

# LIMITED WAR

Simpson, O R

Marine Corps Gazette (pre-1994); Mar 1957; 41, 3;

Marine Corps Gazette & Leatherneck Magazine of the Marines

pg. 34

# LIMITED WAR

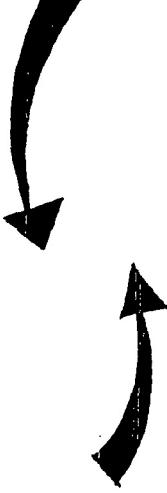
By Col O. R. Simpson

## Introduction

UNTIL RECENT YEARS THERE HAS been no particular need to establish categories for wars. It was sufficient to describe them as "large" or "small" and even this often depended on whether the speaker was involved directly or a long range observer. However, the global magnitude of WWII and the advent of mass destruction weapons conditioned the thinking of many people — particularly Americans — to view all war as "total." Evidence of this was clearly seen in our public debates on national security of 1946-47 and 1949. Here we were preoccupied with our concern for establishing a defense structure with which to cope successfully with WWIII — an "all-out," "no holds barred" conflict. The events of the last 10 years indicate some categorization would now be useful. There has been considerable armed conflict since 1945 but none of it has become "global" or "total." No nuclear weapons have been used in combat since Nagasaki. Yet we have not reached the millennium of world peace and do not appear likely to do so. While WWIII and the "nuclear exchange" does not seem imminent, conflict goes on in various parts of the world and unquestionably will continue.

Thus it would be useful to have some commonly accepted designator which would be descriptive of that type of warfare which is less than global or total — that type where the fate of the world does not necessarily hang in balance.

Marine Corps Gazette • March 1957



## For the United States, Navy and Marine Corps elements are the forces best suited by mission, organization and training to go into action in such a conflict

There has been no dearth of terms. Lippman first used "cold war" in 1947 to describe the manifold activities short of actual war which were being used by the Soviet bloc in pursuit of its objective of world domination. After 1950, however, many found it hard to include the "hot" Korean conflict within the compass of "cold war." This was particularly difficult for those directly involved. President Truman's attempt to describe Korea as a "police action" lacked both accuracy and public acceptance.

A British writer, Brigadier Barclay, has proposed "New Warfare." This he defines as "the means by which a nation or group of nations seeks to impose its will on others by all means short of war and without disturbing its own economy to an extent unbearable or unacceptable to its people." In his term, he includes the activities of Lippman's "cold war" — propaganda, sabotage, intimidation, armed threat, etc. — and also "war by proxy on a limited scale."

### Limited War

Of all the many terms which have been employed to describe that war which is something less than general or total, "limited war" seems to be the most accurate and thus the most useful. "Limitation" in scope, objective, means — or combinations of these — is the predominant characteristic of this type of warfare. The limitation may be practiced by either or both belligerents. Whether

the war is limited or not depends on who is establishing the category. The Republic of Korea, for example, having had the "rake of war dragged up and down its country for years" could scarcely be expected to view that war as limited. But certainly to the US it was limited — in scope, objective and means employed. It should perhaps be noted that all the various terms of limitation are useful only to those who enjoy the sanctuary of the detached observer. To the man being shot at, there is nothing at all limited about his war.

If some form of limitation can be accepted as the most significant characteristic of this form of warfare then a reasonable definition of Limited War might be:

"War of limited scope in which either or both belligerents have limited objectives and employ limited means."

The interrelation of limited objectives and limited means is at once apparent. A limited objective suggests limitation of the means to attain it. Limitation may well stem from the fear that failure to impose positive restrictions will precipitate unlimited or global war — such as was true of the US position in Korea.

### Background

Limited wars are not new. Most wars of early military history were really "small wars" because the economy of the time would not support large armies in the field. Hastings (1066), often classed as one of the

world's great battles, involved only 18,000 men about equally divided between the Normans and the Saxons. As economies and communications systems developed, the size of opposing armies grew. By 1812, Napoleon was able to invade Russia with 350,000 men. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 involved 850,000 men and finally in WWII some 30 million people were under arms.

