reserve units.

The book additionally contextualizes broader discussions about the will to fight in cyber warfare, an area underscored by recent DOD focus on cognitive readiness. Cyber wargames pit more than technical skill; they pit adaptability, emotional control,

decision-making confidence and fortitude in the face of unknowns. In other words, while the book equips the reader with the fields to set combined arms loose, it also gives you the artillery pieces to build the mental muscles needed for the combined arms to battle and win.

And on a fundamental level, cyber wargaming is not only a timely but highly pertinent addition to PME and cyber readiness. It masterfully blends theory, method, and vivid examples into an elegant system teachers, planners, and leaders can apply immediately. And although the book could bolster its treatment of multidomain integration and adversary perspectives, these gaps do not diminish its utility. It is a must-read for defense practitioners who are either curious about cyber wargaming or who wish to introduce it into their classroom or operational milieu. Smith, Kollars, and Schechter offered a treatise that undergirds the conceptual infrastructure of Joint Force cyber doctrine and primes warfighters to think critically in an increasingly contested digital frontier.

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Fire and Rain: Nixon, Kissinger, and the Wars in Southeast Asia. By Carolyn Woods Eisenberg. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. 632. $42.99 (hardcover).

The literature on the Vietnam War is immense. Comprising combat and political memoirs, retrospectives, scholarly histories from nearly every point of view, ideological screeds, robust strategic analyses, plays, novels, poetry, and nearly every other genre one could think of. It therefore always makes sense to ask of a new book on Vietnam what contribution it makes. As the author, Carolyn Woods Eisenberg, says succinctly: "*Fire and Rain* takes as its subject the Nixon administration's conduct of the war in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and the resulting diplomacy with the Soviet Union and China" (p. 8). The book is divided into two parts that address those topics. The historical picture she paints on the administration's conduct of the war in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia is detailed and adds to our historical knowledge, especially when it comes to Laos and Cambodia. The book makes its strongest contribution with the second element describing the diplomacy with the Soviet Union and China.

Eisenberg is a professor of U.S. history and American foreign relations at Hofstra University and has authored a previous award-winning book on the division of Germany in the aftermath of World War II. Her expertise and depth of knowledge is apparent

not only by these credentials but in the quality of the book. Also apparent is her position on the war. In a recent interview with Columbia University, where she obtained her PhD, Eisenberg discussed her activism in opposition to the war in the late 1960s and noted her continued opinion that the war was more than a mistake. "Obviously, to me, it's not debatable that the Vietnam War was wrong. America's position in the war was wrong."[2] This point of view, that the war was immoral and inevitably fruitless (as opposed to those who might accept a "Better War" view of the conflict along the lines laid out by Lewis Sorley), is occasionally on open display. This does not detract from the book, however, but instead forthrightly reveals the author's perspective and lends transparency and authenticity to it.

The author's presentation of the historical record in the first part of the book is compellingly written and richly detailed. She makes excellent new use of audio recordings of the president in his office and of Henry Kissinger's phone calls. Eisenberg adeptly capitalizes on newly declassified materials. This has enabled her to provide a more in-depth understanding of the president's and his most important advisor's psychology, motivations, opinions, actions, and machinations (there seem always to have been machinations afoot) regarding the war. The book offers a deeper and more granular understanding of both men than previously available.

The author also works, however, to draw attention away from an exclusive focus on these two people to more broadly draw our attention to "the wider context of the people, the social, and political institutions, the prevailing ideology, and the existing practices that framed their decision-making" (p. 8). She argues that Richard M. Nixon and Kissinger's thinking was shaped by conventional Cold War strategy, institutions, and people, most importantly General Creighton W. Abrams and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. She also provides new insight into how the president was psychologically affected by the antiwar movement and how it impacted and constrained his decision-making (p. 8).

For this reviewer at least, it was the second part of the book which was most insightful. In this section, Eisenberg demonstrates how "the administration's mounting difficulties in solving its Vietnam problem increasingly shaped interactions with Moscow and Beijing" (p. 8). Nixon and Kissinger both struggled inexhaustibly to leverage diplomatic aid from both the Soviet Union and China to end the war. They frequently deluded themselves, and each other, about the success of those efforts, which they desperately wanted to believe were paying dividends.

