



*The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* by Sean McFate.

New York: William Morrow, 2019. Pp. xviii, 318. ISBN 978-0-06-284358-6.

Review by Samuel B. Hoff, Delaware State University (shoff@desu.edu).

---

In *The New Rules of War*, military historian and political scientist Sean McFate (National Defense Univ./Georgetown Univ.) argues that adhering to traditional precepts of war in the twenty-first century is a recipe for disaster. The conduct of war must adapt to present-day conditions. McFate uses examples from previous wars and his own experience as a US Army paratrooper, private contractor, and professor of military strategy to proffer alternatives to conventional strategy and tactics. In a text comprising three parts (after a foreword by retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal) McFate responds to problems in current military thought and training with ten rules for future warfare, each receiving a separate chapter.

The author maintains that the US military has been trending downward since World War II, because it has not grasped the new global system he dubs “durable disorder.” The result has been a policy of containment yielding perpetual instability. America’s enemies are more effective in warfare even with fewer resources. While the United States still employs a strategy based on broad national goals, others exploit the circumstances of the new international environment to meet immediate, often limited objectives. McFate identifies forward-thinking men who made a difference in past conflicts, while bemoaning their limited longer-term influence. What is needed is a blend of scholarly thought and practical experience. He bluntly urges the United States and the West generally to “catch up to our enemies and play by war’s new rules to win” (24).

The author’s first rule is to recognize that conventional war is a relic of the past. To meet the challenges of recent conflicts, US military officials should stop buying traditional weapons and reallocate defense funds to civilian agencies. He stresses that the United States must revamp its military force structure on the model of lean and mean special operations. His second rule is to avoid blind reliance on technology instead of human ingenuity.

The third rule stipulates that accepting the co-existence of war and peace is preferable to the inflexibly bureaucratic approach typical of most elements of the military. The fourth rule is to abandon the traditional counterinsurgency strategy of “winning hearts and minds.” The United States, the author argues, would do better to post smaller, foreign-legion-style forces to trouble spots for longer deployments.

Rule five recapitulates Sun Tzu’s observation that defeating an enemy without openly fighting is the best strategy. To accomplish this, America and the West must improve their messaging. Hostile governments can be toppled by internationalizing their abuses, denigrating their existence, and morally corrupting their personnel, but only if the United States is prepared to scrap laws prohibiting the use of propaganda on its own citizens. McFate’s sixth rule promotes the use of (long denigrated) mercenaries. Throughout history, nation states, terrorist organizations, and non-government groups alike have used mercenaries effectively. The United States’ increasing reliance on private military contractors is an (unacknowledged) equivalent practice. The author admits the need for legal constraints on these warriors and believes the Geneva-based International Code of Conduct Association could be helpful in that regard.

Rule seven concerns regional powers that fill vacuums left by the decline of nations. These include, terrorists, warlord-followers, mercenaries, large corporations, organized crime, and mega-churches. According to McFate, the growth of these entities “will fundamentally change who has leverage in international relations, upsetting world order later in the twenty-first century” (169). Rule eight posits, in addition, that international drug cartels and their private conflicts will change the face of war itself.

Rule nine predicts a plague of “shadow wars” involving subversion, deception, and plausible deniability. The author furnishes historical examples of these underground struggles, including US intervention in Guatemala in the early 1950s and the recent Russian incursions into Ukraine. He recommends using shadow-war tactics to destabilize autocracies before they disrupt democracies. Rule ten highlights the links between military and political goals, citing preconditions that allow weak forces to overcome more powerful ones. Reminding the reader once again of the difference between tactics, operations, and strategy, he calls for improved training and education in the latter. The volume’s concluding chapter underscores in stark terms the dire need to adjust to the new world order: “Either we spill enough blood in battle until we finally realize our problem, or we choose to change now” (251).

In the first decade of the 2000s, scholars advanced the idea that organizations could be used as weapons and that increasing globalization could work to America’s military advantage. Over the last decade, specific methods of conflict have been highlighted, encompassing everything from preemption to targeted killing to drone use. Still, there have been warnings not to abandon the principles of just war or to simplify the complexity of asymmetric warfare.<sup>1</sup>

Sean McFate’s new study expands his earlier work on the role of mercenaries in modern warfare,<sup>2</sup> analyzing past and present examples to illustrate how conditions have changed. His ten rules make a clear and cogent case for adapting in order to achieve victory in the age of durable disorder. That said, the rules could have been reduced by half to eliminate repetition and overlap. More fundamentally, McFate underestimates various factors that undercut his advice to adjust to novel circumstances: for instance, (a) the influence of lobbyists for defense contractors, who insist on retaining current weapon systems, (b) the preference of Presidents Obama and Trump for ceasing long-term operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and (c) a concomitant intolerance of the American public for such open-ended missions. Finally, the tendency of military personnel to put off retirement due to uncertain economic conditions has prevented the infusion of new ideas and approaches.

---

1. Mark D. Mandeles, *The Future of War: Organizations as Weapons* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2005); Donald M. Snow, *National Security for a New Era: Globalization and Geopolitics* (NY: Pearson Longman, 2007); Michael W. Doyle, *Striking First: Preemption and Prevention of International Conflict* (Princeton: Univ Pr, 2011); Claire Finkelstein, ed., *Targeted Killings: Law and Morality in an Asymmetrical World* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2012); John E. Jackson, ed., *One Nation under Drones: Legality, Morality, and Utility of Unmanned Combat Systems* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2019); James M. Dubik, *Just War Reconsidered: Strategy, Ethics, and Theory* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2007); Max G. Manwaring, *The Complexity of Modern Asymmetric Warfare* (Norman: U Okla Pr, 2012).

2. Viz., *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2014).