The US has declared war only 6 times: 1775, 1812, 1861, 1898, 1917 and 1941. Of these, 1812 and 1898 were limited wars in the sense of the definition proposed here. A quick look at these shows a pattern which, with proper modification, fits present day limited wars.

Our second war with England (1812-1815) had a limited objective largely concerned with economic considerations. The country was divided as to the merits of the war — and this is true of most limited wars. Soldiers were enlisted for very short terms — often only 6 months. This precipitated a requirement for units actually engaged in combat to be relieved without replacement in order to meet discharge dates — a circumstance repeated in every limited war which followed including Korea 138 years later.

In our war with Mexico in 1845, we suffered because we had no "ready force." The same was true in 1898 in the Spanish American War. During the period 1918-1932, the US employed its Marines as instruments of national policy in Haiti, Nica-



Col Simpson's conviction that our country is preparing for the wrong war in this nuclear age is shared by many other professional soldiers. In presenting his views here he draws on his experience of over 20 years' service. Commissioned from Texas A&M in 1935, he has served in various staff and command billets including command of the 1st and 6th Marines. Now at HQMC, he has attended the Command and General Staff School at Ft Leavenworth and the Army War College.

ragua and Santo Domingo. While these were not really wars except to the individuals involved, many of the characteristics of limited warfare were present.

While we were not again involved in limited war until Korea in 1950, this type of conflict went on elsewhere: 1935, Italy-Ethiopia; 1936-39, Spanish Civil War; 1946, Greece; 1947-48, Arab-Israeli; 1948, Malaya; 1946-1954, Indochina.

Korea, 1950-53, was our most recent and most extensive venture in the field of limited war. The results are none too reassuring. This was a true limited war from the US standpoint — we had a limited objective (while there are grounds for disagreement as to what the objective was, it was a limited one by any standard); we were desperately anxious to keep the scope limited and accordingly we put a definite limitation on the means we employed. It is a characteristic of limited war that political (in the broad sense) considerations dominate military considerations.

We had difficulty in Korea because we had no military posture to cope quickly and adequately with limited war. We had a nuclear retaliatory force which admirably served the purpose of deterring WW III, but we had starved the forces which fight limited war and we had done no serious thinking, either militarily or as a nation, about our possible involvement in limited wars.

Starting practically from a prone position, the nation did a creditable job of rising to its knees and eventually to its feet — militarily. To do this, the expedients and improvisations to which we resorted were many and varied. While the ability to improvise is undoubtedly one of our strong virtues, reliance on it rather than adequate prior planning and preparation may one day lead to difficulties of such magnitude that no degree of improvisation can provide salvation.

These are important points to remember about our Korean experience:

a) Korea was a true limited war from the US standpoint.

b) For Soviet Communism, this was "war by proxy." Russia succeeded in remaining technically neutral while persuading the North Koreans and the Chinese to fight for her interests.

c) The US was totally unprepared to fight a limited war. A major effort was required on our part for even a questionable measure of success.

d) In making this effort, the US found it necessary to invoke measures usually reserved for general war and which cannot be repeated with impunity for future limited wars. (This was particularly true in the involuntary mobilization of Reserves.)

e) If we had to be involved in limited war in 1950, we were fortunate to have it in Korea. Elsewhere we would have had far more difficulty in keeping it "limited."

From our Korean experience alone — to say nothing of our long and varied experience in other limited wars, it would seem prudent to take a careful look at the prospect for our future involvement in this type conflict and determine the preparations we should make for this contingency.

#### Limited War of the Future

In attempting to assess the likelihood of our future involvement in limited wars, we face one hard and unpalatable fact. Soviet Russia may have more to say about whether the US will again engage in limited war than the US itself. We have identified our national interests and announced our determination to defend them. Unless we retreat from that position, Russia can, by her actions, determine whether our protection of these interests will involve war.