They initially sought to coerce cooperation from the Russians and Chinese by linking other issues to assistance in ending the war in a face-saving manner. These efforts proved to be a failure as the Soviets had little incentive to abandon their own allies to assist their primary adversary. "Nixon and Kissinger were pressing their ostensible enemies to salvage their domestic and international reputation" (p. 339) which they of course had little reason to do. Eisenberg points to Nixon and Kissinger's claims that their strong stance in Vietnam supported American credibility in the eyes of the Soviets

[2] Abbey Lovell, "Archives, Activism, and History: A Conversation with 2024 Bancroft Prize Winner Carolyn Woods Eisenberg ('71GSAS)," *Library Spotlight* (blog), Columbia University Libraries, 12 April 2024.

and Chinese, thus bolstering the U.S. diplomatic position. She demonstrates that this was untrue and that the effort to link critical issues, such as nuclear arms limitations and the status of Taiwan, only served to ensure that the Vietnam War would have much broader negative consequences to U.S. foreign policy writ large as it began to affect all those other issues (p. 11).

Eisenberg also points out how Nixon and Kissinger's efforts to align with Russia and China on Vietnam undermined a key rationale for being in Vietnam in the first place. The U.S. presence in Vietnam was predicated, at least in part, on the domino theory that if Vietnam was permitted to become Communist then Communism would spread throughout the region. The spread of Communism was a threat, but even more ominously it would strengthen the position of the Communist Russians and Chinese. Yet, their efforts to gain diplomatic support from the Soviet Union and China, primarily to pressure North Vietnam to accept peace terms favorable, or at least not disastrous, to the United States led them to abandon that reasoning. She quotes Kissinger as saying about China, for example, that "It is the conviction of President Nixon that a strong developing People's Republic of China poses no threat to any essential U.S. interest" (p. 305). She then notes acidly, "Such a statement might have surprised millions of Americans who had been led to believe that the nation's soldiers were fighting and dying in Vietnam in order to stave off both a Chinese and Soviet menace" (p. 305).

Vietnam was never seen as a threat to U.S. national interests. It was only insofar as Vietnam's fall to Communism would strengthen the Soviet Union and China that it made it worth fighting against. "It was the connection to the communist 'superpowers' that made their [Vietnam's] internal governance a matter of overriding importance to the United States" (p. 468). Yet if, in the effort to win diplomatic points, the United States was downplaying the threat from China and the Soviet Union, why be in Vietnam at all? "If Nixon was toasting the communists in Moscow, what sense did it make to be killing them in Vietnam? The paradox existed in plain sight" (p. 468).

As America's position in Vietnam weakened and the president became increasingly desperate to end the war "with honor," if not victory, Russia and China had even less incentive to help the U.S. avoid the consequences of its involvement. In the end, U.S. diplomatic efforts with Russia and China had little pay off in terms of the ultimate resolution in Vietnam and only served to extend the length of the war and the number of its casualties.

Given the breadth and depth of the extant literature on Vietnam, it is quite an accomplishment to produce something new and insightful. *Fire and Rain* will take a rightful place in the top-tier of histories of the war. Eisenberg won the prestigious Bancroft Award for the book, which was well-deserved. Readers will also be highly rewarded by this book.

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Ground Combat: Puncturing the Myths of Modern War. By Ben Connable. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2025. Pp. 352. $110.95 (hardcover); $36.95 (paperback and ebook).

In his book, *Ground Combat: Puncturing the Myths of Modern War*, Ben Connable, retired Marine officer, former political scientist at Rand Corporation, and adjunct professor at Georgetown University, challenges the historical analyses of ground combat to enhance military forecasting, improve tactics, strategies, and innovative approaches to military force design. The central argument of the book challenges the notion of a universal "character of war," arguing that most efforts to define war or forecast its future are based on overly subjective, limited, or technology-based models. Connable presents an evidence-based approach that recognizes the complexity, unpredictability, and evolutionary nature of ground combat and delivers a more realistic and data-driven understanding of warfare writ large.

In the book's introduction, Connable identifies the fundamental problem that exists in efforts to study war: subjective and speculative theories and opinions, that, while often useful in stimulating debate, fail to provide much needed clarity for military planners and strategists. He contrasts provocative views of modern warfare, such as those of General Sir Rupert Smith (*The Utility of Force : The Art of War in the Modern World*) who claimed that "war no longer exists" with more rigorous, historically attuned assessments, like those of Marine officer Major Earl Hancock "Pete" Ellis, who accurately forecasted Japanese strategy prior to World War II. He uses this contrast to emphasize the need for a more disciplined and empirical method of studying war.

