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John David Lewis, *Nothing Less Than Victory: Decisive Wars and the Lessons of History*. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2010. Pp. x, 354. ISBN 978-0-691-13518-2.

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Russell F. Weigley concluded his most important work by claiming that “the history of usable combat may at last be reaching its end.”¹ He was writing in a time dominated by the superpowers’ nuclear standoff and the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Fourteen years later, he further judged that during the “age of battles” prior to Waterloo “war never possessed a satisfactory power of decision” based on the standard of prompt decision at an acceptable cost.²

The end of the Cold War has not dispelled such doubts about the efficacy of war. After the first Gulf War, John Keegan argued for abandoning the lesson—allegedly learned from Clausewitz—that decisive victory was possible via “violence pushed to its utmost bounds.”³ Victor Davis Hanson has identified the quest for decisive battle as a defining attribute of the “Western way of war,” but contends that Western militaries have become “so lethal that we have reached an impasse”⁴—the West’s adversaries now simply refuse to fight a conventional war. Some claim that hostile forces—for example, in Iraq and Afghanistan—have transitioned to “Fourth Generation Warfare,” based in part on guerrilla tactics, which avoids short, decisive conflicts.⁵ Finally, an extremely influential political philosophy, neoconservatism or “hard Wilsonianism,” has endorsed perpetual war to facilitate nation building as a key element of America’s mission as a world power.⁶

John David Lewis (Duke University), in *Nothing Less Than Victory*, rejects the conventional wisdom on both the possibility and the desirability of decisive victory through warfare.

This book presents six major wars in which a clear-cut victory did not lead to longer and bloodier war, but rather established the foundations of a long-term peace between former enemies. Each of these conflicts began with an act of military aggression. Each stagnated during years of carnage that ended when a powerful counteroffensive and an unambiguous victory reached deeply into the moral purposes behind the war, and forced one side to give up its cause and renounce the fight.... How and why these successes were achieved is the subject of this book (2).

Since Lewis has dealt with aspects of classical Greek political development and thought in two previous books, it is not surprising that four of the case studies in the present volume treat Greco-Roman warfare—choices he justifies by claiming the ancients provide critical lessons on “the basic issues behind every war” (8). He also provides a single negative example to illustrate what can happen when basic issues are ignored. The six wars that illustrate his central points are the Greco-Persian Wars, the Theban war against Sparta, the Second Punic War, Aurelian’s campaigns to prevent the break-up on the Roman Empire, Sherman’s Civil War campaigns, and the American defeat of Japan. The negative example is Britain’s appeasement of Nazi Germany.

1. *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 1977) 477.

2. *The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 1991) xii–xiii. He cites approvingly the similar conclusions of Walter Millis on the effects of the Napoleonic Wars: “War was beginning to lose its one virtue—its power of decision”—see *Arms and Men: A Study in American Military History* (1956; rpt. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers U Pr, 1984) 78.

3. *A History of Warfare* (NY: Vintage, 1994) 385.

4. *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (NY: Anchor, 2002) 98.

5. See, e.g., Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (St. Paul: Zenith, 2004).

6. See C. Bradley Thompson and Yaron Brook, *Neoconservatism: An Obituary for an Idea* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2010) 171–96.

Lewis concedes that his decisive victories “are in a certain sense anomalous in history” (8). He argues that three fundamental and interrelated factors brought them about. First and foremost, these wars were fought over profound moral issues at the core of their participants’ societies. They were, in short, the result of a deeper ideological struggle: “Both war and peace are the consequences of ideas—especially moral ideas—that can propel whole nations into bloody slaughter on behalf of a *Führer*, a tribe, or a deity, or into peaceful coexistence under governments that defend the rights and liberties of their citizens. The greatest value of the examples in this book is to show the importance of ideas—especially moral ideas—in matters of war and peace” (2–3). Lewis makes no bones about adjudicating the sharp moral differences between the opposing forces. One side in each case possesses the moral high ground and uses its advantage both to mobilize its own society and to demoralize the enemy.