The ultimate goal of Communism

is world domination. The tenacity with which International Communism adheres to this goal is nothing short of remarkable. Defeats, military, political and economic — are all viewed as only temporary detours in the course of overall progress. This attitude is totally incompatible with the US desire to live and prosper according to our own dictates in a world of peace. It would seem to place the two foci of world power in conflict until such time as the fundamental objective of one or the other is changed.

Since WWII, the USSR has demonstrated to our bitter satisfaction that she has a complex pattern of methods for use in pursuing her goals. She is skilled in the application of propaganda, subversion, appeals to nationalism, infiltration, armed threat, war by proxy and, of course, general war. The USSR is currently employing all these except general war in a wide variety of places across the globe. And before she will abandon her goal of a Communist dominated world, she will employ general war if this seems necessary and if it appears to offer a reasonable chance for success.

With the specific exception of the Korean war years of 1950-53, we have devoted most of our defense effort to insuring that no antagonist of ours can anticipate any "reasonable chance of success in general war." We have developed a Strategic Air Command and armed it with thermonuclear weapons of incredible power. We have entered into a series of collective security agreements — NATO, SEATO and the like — designed on the one hand to reassure our allies and the other to warn our Communist opponents that aggression will bring disaster in the form of nuclear — "massive" — retaliation.

But, during this time, the USSR has also developed mass destruction weapons and the means to deliver them. This has brought about the curious situation in which the two centers of world power have the capability to destroy each other. The specter of "thermonuclear holocaust" has given the world more cause to ponder its ultimate fate than any other single event in the last several centuries. Churchill has spoken of it as "roaming and peering around

“rim of Hell.” In the case of the Communists, there can be assumed to be no reluctance in pushing their enemies into “the pit” but there could be a natural reluctance — set on the part of Communists — to being dragged in after them. There seems to be now a growing acceptance of the fact that there will be no victors in thermonuclear war — only survivors.

This situation has been described as “nuclear stalemate.” Regardless of the accuracy of this, the fact is that WWIII has not yet started and the prospects for it are gratifyingly dim. This does not mean any fundamental change in the objectives of Communism. It only means that it is not in the interests of the Communists to precipitate a general war. It is a situation that can be prolonged a very long time provided we maintain the appropriate form and magnitude of deterrent power.

But in dealing with the major threat we have not eliminated or even stalemated armed conflict as such. On the contrary, we may well have set the stage for more numerous small wars. Liddell Hart has observed that “to the extent that the H-bomb reduces the likelihood of full-scale war, it increases the possibilities of limited war.” This stems from the fact that if, as it appears, we have an effective deterrent for general war, this has not altered the objective of world domination as the goal of Communism. Since general war is only one of the means available, the Communists can be expected to give full attention to the others which promise more success — subversion, infiltration, armed threat and limited war. We have yet to develop an effective deterrent for these.

On balance it seems reasonable to expect that the world will see many limited wars in the future. It would be foolhardy to assume that we will be able to avoid direct involvement in every instance. It would be even more foolish to pattern our national defense structure on such a premise. The choice in all probability, will not be ours — unless the alternatives of abandoning our national objectives or engaging in limited war is considered a choice. It is difficult to imagine how we could maintain our integrity as a nation and still consider such a course of action — or

inaction.

It is all very well to say that we must never again become involved in another “Korea.” The only way to be absolutely certain that we will never again be involved in limited war is to announce that we will never fight again under any consideration. This could effectively prevent our engagement in war and would, at the same time, surrender the Free World — including the US — to Communist domination. Thus it would seem that reality would cause us to acknowledge that there will undoubtedly be limited wars in the future and that there is an ever present possibility that we will become involved in them.