Connable organizes his argument in a clear, progressive structure. He begins by examining past U.S. military forecasts and theories of war, highlighting their flaws and inconsistencies. By analyzing post-WWII conflicts and twenty-first-century warfare, he finds no clear-cut "revolutions," as often predicted by military professionals. Instead, he identifies gradual, uneven evolutions, challenging the narratives promoted by individuals like General William C. Westmoreland (senior American leader in Vietnam, 1964–68), Dr. Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr. (Army officer and senior defense advisor), and William F. Owens (*Euclid's Army: Preparing Forces for Warfare Today*), who envision technological systems replacing traditionally chaotic, uncertain, and fundamentally human elements of ground warfare. Connable also takes aim at the prevalent forecasting that fails to recognize the slow pace of military adaptation and underestimates the consistent role of human friction in combat. Examining force structure initiatives, he speaks to the Marine Corps' 2022 Force Design framework and warns that its assumptions about the nature of future war may be based on flawed interpretations of both historical trends and current Chinese military capabilities. His assertion early in the book, that war characterization and forecasting in the latter part of the twentieth century were inadequate, sets the stage for the heart of his book: research and data.

Connable's research methodology is the central feature of the book. Avoiding anecdotes and intuition, he executes a large-scale study, meticulously coding 445 ground combat operations based on 432 data points, including weapons and munitions, battle-

field geometry, order of battle, technology, tactics, and more. His use of both qualitative narratives and quantitative coding allows for nuanced insights into how ground combat has or has not changed over time. The book is structured around three key historical periods: World War II, the post-war era from 1945 to 2002, and the contemporary period from 2003 to 2022. Within each of these eras, Connable presents select battle narratives aimed at distilling the underlying "character of ground combat." These distinct samples are followed by chapters that explore patterns, shifts, and enduring features in combat tactics, weapons effectiveness, and battlefield dynamics. This clear and segmented structure provides a helpful roadmap through what is otherwise a deeply analytical and information-rich book.

Connable's conclusions are stark but significant. First and most simply stated, the "character of war," a phrase that has been misused over time, is undefined. Rather than searching for a single unifying concept, military professionals should embrace the uncertainty of war and focus on identifying characteristics of ground combat that change over time. Second, counter to common assertions in historic military studies, he argues there have been no true revolutions in warfare, only slow and irregular evolutions. Third, drones and other technologies have changed warfare incrementally, but have not fundamentally altered its nature. Combat effectiveness lacks a clear, objective definition, complicating meaningful evaluation of military outcomes. Strategic planners must adopt a more evidence-based approach to forecasting, especially regarding adversaries like China, whose capabilities remain largely untested in modern ground combat.

Ground Combat: Puncturing the Myths of Modern War is an important contribution to the study of warfare and ground combat. Author, Ben Connable, combines his firsthand military experience with an academic's attention to detail and a scientist's need for evidence. He presents a compelling argument about the current state of war and ground combat analysis, arguing that its deficiencies have undermined forecasting capability of military planners. Stylistically, the book balances academic rigor with military pragmatism. While grounded in data, the author's writing remains accessible to defense professionals, policymakers, and military historians alike. By revealing the shortcomings of past analyses and striving for a more rigorous understanding of ground combat, he provides a much-needed alternative to decades of speculative thinking in defense strategy. For military professionals, defense analysts, and policymakers, this book offers a powerful call to rethink the conceptualization and planning for war. For students of military history and strategy, it is a compelling example of how data-driven historical analyses can challenge conventional doctrine.

Lieutenant Colonel Melissa D. Mihocko, USMCR (Ret)

The Military Legacy of Alexander the Great: Lessons for the Information Age. By Michael P. Ferguson and Ian Worthington. London: Routledge, 2024. Pp. 370. $152.00 (hardcover); $31.99 (paperback and ebook).

This work by Michael Ferguson and Ian Worthington focuses on a two-part approach. The first being a historical snapshot of the military history of Macedon to include the developments and military transitions under Philip II and Alexander the Great. This work does an amazing job of allowing the reader to see the importance of both men as military leaders. The earliest portions of this work focus on the transformation that Macedon made from being a country that relied heavily on mercenary forces to fight their battles to being transformed into the most powerful military in all of Greece even if the Greeks did not view Macedon as one of their own. For those who enjoy ancient warfare, this work also does an amazing job of shining a light on not only the history of Macedon but the military history of Greece and how the Macedonian forces and eventually their leaders, played a role in uniting the militaries of Greece at least for a time under both father and son as is discussed during the early chapters of this work (p. 24). This work fleshes out how important these two were to the dominance of Macedon even if it faltered after the death of Alexander the Great. This work does an amazing job of describing the drive for Alexander the Great and the vision of Philip II and how these two men turned a fledgling city into an empire that was unmatched during its time.

