

Book Review

How to Fight a War

Mike Martin

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How to Fight a War is the third book by Mike Martin, a former British Army officer and senior visiting research fellow in the Department of War Studies at King's College London. *How to Fight a War* follows from Martin's 2021 book, *Why we Fight*, which, taken together, provide a timely and compelling foundation to make sense of the resurgence⁸¹⁵ of conflict – especially conventional war – in the early 2020s, and why conventional war now looks the way it does. The ambitious aim of *How to Fight a War* is to serve as a strategic reference guide for those who are commanders-in-chief of the armed forces of a country and covers important considerations at strategic, operational, and tactical level.⁸¹⁶ Written as a second-person narration, the book is written as though the reader occupies this ultimate leadership position, and is faced with war or the threat of war. For Martin, the self-stated intention is to help educate national leaders to direct wars better – not to encourage warmongering, but to help such leaders arrive at 'durable strategic answers to the pressing geopolitical issues of the day quicker and more efficiently.'⁸¹⁷

Divided into three parts, the book follows a structure that ranks the components of conducting war from most influential on the war's outcome to least influential. The first part covers a set of 'intangible fundamentals' in order of importance: strategy and intelligence, logistics, morale, and training. The second part covers what Martin considers 'tangible capabilities': land capabilities; sea, air and space capabilities; information and cyber warfare; and nuclear, chemical, and biological weaponry. The third part, which largely covers operational art, concerns the combination of the intangible and tangible elements to defeat an opposing force.⁸¹⁸ The listed intangible and tangible fundamentals of war delineate the essential principles to which Martin urges strategic decision-makers to pay close attention. Each principle is effectively presented as a different context for wartime leadership, and delves into more tactical and operational depth than one might expect a senior commander or politician to understand. This should however not stand as criticism of the book. Colin Gray has sagely noted, 'tactics and operations ... are the real-world material from which strategy has to be made.'⁸¹⁹ One implication of this is that forcing too much distance between knowledge sets for non-military political decision-makers and knowledge sets for military personnel could be detrimental to creating the desired strategic effect. While one might argue that politicians, for example, do not

need to understand how terrain shapes infantry tactics, Martin implicitly shows that, by having at least a rudimentary understanding of tactical and operational matters, a strategic decision-maker might appreciate better what could realistically be achieved within a given geography. In turn, this may help politicians to avoid making unrealistic demands on their military forces and to appreciate better the strategic effects that may or may not be within reach.

Of specific interest for this review are Martin's observations of strategy itself. A key assertion that Martin makes – one likely to be contentious among academic audiences – is that success in war is about following basic principles. The book under review in its entirety is an outlay of those principles. Where wars have been lost, the argument is that this is due to leaders ignoring or misapplying these principles, the most important of which is getting strategy right.⁸²⁰ Martin leads the discussion of strategy framed according to the familiar ends–ways–means structure.⁸²¹ The leader is advised to select strategic objectives carefully. Such objectives must rest on a sound understanding of the problem to be solved with military force, and must also allow for a framework to judge political actions.⁸²² In recent years, however, the ends–ways–means architecture of strategy – to which Colin Gray has added the category of assumptions⁸²³ – has come under much scrutiny, specifically as a way of formulating strategy itself. Although Martin makes an effort to reiterate that strategy is not a simple or formulaic matter, his conception still lends itself to what Jeffrey Meiser has alluded to as a 'seductive simplification.'⁸²⁴ Indeed, while Martin is certainly correct in asserting that many losses in war can be contributed to a mismatch between ends, ways, and means, he does not address the fact that many losses might occur because of strategy being oversimplified and abused as military planning tool comprising ends, ways, and means.⁸²⁵ Some military strategists themselves have experienced disillusionment in terms of this formulation, pointing out, for example, that it does not take the adversary sufficiently into account, that it fails to acknowledge the unending nature of ends, and that its adoption does not necessarily even improve strategic practice.⁸²⁶ *How to Fight a War* could certainly have benefited from Martin's insight into how to avoid this oversimplification or how to prevent the ends–ways–means structure from devolving into mere means-based planning.

With that said, there is also still the somewhat lingering question of *how* to really make good strategy. In a podcast interview with Abel Esterhuyse, Chair of the Department of Strategic Studies at Stellenbosch University, Martin alluded to such a possible structure and the need for a diverse team with wide-ranging perspectives and backgrounds that are given the space for robust debate and shaping of creative ideas to strategic questions.⁸²⁷ Coupled with the question of how to make good strategy, is the question of strategy in contexts other than regular or conventional warfare. The American failure to ultimately prevent the Taliban from taking political control in Afghanistan after 20 years of deployment, or the French withdrawal from the Sahel after almost 60 years' experience in North and West Africa, points to a particular context for strategy that even the best equipped nations with access to the best strategic minds cannot master. If there were to be a second edition of the book in the future, this could certainly be an added chapter.

Given the overall accessibility of the book, *How to Fight a War* would serve as an excellent primer for students of international security or strategic studies, and would also be beneficial to non-military professionals involved in security matters, such as journalists who look to cover current affairs related to contemporary warfare. A close reading of the book would likely make policymakers far more careful in even attempting to conduct war in the first place, and those readers who are not directly involved in strategic decisions more capable – if not more confident – in holding those policymakers to account for their decisions about war.

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Endnotes

- ⁸¹⁵ Editorial Board, 'The Unwelcome Resurgence of War', *The Financial Times*, 27 December 2023. <<https://www.ft.com/content/b3a9aaf2-f45d-4775-940d-9d70bc2f59a1>> [Accessed on 22 February 2024].
- ⁸¹⁶ M Martin, *How to Fight a War* (London: Hurst, 2023), 8.
- ⁸¹⁷ Martin, *How to Fight a War*, 8.
- ⁸¹⁸ Martin, *How to Fight a War*, 158.
- ⁸¹⁹ CS Gray, *Theory of Strategy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 32.
- ⁸²⁰ Martin, *How to Fight a War*, 7.
- ⁸²¹ Martin, *How to Fight a War*, 15.
- ⁸²² Martin, *How to Fight a War*, 16.
- ⁸²³ Gray, *Theory of Strategy*, 5.
- ⁸²⁴ JW Meiser, 'Ends+Ways+Means=(Bad) Strategy', *Parameters*, 46, 4 (2016), 83.
- ⁸²⁵ This point is developed fully by Jeffrey Meiser. See Meiser, 'Ends+Ways+Means=(Bad) Strategy'.
- ⁸²⁶ ML Cavanaugh, 'It's Time to End the Tyranny of Ends, Ways, and Means', Modern Warfare Institute, West Point, 2017. <<https://mwi.westpoint.edu/time-end-tyranny-ends-ways-means/>> [Accessed on 10 February 2024].
- ⁸²⁷ M Martin, 'How to Fight a War', interview by Abel Esterhuyse, *Pagecast*, 2024. <<https://open.spotify.com/episode/1IcgvkSUPHI0BRr3OPmCHn>> [Accessed on 22 March 2024].