It has been argued that the US should fight these wars “by proxy” in the same manner as the USSR. This is not easy for us to do. War by proxy is a part of an overall pattern of aggression which this country cannot, in all conscience, embrace. We do have it as a basic policy that the countries most directly threatened will make maximum effort on their part as a condition of our assistance — as witness the 20 ROK divisions. We have Military Advisory Assistance Groups in many areas, but progress is painfully slow and expensive. Since the Communists clearly have the initiative in these matters of aggression, it can be presumed that they will move in an area where our preparations are least advanced. Circumstances may well make necessary the commitment of US combatant elements in future limited wars as they have done in the past. Certainly we must attempt, with all practicable means consistent with our position, to avoid being drawn needlessly into a limited war. But common prudence and a reasonable sense of history dictate that we recognize that our direct participation may be required in limited wars of the future.

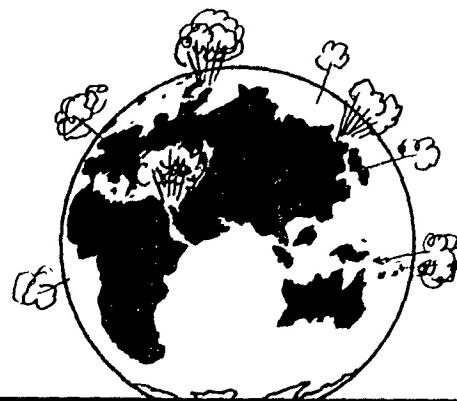
We must thus ensure that our national defense structure contains the elements to cope with limited wars. There is a view that “if we take care of the big ones, the little ones take care of themselves.” This is dangerous oversimplification. SAC, regardless of its virtue in its designed role of deterring and winning WW III was far from decisive in the limited war of Korea. Certainly no one

would argue that we should weaken or jeopardize the forces designed for general — total — war. Here we must have the best we can devise and afford. But this does not automatically provide for limited wars and it puts a premium on forces that are effective in either kind of war.

A look at some of the characteristics of limited wars and the forces required to wage them successfully gives a reasonable yardstick for assessing our capabilities in this field:

1) Limited wars may be nuclear or non-nuclear. Any general war can be assumed to involve nuclear weapons on a massive scale. But this is not true of limited war. It might well be that it would not be to the advantage of either side to employ nuclear weapons. The fact that nuclear weapons were not employed or that their use was greatly restricted might well be one of the “limitations” of a limited war. (One of the most difficult problems in limited war is keeping it “limited.” Nuclear weapons complicate this problem enormously and whether a two-sided nuclear war could be limited in any form is, at the very least, open to serious question.) In any event, forces for limited war must have the capability for combat under nuclear or non-nuclear conditions. A limited war may, and probably will, start with non-nuclear weapons. However, the threat of nuclear weapons will always be present. The combat elements which ignore this threat are inviting disaster.

2) The nation cannot afford two defense structures — one for general war and one for limited war. The structure must be designed to deter general war and to win it should deterrence fail. This structure must include the elements to cope successfully with limited war. These elements must, of course, have the capability of contributing to the general war effort.



3) Limited wars are fought primarily on the ground and, thus, ground forces are the primary elements in the force structure. Tactical air support is the second essential element. Included must be the capability for battlefield mobility by both helicopter and transport aircraft. Naval forces are required in many forms. The Navy must control the sea lines of communication, move the bulk of the ground elements and much of the air elements to the area of operations. In addition, the Navy is required for carrier air support, amphibious assault and shore-to-shore movement. In short, limited wars require balanced forces.

It should be noted that there is a theory held by many responsible people, that naval and air forces with nuclear weapons should be our principal contributions in limited war. This view holds that we must avoid involvement of ground forces at almost any cost. This is theory. It sounds good but it lacks substance and reality. There is no combat experience to support it and much to deny it. The weight of evidence supports the opinion that effective intervention in limited war means a balanced force built around an effective ground combatant element.