The other aspect of this book is how the authors find a correlation between ancient warfare and modern. One could make the argument that is what truly sets this work apart from other military history books. There is a constant effort on behalf of the authors to paint a picture that shows the reader the importance of remembering lessons that were learned even from the ancient world and how we can apply those lessons to today's warfare (p.80). It is fascinating to see how these two authors constantly use ancient techniques and forms of leadership and applied them to today's battlefields and alert the reader to the startling similarities between what was going on during the era of Alexander and today's modern force. It is something that all historians whether military or not, should not only view but pay reverence to as the authors allude to the point that we are in a constant cycle that has not changed since ancient times (p. 44). It is this constant back and forth between ancient history and modern warfare that makes this work truly interesting. This is the work that shines best when making the comparison between the two and even those who do not have an interest in war can see the parallels between the terrain, training, military standards, an overall combat that took place during the age of Alexander in today's U.S. military. It is a seamless transition between the two and the authors should be applauded for their constant effort to educate their readers about warfare and how it not only affects the soldiers but the people and environment to which the soldiers defend.

The heart of this work is how the authors draw comparisons from modern warfare to ancient times and how seamless it is. This work serves as a warning not only to the leaders of the modern world but to any scholar who would dare study ancient or modern warfare. The warning is not a grim reckoning but rather an eye-opening testament to the similarities between ancient warfare and the leadership of Alexander of Macedon and of the military here in the United States today. This is a good book to have to any scholar who fancies themselves a military historian or to anyone who appreciates the campaigns of Alexander of Macedon and or Greek history. This is an incredibly well

written work, and these authors should be commended for the job that they did in using ancient warfare to illuminate the dangers and difficulties that commanders have faced in today's fight. There is a fear that those who read this work could find it difficult to make the connection between ancient times and modern times. There are several aspects of this work that oversimplified the work of the Coalition forces during operation Iraqi freedom, but this reviewer would argue that it is simply done to draw parallels as opposed to diminish the work of the soldiers who fought and died during that conflict. Overall, this is an amazing work, and it should go on the shelves of any historian, both military and otherwise as well as the casual reader who simply wants to learn more about how battles are fought and the leadership it takes to achieve victory.

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NATO: From Cold War to Ukraine, a History of the World's Most Powerful Alliance. By Sten Rynning. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024. Pp. 400. $30.00 (hardcover); $22.00 (paperback and ebook).

With the outbreak of war after Russia's aggression against Ukraine's sovereign borders in 2022, NATO's relevance as continental peacekeeper has been thrust back into the spotlight since the days of the Cold War or even as recently as Yugoslavia's breakup in the 1990s. Moscow's turn away from Euro-Atlantic partnership and its preference for a return to asserting its political and military influence in its former Soviet periphery has not only exposed NATO's policy malaise through lack of effective responses since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 but also its failure to adapt to a twenty-first century that sees a new struggle for global order rising in the Pacific realm with China at the forefront. Sten Rynning's *NATO: From Cold War to Ukraine* seeks to highlight this present-day identity crisis by arguing that the trans-Atlantic institution must shed its current pattern of "boom and bust" for aspirations followed by fraught relationships (p. 13).

A political history, the monograph spans 11 chapters that are divided into four parts that represent eras of NATO's shifting policy orientations. Part 1 begins with the Atlantic Charter laying the foundation for European unity through financial and monetary cooperation via global institutions in lieu of a return to centuries of balance of power solutions to continental struggle (pp. 25, 38). NATO's turn to a defensive pact for Western Europe follows, due to the Soviet Union's entrenchment in Eastern Germany and a subsequent formation of an East-West axis. Despite the Soviet threat uniting the alliance behind the United States' mentorship, struggles arise as national interests and the idea of rehabilitating West Germany as a power player undermine

