

Strategy Strikes Back: How Star Wars Explains Modern Military Conflict

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As US-China competition has intensified, leading scholars, American¹ and Chinese² alike, have cast their countries as falling into Thucydides' Trap—stumbling into a war that neither side wants. Thucydides, the ancient Athenian general, supposedly defined the trap when he wrote of the Peloponnesian War: “It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.”³ It is today, then, the rise of China and the fear that this instills in the United States that purportedly makes war unavoidable.

Yet this “trap,” like other popular maxims, remains unintelligible for those who have not studied the ancients. It is evidently confusing even for international relations experts who have, in fact, misinterpreted Thucydides, according to some classicists. The scholar Raphael Sealey, for his part, offered his own translation of Thucydides' writings in 1975: “Now the most genuine cause, though least spoken of, was this: it was the Athenians, in my opinion, as they were growing great and furnishing an occasion of fear to the Lacedaemonians [Spartans], who compelled the latter to go to war.”⁴ The relatively minor difference matters. An “impersonal dialectic of history” did not cause the war, as many contemporary international relations scholars suggest, but specific Athenian actions—which Thucydides actually lists—did.⁵ War, then, according to Sealey's translation, was not inevitable because the Spartans feared the Athenians; conflict happened only because of decisions made by the latter. Power, ultimately, was only one of many variables that brought the two powers to war.

Given that even experts struggle to get the history right, and how much the history itself is still debated, it is no surprise that the knowledge gap between them and the public makes it impossible for much of the latter to talk strategy when these examples arise; both participants in such a conversation must be familiar with the case in question to make any headway (xiv).

Strategy Strikes Back: How Star Wars Explains Modern Military Conflict—an illuminating essay collection featuring contributions from academics and military officials alike—addresses this problem, democratizing strategic thinking by using *Star Wars*, rather than the Peloponnesian War, as a lens to dissect strategic think-

ing. By replacing Thucydides with Darth Vader, the book offers not only entertainment but valuable lessons. Many of these essays are strong, but there are nonetheless a few notable standouts.

One is “Han, Greedo, and the Strategy of Prevention,” in which Chuck Bies, deputy chief of staff at the US Army’s 4th Infantry Division, uses the controversially re-edited⁶ shootout between Han Solo and alien bounty hunter Greedo to clarify the difference between preemptive and preventive strikes. When Han, in the original 1977 film, shot Greedo before he had pulled his weapon, Han “conducted a preventive strike . . . because Han looked at the situation and though he wasn’t sure what Greedo would do, he was sure that he didn’t like the threat that Greedo posed” (128). Yet when Han, in the edited 2011 version, “just barely gets his shot off before Greedo,” he carried out a preemptive strike, because “he sees Greedo about to pull the trigger and understands that his enemy’s attack is imminent” (128). This “is where preemption differs from prevention; the preventive strike aims to prevent future strategic threats from manifesting, where a preemptive strike aims to be quicker on the draw than a tactical threat that has already arisen” (128). Bies’s lesson enables easy analysis of real life. Whereas certain media outlets have wrongly described Israel’s recent strike on the Iranian nuclear facility of Natanz as preemptive⁷, readers of *Strategy Strikes Back* know better—they know that it was a preventive strike, because the Iranians were not preparing to imminently attack Israel.

Another highlight is, incidentally, Bies’s essay, “Why Military Forces Adapt, Even in a Galaxy Far, Far Away.” He not only dissects the militaries’ need to adapt—“If you don’t like change, you’ll like irrelevance even less” (150)—but also jabs playfully at *Phantom Menace*, arguably the worst *Star Wars* film. Of the Naboo blockade crisis, he writes: “If this seems stupid, it is, because *Phantom Menace*” (151) —in short, because much of *Phantom Menace* makes no sense. Nonetheless, he shows why the underdog strategy pursued by Gungans, the natives of Naboo, was also strategically flawed. Rather than draw “the droids into a forest or into a narrow pass to negate their numbers and firepower—as was done at Thermopylae,” the Gungans, armed only with spears, almost lost everything by meeting their adversaries “on a plain with nothing resembling cover” (153). Bies’s analysis of the Galactic Civil War is similarly astute. Because the Imperial Army “was still winning victories, and given its nearly inexhaustible resources, there was no compelling reason to change how it fought” (156). As in the Vietnam War, the fighting only stopped after “its head was decapitated” (156), though admittedly this was only metaphorical in real life.

The book highlights the following lessons. First, a “lack of societal awareness, no matter how well intentioned will place us (the United States) in the role of

foreign occupier” (6), as Max Brooks writes, and as American campaigns in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq have shown. In his essay “Darth Vader’s Failed Counterinsurgency Strategy,” this point is emphasized by retired US Army colonel and former director of Modern War Institute at West Point Liam Collins, who depicts a discussion between Vader and his commanders. When one captain argues that the Empire “must address some of the underlying grievances that are driving people to join the rebellion” (172) and lays out a counterinsurgency strategy (175), Vader responds by choking him with the Force and proclaiming: “I find your lack of faith disturbing” (176). Of course, Vader’s failures preempted not only the deaths of these commanders, but of the Empire itself. The lesson, then, is that senior leaders must not assume that they either know better than their subordinates, or even that they understand the places in which they are fighting. Militaries have experts who understand the domestic causes of counterinsurgencies. Leaders, whether in a galaxy far away or here at home, would be wise to listen to them.

Second, the increasing technologization of war could make conflict only more brutal. As Raq Winchester and Fran Wilde, a lead at the consulting firm Guidehouse and science fiction writer, respectively, conclude their essay “How General Grievous and Vulture Droids Foreshadow Conflict’s Fast Future”: “Centaur and drone swarms will likely give us safer, quicker war, but may come with the loss of the very human *why*” (49) (emphasis theirs).⁸ Their compelling argument, in essence, is that by removing human forces from the battlefield, leaders the world over will worry themselves less with the actual rationale for going to war. It is indeed only logical that when the human cost of war declines, so does the sophistication of one’s rationale for engagement. Yet conflict will always claim human lives, particularly those of the less technologically advanced participants. As Jean Marie Ward, a novelist and non-fiction writer, puts it simply in her essay “Jedi Mind Tricks,” “When warfare becomes nothing more than a video game, everybody loses” (103).

Third, great powers cannot will their way to victory because of their largess but must deploy troops equipped to handle specific types of warfare. They cannot, in short, send soldiers trained for battlefield warfare to take on the guerilla attacks that dogged the Empire throughout *Star Wars* and the United States in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and beyond. This point is one made well by retired four-star US naval officer James Stavridis and Noblis ESI analyst Colin Steele in their essay “Hybrid *Star Wars*,” which demonstrates the impossibility of responding to hybrid warfare by traditional means, and the need to develop creative strategies.

Ultimately, while the essays are somewhat uneven⁹, with some seeming like little more than summaries of *Star Wars* itself, the book ultimately delivers on its

promise to operationalize the film series for strategic studies. And while some potential readers may scoff at the authors' use of fiction for serious scholarship, they would be wise to consider retired US Army general Stanley McCrystal's advice in the book's foreword: "Wisdom is where you find it. Don't be afraid to look in unexpected places. This is a great place to start." ★

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Notes

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3. Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap," *Foreign Policy*, June 9, 2017, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.
4. Raphael Sealey, "The Causes of the Peloponnesian War," *Classical Philology* 70, no. 2 (1975): 89–109.
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