

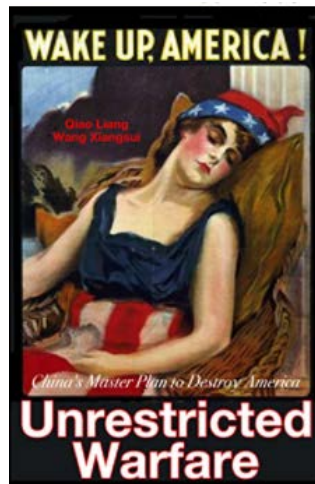


“Unrestricted Warfare” is Not China’s Master Plan

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Introduction

The book “Unrestricted Warfare” (UW), published in 1999 by People’s Liberation Army officers Qiao Liangⁱ and Wang Xiangsuiⁱⁱ has been thoroughly discussed and lauded by many in the West as an important document for understanding the Chinese strategic perspective. An article published in *War on the Rocks* went as far as to say the authors, “were about a decade and a half before their time.”¹ In many universities and other higher learning institutions excerpts from the book are assigned and studied. NewsMax Media, Medina University Press International and Natraj Publishers even added “China’s Master Plan to Destroy America” as a subtitle. Shadow Lawn Press’ 2017 publication of UW depicted a woman representing the U.S. sleeping with the words, “Wake Up, America! China’s Master Plan to Destroy America”. Overall, since UW’s publication in English, the book has been used and cited many times as an important work in understanding China’s military strategy.



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The narrative that UW represents an authoritative source that provides valuable insight the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) follows is extremely problematic. The book is unoriginal, not authoritative, both the authors themselves and examples from history contradict their thesis and much of the writing is designed to sound profound, but falls flat under closer examination. Moreover, the authors do not provide an applicable plan for a military to follow. While the book has certainly been popular and widely cited, this does not validate it. Understanding the PLA's strategic thinking is complicated and continues to evolveⁱⁱⁱ. A book written in the 90s does not hold the answers to China's "Master Plan".

Overview of UW

Just as the sum of "On War" cannot be expressed with "war is the continuation of politics by other means", UW cannot be summarized with a quote or two. With a full overview of the book the basic context of what UW actually contains and argues can be understood. Note much of the book is simply the authors' commentary on the history of warfare (particularly the Gulf War) and how it has changed rather than any type of plan to be implemented and followed. Additionally, much of UW's inspiration and even their commentary and critiques of the Gulf War, when examining the references in the footnotes, stems from U.S. military theorists and Department of Defense documents.

The book is broken up into two parts. Part one (chapters 1-4) titled "On New Warfare" focuses on how war has fundamentally changed. Part two (chapter 5-8) titled "New Methodology of Operations" emphasizes what new strategies and way of thinking must be adopted to achieve victory. In the introduction the authors make clear their core argument. The purpose of UW is to analyze and show how war has fundamentally changed and how future wars will be won. The authors summarize their thesis writing:

If we acknowledge that the new principles of war are no longer "using armed force to compel the enemy to submit to one's will," but rather are "using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one's interests." ²

In their assessment of the history of war, war was confined to the "military sphere", but now outcomes can be decided by, "political factors, economic factors, diplomatic factors, cultural factors, technological factors, or other nonmilitary factors." ³ The authors look at the history of war dating back thousands of years, from ancient Chinese history to the Gulf War. There are references to Alexander the Great, Napoleon, Schwarzkopf, Powell, Machiavelli, Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. Throughout history soldiers have had an exclusive monopoly on war⁴. Now (1999), the world has changed and war must fundamentally change as well from what it was for millennia.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Mattis' article, "So You Want to be a PLA Expert" does a great job giving an overview of requirements to understanding the PLA. <https://warontherocks.com/2015/06/so-you-want-to-be-a-pla-expert/>

Chapter 1 “The Weapons Revolution Which Invariably Comes First” focuses on the idea that technology changes war as capability and lethality change. Technology advancements occur first followed by changes in tactics. Most of the ideas and concepts of this chapter are taken from T.N. Dupuy’s “The Evolution of Weapons and Warfare” and “New Military Perspectives for the Next Century” by the Military Science Publishing House.

In Chapter 2, “The War God’s Face Has Become Indistinct” continues the discussion of how technology has made the battlefield less distinct. The authors write, “Technology is doing its utmost to extend the contemporary battlefield to a degree that is virtually infinite.”⁵ The authors ask the question, “Where is the battlefield?” and answer, “Everywhere”.⁶ The main ideas of this chapter seem to come from the book “War and Anti-War” by Alvin and Heidi Toffler. The UW authors cite from the book, “If the tools of warfare are no longer tanks and artillery, but rather computer viruses and microbots, then we can no longer say that nations are the only armed groups or that soldiers are the only ones in possession of the tools of war.”⁷

Chapter 3 “A Classic That Deviates from the Classics” builds on the ideas of the first two chapters examining the Gulf War, particularly Operation Desert Storm, as the new paradigm for war expanding the battlefield with the use of technology. They mention the role media now plays in war, the superiority of helicopters to tanks, and the beginning of “new alliance era”⁸. U.S. reports and a study on the Gulf War done by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) are cited throughout this chapter.