allied solidarity and power sharing (p. 64). Part 2's "Retreat to Pragmatism" spans from 1965 up until the fall of Eastern Bloc Communism in 1989. Here, Rynning showcases NATO's coming-to-terms with coexistence with adversaries as a political necessity while equally balancing a shift away from mass retaliation in favor of flexible approaches such as land and sea-based forces and nuclear consultation schemes. Chapter 6 displays the persistence of pragmatism as NATO insisted on stability "through a prudent path" to democracy rather than exploiting the crumbling Soviet empire. NATO return to its origins of great ambitions in Part 3 but in the form of enlarged membership and scope of interests. On the one hand, NATO sought to transition from military bulwark to an appealing model for cooperation, open borders, and reconciliation, especially when attempting to establish a Euro-Atlantic partnership with Russia. On the other hand, it found itself becoming a coalition toolbox for members such as the United States to rally support behind countering global threats like the war on terrorism post-2001. Despite ambitions of community building and enlargement through pronouncements of local choice, empowerment, and accountability, they also came in forms of laxed orientations where the alliance could not form a united front on whether collective defense or general security was more important (pp. 228, 231). Rynning uses Part 4 to scrutinize the last 12 years (2012–24) as an ambition hangover where NATO has failed to maintain its continental roots and neglected a Russia now proactively reasserting its political and military reaches via hybrid warfare. The current war in Ukraine has arguably returned NATO to its origins in defending against Russia while using the support Kiev has received from prospective leaders like Germany to signal a new allied leadership to balance the already established British and French counterparts. Russia's behavior has been NATO's gain: maintaining an open-door policy for membership, enhancing aid to Ukraine through institutional and leadership development, and bolstering the alliance's ability to defend its own territory (pp. 245, 267, 269).

The monograph's contribution to Cold War historiography is its demonstration of NATO's nonlethality through three very noticeable concepts: community, cooperation, and consultation. With its stark origins in promoting peace among states, the very foundation to achieving this was marked by encouraging the exercise of power through free-thinking to attract members to buy-in to the idea of NATO. Rynning's extensive research through media outlets, monographs/biographies, and think tank reports unveils the painstaking consultations it took to carefully sew together allied cooperation that has brought the institution presently to 32 members. Despite the Soviet threat or even a future revanchist Germany, the NATO approach of using consultations was perhaps the strongest tool in overcoming French demands for nuclear capabilities, British hold-outs for balance of power precedent, and prioritizing German unification and membership as a symbol of successful community building (pp. 38, 64, 171). The formation of institutions such as the trailblazing Organization for European Economic Co-operation (OEEC) and the Conference on Security and Co-operation (CSCE) lent a voice to even the smallest members to exercise their participation (pp. 34–35, 117–18), while those like the Mutual and Balanced Force Reductions (MBFR) and the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) were just as crucial to developing a bridge with adversaries to promote dialogue on mutual

interests such as nuclear limitations, arms reductions, and the entrance of former Warsaw Pact states to the alliance (pp. 106–7, 186–87). Despite Russia's retreat from cooperation by the 2010s and the return of the East-West axis, NATO's pursuit of consultations with all power players has been a bedrock for peace over continental or global warfare in the last 75 years.

Rynning's approach has not only been original in bringing attention to the behind-the-scenes intricacies of cultivating domestic and continental political support to back NATO ambitions, it also raises opportunities for further research. While the monograph aptly spends time on present-day Ukraine, it does not quite delve into the former bloc members (and now allies) like Poland for example. Such an omission comes at a surprise given Warsaw's increased acceptance of NATO troops and collaboration in the last 10 years, thereby assuming a sentry if not leadership position in Europe that the United States has longed for or betted on Germany as accepting one day. Historically speaking, if the interests of Eastern Europe and the Baltics have always taken a back seat to Western European geopolitical desires, then the former's defensive predisposition toward Russia could be the leadership that the United States has been searching to succeed its conservatorship over NATO since 1949. That, and it potentially mitigates the Donald J. Trump administration's open calls to severely reduce American involvement and the bankrolling of Transatlantic security. But further research is also warranted into Russia's estrangement despite the initial high hopes that came with the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act. Russia's transition from communism to democracy and a seemingly reversal from democracy and into authoritarianism raises the question of how much NATO had lent support to Russia's internal democratic reforms even if eventual membership was never in the cards.

What originally was meant to assist in Europe's recovery and to promote continental peace, has now broadened to include anything deemed a threat to the alliance's values, institutions and overall security due to NATO's outreach to the Middle East. While a new concern over Russia's periphery has reemerged, the monograph serves as not only a historical lesson in how the world's greatest alliance came to be and has sustained itself, but also as a reminder that changing geopolitics always require new approaches, specifically with the rise of China and renewed tensions in its Pacific periphery. It is here that Rynning concludes that NATO's preservation ultimately lies in returning to the drawing board: tempering aspirations with geopolitics, returning to the original postwar goal of developing European leadership, and proactive adaptation of long-term policies that eliminate policy sprawls and mere headlining summits (pp. 13–14).

