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## From the Editor

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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.<sup>1</sup> Marines ostensibly believe that the very object of war is “to impose our will on the enemy.”<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

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.<sup>5</sup> This vast literature, much of it dating back to the early twentieth century—see, for example, Lord Moran’s *Anatomy of Cour-*

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> *Warfighting*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, 1997), 1-4.

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> *Journal of Advanced Military Studies*, SI (2022), <https://doi.org/10.21140/mcu.j.2022SIstratcul>.

age—is of course immensely helpful; all good theories and analyses build on the works of others.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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-lead five government-funded research projects tailored to help define and assess will to fight.<sup>8</sup> 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.*<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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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<sup>6</sup> Lord Moran, *Anatomy of Courage* (London: Constable, 1946).

<sup>7</sup> 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>.

<sup>8</sup> “Understanding the ‘Will to Fight,’” Rand.org, accessed 5 March 2026.

<sup>9</sup> Connable et al., *Will to Fight*, xi.

<sup>10</sup> 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](http://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.<sup>11</sup>

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*

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<sup>11</sup> On uncertainty, see *Warfighting*, 7-9.

