

Review

Freier, Nathan P., et al. June 2016. *Outplayed: Regaining Strategic Initiative in The Gray Zone. A Report Sponsored by the Army Capabilities Integration Center in Coordination with Joint Staff J-39/Strategic Multi-Layer Assessment Branch. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute and U.S. Army War College Press. <https://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo78897>.*

This report is one of the first of a series on the gray zone, a “carrier concept” for hostile action, preceded by a long game of diplomacy, threats, and propaganda to achieve warlike aims without full-scale warfare. It owes a good deal to the British Royal Army’s General Rupert Smith, author of a 2005 best-seller, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*.

Gray zone warfare is a new name for a concept as old as warfare itself. Kingdoms of past ages lacked the means of total conquest. All wars featured long sieges, punctuated with skirmishes, raids, ambushes and “ravaging” (i.e., burning crops, rustling cattle, etc.) Actual pitched battles were rare. England’s Wars of the Roses (1455-1485) were thirty years of political crises. Foreign kingdoms exploited and prolonged the conflict (sound familiar?) and treacherous political infighting filled three decades that, in all, saw about fifty-six days of actual fighting. Yet the English throne changed hands four times, until the Tudors cemented power, and a third of England’s aristocracy had been killed. English society was forever changed. Thus, wars change history even without massive casualties.

By contrast, *Outplayed* examines the “American way of war” or, more accurately, the American preference to

prepare for a particular kind of war.” For Americans, wars are five-act grand operas of Peace, Crisis, War, Resolution, ending with a New, Improved Peace. That is our memory of the American Civil War, World War I, and above all, World War II. However, if that is war, said General Smith, then war no longer exists. The world’s last battle between formations of tanks was in the Golan Heights in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The 1991 Gulf War was the swan-song of regional campaigns. Since then, American military adventures have stalled or foundered. Conflicts close when troops withdraw, not when the enemy yields his sword.

All militaries mirror the nations they exist to defend, and *Outplayed* asserts that the American military, no less than the American people, acting through their elected representatives, remain saddled with four outdated assumptions: First, we will always be the good guys: our interventions will be supported and acclaimed by most of our allies. Second, that competitors, opponents, and enemies will always fight (and lose) by our rules; we win all the battles, and no one will think of a way to fight us without fighting battles. Third, that only direct conflict between large and powerful states matters; we should just let little countries have their little fights, in the words of Will Rogers. Lastly, that nation-states would forever hold their authority, without fraying from the centrifugal forces of tribes, ideologies, and factions.

On the contrary, Freier’s project team advances three far colder assumptions: We shall remain under assault by diverse and ever shifting forces; gray zone warfare will be the most common strategy; to counter it there will be a

steep learning curve to gain, or regain, the skill shown by our foes. The USA and its allies are status quo powers, who maintain the post-World War II international order. Revisionist powers, mainly China, Russia, and Iran, approve of having an international order, but they seek to supplant the USA and its allies as the author of its rules. Rejectionist forces, such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, and others yet to emerge, reject the modern world’s order entirely and seek to demolish it.

Outplayed’s middle chapters examine each of these challenges in detail. They conclude by reviewing our country’s history, beginning with President Theodore Roosevelt, who made skillful use of gray zone warfare when England had the largest navy and France the largest army. We owe our privileged position in the world to generations of success at gray zone warfare. Russia, China, and Iran all learned from the “American Century,” the way Germany learned the art of “blitzkrieg” from the Allies’ Hundred Days’ campaign that finally defeated the Kaiser’s armies in the First World War.

Their closing recommendations make the most difficult reading, since the problem they address is so complex and diffuse. The theme, however, is clear: The United States must get back in the game or be relegated to the international sidelines. Military technology has overcome the barriers of geography and economics that formerly limited wars. Political and social conflict, between nations and within nations, pose obstacles as difficult as any mountain range.

Most ominously of all, nations the world over are in a crisis of legitimacy. We may be seeing an Internet effect which has heretofore passed unnoticed. Textbooks on project management have

for decades affirmed that the larger the visibility of any project or policy, the less tolerance there is for even the slightest error or setback. Easily correctible mistakes result in cancellation and shutdown amid scorching denunciations from the press and political leaders. It may be the Internet has put an end to low-visibility projects. Scandals and scapegoating now

hamper defensible conduct at every level of public affairs.

Outplayed is a valuable contribution to understanding the world today, useful mainly as an introduction to the growing body of government publications on gray zone warfare since 2016, such as *Mastering the Gray Zone: Understanding a Changing Era of Conflict* by Michael

Mazarr, *Thucydides was Right: Defining the Future Threat*, by Colin S. Grey, or *A Whole of Government Approach to Gray Zone Warfare*, by Elizabeth G. Troeder. Recommended for history and political science students, and for international programs.—*Carl P. Olson (colson@towson.edu) is a librarian for government publications at Towson University*