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The Return of the Great Powers: Russia, China, and the Next World War. By Jim Sciutto. New York: Dutton, 2026. Pp. 384. $30.00 (hardcover); $20.00 (paperback).

In his latest book, *The Return of Great Powers* CNN national security analyst and anchor Jim Sciutto embarks on the sobering task of highlighting the global national security precipice the world now teeters on with the return of great powers. Sciutto asserts that with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the United States created a unipolar world where it enjoyed an unrivaled and short-lived status as the sole global power. However, it is now a multipolar world with three great powers—the United States, China, and Russia—with the latter's reemergence featured in its 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This return of great powers has upended the post-Cold War order and replaced it with a more unpredictable and dangerous one.

This new world order consists of these three great powers and the hardening political, economic, and military divisions among them, while drawing in middle tier powers through partnerships and alliances. This can be seen through the strategic gamesmanship of the United States, NATO, Japan, and ASEAN nations on one side, and China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran on the other. This remaking of the global order is something akin to Barbara Tuchman's (*The Guns of August*) description of international events at the beginning of the First World War. The echoing concerns over potential global conflict are not that great powers will deliberately choose global conflict, but may stumble into war through small regional encounters, potential miscommunication, and increasing mistrust.

While echoes of historical conflict can be heard, this new era of competing global powers is markedly different. This hardening of global division is only further complicated through multidomain warfare capabilities in land, sea, air, and now cyber and near space, creating multifront risks for a hot war. These new potential battlefields of cyber and outer space add to the already complex array of this modern great power game of economic, intelligence, and diplomatic rivalry between China, Russia, and the United States. However, although modern advances in technology have changed the face of warfare, there are eerie similarities between twentieth and twenty-first century great power conflict.

The conflict in Ukraine, which has underscored the return of a multipolar word and ushered in a clear break in the post-Cold War order, has highlighted the complex and paradoxical nature of modern war. The Russian and Ukrainian armies have resorted to WWI-style trench warfare, while simultaneously experimenting with drone battlefield capabilities. Although not an instance of direct conflict between great powers, Ukraine has served as a sort of proxy war for great power conflict. This laboratory of violence has demonstrated that even in an age of immense technological advancement, great powers still require traditional industrial economies. The war in Ukraine has exposed the weaknesses in the military supply chain of the United States and NATO as great powers who previously deemphasized their industrial base and the ability to mass produce munitions and field large, mechanized militaries to project their will.

Beyond the technology of war, the geopolitical nature of great power conflict has evolved in the wake of a return to multipolarity. The NATO alliance formed at the beginning of the Cold War to defend European sovereignty against one great power has now expanded its mission to defend against two great powers not just in the European

theater but globally. The three great powers continue to circle each other, like rival predators, in Ukraine, Taiwan, and elsewhere, with new front lines for potential being drawn around the world, with middle power countries not aligning with either side, and sometimes on both sides. These alignments and alliances of mid-tier states present additional geopolitical and economic challenges, as well as present increased risks of potential flashpoints in the Baltic, the South China Sea, and increasingly in the Arctic. These complicated alignments and alliances risk drawing in these middle powers into a truly worldwide conflict.

Reader beware; this is not a book for the faint of heart. Sciutto analyzes the harsh realities and terrifying potential consequences of a global conflict with scathing honesty. This book is raw, unfiltered, and provides a sobering examination of the global threats of our time, including potential nuclear conflict as no longer an unthinkable reality. However, the book ends with a note of optimism, with Sciutto exploring means and strategies for great powers to pursue their individual national security interests without descending into global war. While there is a feeling of a momentum toward conflict in a sort of modern-day Thucydides Trap, there is always an offramp to pursue international cooperation, deescalation, and peace, with templates provided in this book.

This book is highly readable and a must-read for military strategists, policymakers, and armchair enthusiasts. Written in easy-to-read prose with an expected investigative reporting style, this book includes many interviews and perspectives from world leaders, politicians, strategies, and military experts, of which the weight of history looms and the responsibility of tomorrow rests. Sciutto spanned the globe with journalistic tenacity conducting interviews for this book that allow the reader to gain insight into the strategic thinking of world leaders who are grappling with these complex global realities. This book provides keen insight into the multipolar world we face today and how this great power competition of today might drastically reshape the global order of tomorrow.