4) Successful prosecution of limited wars requires "ready forces." Mobilizing the necessary forces after the initiation of limited war means, at best, prolonging the conflict and, at worst, risking early defeat. Readiness is a virtue so widely recognized as to be a "truism." In the past our Services have given much "lip service" to this concept but insufficient positive attention. Forces for limited war must be ready in fact as well as in name. They cannot be merely a statistic in a mobilization plan. If the war is to remain limited and we are not to lose it, our forces must be ready to move immediately to the point of trouble.

5) In addition to the normal forms of land combat, limited wars may involve amphibious assault, airborne, or air-transported or other forms of special operations. Usually it is a war of movement covering relatively large areas. This indicates a requirement for highly skilled forces thoroughly trained for land combat and capable of independent operations by small units.

6) Readiness implies mobility. Ready forces on the West Coast are of little use for a limited war in Southeast Asia unless they can move quickly to the scene and in a manner which permits them to enter combat on arrival. The forces must be able to rapidly and efficiently employ both sea and air transport—and that transport must be available in reasonable quantities.

7) The maintenance of forces which can engage effectively in limited war coupled with a national will to use them where required should serve as a form of deterrent to any intended aggressor. Under some circumstances these forces might be deployed to the general area of trouble prior to the outbreak of hostilities. "Showing the flag"—or, more realistically, showing positive intent—has prevented the outbreak of hostilities in the past and may do so in the future.

Even this brief and incomplete listing is sufficient to clearly indicate a requirement of this nation for a "force in readiness." It should be a balanced force of both ground and air elements with appropriate naval support. It must be prepared for nuclear and non-nuclear war—both offensively and defensively. It must be a highly skilled, thoroughly professional force. It must have expert leadership and a fine edge of esprit de corps—since it can be expected to face unknown situations in unreconnoitered areas and since it may well be called on to fight "unpopular" wars. Of greatest importance is the requirement of readiness to move without reorganization or augmentation of personnel or materiel.

This force need not—and indeed should not be labeled a "limited war force," "special force" or any other trick name. It must be an organic element of basic national defense structure.

While the qualifications described here are by no means the exclusive property of the Marine Corps, it would be difficult to describe better the characteristics of the Fleet Marine Forces. Almost since its inception, the Marine Corps has served as a force in readiness for this nation. The "Fire Brigade" is part of the tradition of the Corps. Marines have served in combat for months and years in response to the nation's in-

terest in campaigns that were never titled as wars—limited or otherwise. Yet in the instances where the nation has engaged in struggle for survival—general war—the Marines fitted effectively into the overall national effort.

As elements of the Atlantic and Pacific Fleets, the Marine air-ground task forces are the ideal organizational forms for the conduct and control of limited wars. Where the national interests requires intervention in these conflicts, the Fleets, with their assigned Fleet Marine Forces, are the proper instruments of national policy. Most of the areas where limited wars are likely to start are accessible from the sea. Thus seapower in its full dimensions can be employed. Of all nations, the US alone is in a position to exploit the vast potential of seapower. In projecting this power from the sea onto the land, the Fleet Marine Forces will be critical elements.

This is not meant to imply that the Navy-Marine Corps elements can or should be assigned exclusive responsibility for limited wars. Nevertheless these are the forces which by mission, organization, experience and training are the ones best suited to initiate action in these conflicts.

There is much to support the belief that this is the proper modern-day role of the Marine Corps. A force in readiness prepared to move on a moment's notice to any spot on the globe required in the nation's interest. A force prepared for immediate intervention in limited war or to take its place in the overall effort of general war.

This is the opportunity for the modern Marine Corps. But this coveted role will not go to the Marine Corps simply because the Corps exists. The Corps must earn it; it must be alive and dynamic—a modern fighting arm, constantly moving forward, constantly evolving new techniques and new ideas. Pointing to Belleau Wood, Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima is not enough. These are pages of glorious history, but history will win no wars for the nation in 1957, 1960 or 1975.

For the Marine Corps this is both an opportunity and a challenge. In 182 years of proud history we have faced no greater opportunity—and no greater challenge.

USMC