The second requirement for decisive victory is to implement a strategic offensive based on an understanding of the moral issues at stake and the nature of both the enemy’s culture and one’s own. In discussing Scipio’s offensive against the Carthaginians, Lewis stresses his wise rejection of the Fabian strategy of delay and attrition in favor of targeting not the enemy’s military but his very will to wage war. Once Scipio brought the war to the Carthaginians’ doorstep, their determination to continue the struggle evaporated: “The collapse of Carthage into fear was the climax of the war; the decision to sue for peace was the admission of helplessness” (101). Lewis notes that Carthage never again broke the peace or reneged on its treaty obligations.

The third prerequisite for decisive victory is keeping ends and means connected. The essential criterion in assessing the moral status of combatants—especially on the battlefield—is their respective goals: “It is vital to evaluate the purposes of a war when evaluating both the means by which that purpose is being pursued, and the social support for those directing the war” (3). If a nation’s civil and military leaders lack an accurate vision of the ends they seek, then the appropriate strategy for decisive victory will elude even the party on the moral high ground.

To illustrate this point, Lewis compares George McClellan with William T. Sherman. He refers to McClellan as the Union’s *Cunctator* (Delayer), whose Fabian strategy led to bloody stalemate. Although an excellent organizer and, on rare occasions, a skilled battlefield tactician, McClellan lacked sufficient moral confidence in his cause to define and carry out a strategy that would yield final Union victory. He not only despised his commander-in-chief, but also harbored a low regard for the men he was leading and, by extension, their cause.⁷ Lewis cites McClellan’s equal hostility to “ultra and mischievous” Massachusetts and South Carolina: “A general who thinks that his own people are as bad as the enemy is in no position to put forth the demanding effort, in the face of indescribable slaughter, needed to force a victory” (147). McClellan’s lack of moral clarity undermined his campaigns.

Lewis shows that Sherman was cut from different cloth, not by focusing on his famous Marches, but by examining the moral force behind his ruthless strategy to destroy the Southern planter class. In looking at Sherman’s correspondence with John Bell Hood, Lewis discerns the elements that together made Sherman’s strategy so effective: properly assigning war guilt, developing an understanding of both one’s own society and the enemy’s, identifying the enemy’s vital center, and defining victory. Lewis sums up Sherman’s famous “War is cruelty” response to Confederate entreaties that he moderate his policies: “These familiar passages cut to the heart of Sherman’s attitude toward an enemy that had started a war that his command now charged him to end: he accepted no guilt for a war that was not of his making. This sense of rightness allowed him to prosecute the war to its conclusion quickly, with his force directed at the true source of southern power rather than merely at military positions dependent upon that power” (175).

Sherman’s aim in his march across Georgia and the Carolinas was to humiliate the planter class and destroy its property, thus extinguishing the aristocracy’s moral authority over southern society and reestablishing the national government’s legitimacy. After his army marched south from Atlanta, it did not fight

7. Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004) 182–87.

another battle until the war's very end in April 1865. His Western army's reputation, determination, and ability deterred the Confederates from trying to stop him.

In his chapter on the Roman Emperor Aurelian (r. 270–75), Lewis finds, even in a time of confusion and tumult, a perceived need for political legitimacy based on moral justification. Upon becoming emperor, Aurelian, facing a divided empire teetering on the edge, embarked on a series of whirlwind campaigns that brought stability within five years. Lewis asserts that a decline of reason led to theocracy: “For Aurelian, political authority, divine sanction, personal deification, and military victory were all perspectives on the same imperial project: the victory of a unified imperial power over the empire” (135). While Aurelian's victories based on the strategic offensive and the moral sanction of a syncretic religion could not stave off long-term Roman decline, he did end a period of anarchy and give Rome a new lease on life: “The collapse of the ideas needed to maintain a rational system of government was complete—all that was left was the force of an emperor-god” (136).

Lewis makes a complex moral argument for the need of the strategic offensive in order to achieve definitive, permanent victory. Each of his historical examples centers on weighty moral issues. In most cases, when the side of the just cause stopped short of the strategic offensive, a prolonged, sanguinary standoff resulted. Drawing on both his positive examples and the negative one of the Armistice and British appeasement, Lewis argues that the vanquished must openly acknowledge defeat and repudiate the ideology of aggression, while the victors must clearly establish and publically articulate their goals. He successfully shows that the decisive struggles examined in *Nothing Less than Victory* are exceptions in the long history of warfare that repay careful analysis and relate to our own time of seemingly endless war.