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Right and Wronged in International Relations. By Brian C. Rathbun. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 404. $105.00 (hardcover); $34.99 (paperback and ebook). https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009344722.

The field of international relations is a cross-disciplinary field that is based on the concept of morality. Using various lenses to examine the concept of morality in relation to international relations helps to inform scholars and others on how to perceive international relations as they apply international relations to past and present wars and other scenarios.

"Chapter 1: The Nature in and Nature of International Relations" is a well-documented examination of morality through the philosophical realm, drawing on human nature to frame why morality and philosophy are intertwined. Utilizing cross-disciplinary literature, ranging from philosophy to naturalism, presents a well-balanced perception of how morality is also intertwined with sociological and evolutionary origins of society though a multimodal evidence-based approach grounded in a comprehensive literature review.

"Chapter 4: See No Evil, Speak No Evil?" takes a comprehensive approach to international relations through the lens of various government regimes and an analysis of global leaders' speeches which demonstrates that word usage in leader speeches as well as government regimes go hand in the hand with individual and national perception of morality which serves as a wake-up call to policymakers and others to choose their speech verbiage carefully especially with the advent of social media while realizing that government regimes are a manifestation of morality.

Cambridge Studies in International Relations continues the analytical and scholarly approach to international relations while acknowledging in "Chapter 9: Dying in Vain" that morality sometimes causes world leaders to wrongfully throw morality out the window with disastrous and often draconian results as informed by history and also as seen in today's environment especially with federal government cutbacks across the board.

"Chapter 6: Just Deserts in the Desert Fairness, Status, and Wilhelmine Foreign Policy during the Moroccan Crisis" is a well-documented international relations case study, the concept of fairness is contextualized within morality and fairness chiefly through a discussion of current literature and the behavior of Germany during the First and Second Moroccan Crises (1905–6 and 1911). Continuing the excellent organizational theme of using case studies to examine international relations morality, a 2020 survey of the public in Russia supplements the case study to address inherent weaknesses in case as well as to supplement statistical analysis assessing how Russia's participation in major international organizations (e.g., the G8) impacts Russia's economy in relation to other nations' economy. This well thought out and easily explained economic analysis draws a parallel to the current United States' presidents' behavior and the United States' public's perceptions of which way their moral compass is pointing.

Right and Wronged in International Relations strengthens the academic international relations debate by offering various scholarly studies which in conjunction with a discussion of various ideologies in "Chapter 5: To Provide and to Protect" offers a multidimensional approach to international relations also informed by comprehensive references to international relations literature and a review of fundamental aspects of human nature in "Chapter 2: Lesser Angels."

"Chapter 10: Daily Bread" and "Chapter 11: From Demonizing to Dehumanizing" inform the scholarly debate over international relations morality through a well thought out examination of basic human urges and the underbelly of society, such as lawbreakers, and using World War II as a case study as what happens when society's moral compass misfires.

"Chapter 8: Biting the Bullet" uses the backdrop of World War I to explain how morality shapes people's worldviews by both rationalizing enemy behavior and attribut-

ing morality principles to enemy wartime conduct which is easily transferable to current and future enemy wartime conduct and even to conduct during peacetime to understand what worldview causes a particular or group of countries to behave in a particular way. Perhaps even if current and future politicians, policymakers, and others took the time to consider the conduct of other nations during the peacetime or wartime, such as the impact of economic warfare, and how the United States' and other nations' foreign and domestic policies may have implications for morality and or conduct of specific communities, nations, and other subdivisions may avoid or diminish the need wartime conflict.

A chapter-by-chapter review of *Right and Wronged in International Relations* aids international relations scholars, the public, and others in understanding how morality in international public relations relates to today's world as well as in current and future wartime and peacetime domestic and foreign policymaking by countries on both the macro and micro levels. Superb organizational, presentation, use of sources, and relevance to modern times warrants a rating of four out of five from this reviewer.

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Unwinnable Wars: Afghanistan and the Future of American Armed Statebuilding. By Adam Wunische. New York: Polity Press, 2025. $69.95 (hardcover); $24.95 (paperback); $20.00 (ebook).

> "The world is bad. No person or state can make it not bad. The expectation should be that sometimes we can make it less bad, but not always. Expending significant resources in conflicts we have little hope of impacting for the better reduces available resources and political will when conflicts arise that can be impacted for the better."
>
> ~ Adam Wunische

Optional military interventions are conflicts nations bring about when initial mission objectives are assessed as desirable and achievable. *Optional* in this sense means the conflict is nonessential to that nation's continuance, but the prospect is considered just and feasible within the nation's military force capabilities. Interventions of this type are often defined by a variety of regular and irregular subcomponents that complicate planning and operations. When variables change, so should the objectives, or at least the ways and means employed to meet justifiable ends. The United States has demonstrated a long history of optional military interventions that did not effectively adjust to meet stated ends, leading to catastrophic failure. Complex military operations involving state-building activities are dynamic environments with numerous variables and stakeholders to consider. Without a shift in mission priorities, such conflicts turn

into open-ended, indecisive, and ultimately humiliating events that draw to anticlimactic ends. *Unwinnable Wars* is a scholarly attempt at deconstructing the undesirable outcomes of the limited state-building efforts in Afghanistan during the 20-year Global War on Terrorism.

Adam Wunische offers a well-researched and logical argument that Afghanistan and similar optional engagements are doomed from inception. The factors that cause their failures include preexisting conditions, ticking clocks, dilemmas, and paradoxes. The concept of being "overdetermined" for failure resonates early on, with concrete explanations why a strong will to win is defeated by the sheer weight of countervailing forces (p. 7). Each key factor is explored to understand why the conflict(s) ended in unintended outcomes and prevent future decision makers from similar follies. Wunische compares Afghanistan to similar optional military interventions and details the flow of resources to campaign actions, allowing readers to understand the causes and effects. Resource constraints and restraints are also explored to make readers appreciate the limited manner in which decisions were made.

Unwinnable Wars' later chapters offer a framework decision-makers can use to assess where a conflict is worth engaging in and, if so, how best to engage. The framework categorizes interventions as limited or comprehensive and conditions as favorable or unfavorable. The available data collected on more than 100 years of United States optional military interventions abroad can be parsed into this framework for an understanding of what stated objectives were and how effective the outcome became as a result of actions.

The array of sources researched to develop the arguments of *Unwinnable Wars* is extensive. Wunische, a U.S. Army veteran who served in Afghanistan, delved deep into recorded texts of state-building, counterterrorism, and most importantly counterinsurgency. Throughout his research, he pulls from a multitude of data to shore his argument with undeniable facts. Readers are presented the information in simple, palatable text and graphs that identify trends that beg the question: How could we get this wrong, over and over again?

The end result of the deep research, analysis, and reasoning is a sequential journey beginning with a description of the feeble security environment during the August 2021 United States withdrawal from Afghanistan. This alarming categorization of failure serves as a segway in exploring the preexisting conditions, ticking clocks, dilemmas, and paradoxes as the shaky foundation that led to the calamitous withdrawal. With the brutal ending described and the most relevant factors that defined its underpinnings, Wunische moves forward with recommendations and considerations for planners of future optional military interventions.

Wunische masterfully explains the abasing failures recorded during the final chapter of the Afghanistan war in an epigrammatic and favorable manner. His critical analysis is as informative as it is disheartening. Time and again, optional military interventions sputter or flame-out resulting in disorderly endings where political aims fail to be met and the wrong people die. Policy and decision-makers action bear consequences too grave to be taken lightly. The most admirable intentions are rarely advanced effectively beyond the conceptual phase once met with real-world friction, however a small good is

better than a great bad. The story told in *Unwinnable Wars* can be distilled down to you do not have to be perfect to be good. Armed state-building interventions should begin with a well-defined and reasonable end state, thorough understanding of the outcomes of comparable events from the past, and detailed plan of action for execution.

The irregular nature of state-building is a contemporary issue military professionals, policy makers, and academics alike grapple. The decisive outcome of World War II often leads statecraft practitioners to become comfortable expending military forces toward national policy goals, however, the results of World War II were unique with a low probability of ever being repeated. *Unwinnable Wars* challenges these same practitioners to view events holistically, make better informed decisions, and avoid conflicts that cannot be won. Participants of the war in Afghanistan can expect some level of closure to the unnerving withdrawal in August 2021; observers of foreign policy can learn what not to do when considering a similar affray. The data presented in *Unwinnable Wars* demonstrates that in armed state-building, the odds are not in favor of the intervenor and in the rare event when odds are favorable, the cost should not exceed the benefits gained.

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