Chapter 4 “What do Americans Gain by Touching the Elephant?” continues the examination of the Gulf War with an analysis of the struggles the U.S. military faced in creating “joint campaigns” and “joint plans”⁹. Emphasis is placed on lessons the U.S. military learned from the conflict, including a breakdown by service. The authors also point out the over-reliance and tremendous spending on technology as a major weakness. Much of this chapter again utilizes DoD documents such as “Joint Vision 2010”.

Part Two “A Discussion of New Methods of Operation” begins by reiterating much of part one. National security is not “limited to the military aggression of hostile forces”¹⁰ as the “combination” of many factors has, “nearly increased the means of modern warfare to the infinite”¹¹ Chapter 5, titled “New Methodology of War Games” begins by stating, “Everything is changing.”¹² The “boundaries of the battlefield” have expanded with the “expansion of the scope and scale of non-military means and non-military personnel involved in warfare”.¹³ The authors go on to explain the United States is ill-prepared to handle the new expanded battlefield particularly in regards to nonmilitary war and non-state actors (such as terrorist organizations) because a lack of unified strategy or command structure. There is also an emphasis on “combining well”^{iv} one’s capabilities, citing throughout history “the winner is the one who combined well”.

Chapter 6, “Seeking Rules of Victory” expands on “combining well” by going into the idea that there are rules of victory to war. While the authors say the rules are “hidden” they place

^{iv} The also use the idea of “mixing a cocktail” throughout the chapter as a metaphor for “combining well”.

great emphasis on the golden ratio.^v They argue that in the military realm there are many examples of the golden ratio referencing ancient, modern, Chinese and foreign wars.

Chapter 7 “Ten Thousand Methods Combined” continues on the ideas of “rules of victory” and “combining well” from the previous chapters. The authors get at the heart of implementing UW writing, “first of all, to transcend ideology. Only secondarily does it mean, when taking action, to transcend limits and boundaries when necessary, when they can be transcended, and select the most appropriate means (including extreme means).”¹⁴ However, while extreme means are an option they point out that they should not be the default option. At the heart of UW is transcending limits (although they point out it does not mean there are “no limits”) and combining opportunities. In practice a nation must use, “combined action with supra-national organizations + trans-national organizations + non state organizations”¹⁵ to their own national interests. One nation alone is not very strong. They view the United States as being the best at using the international order to their advantage. They conclude by emphasizing UW is first, “a way of thinking, and only afterwards is it a method”.¹⁶ Theorist Zbigniew Brezinski and Alvin Toffler’s ideas are heavily referenced in this chapter.

The last chapter, “Essential Principles”, reemphasizes UW’s thesis that the nature of war has changed and there is “no longer a distinction between what is or is not the battlefield”.¹⁷ They list eight principles that they believe are connected with UW: omnidirectionality, synchrony, limited objectives, unlimited measures, asymmetry, minimal consumption, multidimensional coordination and adjustment and control of the entire process. Omnidirectionality refers to the use of a nation’s entire combat power to include the supra-national level. Multidimensional coordination and synchrony are very similar with the basic idea that all capabilities (military and non-military) should be coordinated and utilized simultaneously.^{vi} Limited objectives is connected with unlimited measures. Your goals should be limited and specific, but the means to achieve those goals should be unlimited in the way you think and act. Asymmetry is about exploiting an adversary’s weakness where they do not expect to be hit. Minimal consumption means use the least amount of resources to accomplish an objective. Finally, adjustment and control simply means war is dynamic and cannot be tied to one set of ideas or a predetermined plan to achieve victory.¹⁸

The conclusion reemphasizes the idea of the “borderless battlefield” in which war is not confined to the military sphere and has been impacted by globalization and technology. They write, “The boundaries between soldiers and non-soldiers have now been broken down, and the chasm between warfare and non-warfare nearly filled up.”¹⁹

^v The Golden Ratio (also known as the Golden Section, Golden Mean, Divine Proportion or Greek letter Phi) exists when a line is divided into two parts and the longer part (a) divided by the smaller part (b) is equal to the sum of (a) + (b) divided by (a), which both equal 1.618. The number appears in many areas such as nature, art, architecture and geometry.

^{vi} The authors write the Americans capabilities are the best in this regard.

UW is Not Authoritative

In the afterword of UW, the authors describe the reason they wrote the book. They write that they simply wanted to “concentrate together the concerns and thoughts each of us had over the past several decades and especially during the last ten years concerning military issues”.²⁰ The Gulf War in particular is cited as a major event; they wanted to provide their opinion not write a textbook or guide. At no time do the authors express their desire to create a plan or stratagem for Chinese leadership to follow. They were not commissioned by the military or government to write this book (there are many books available that are commissioned by the PLA). Moreover, the publisher they used, PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, is known for publishing military entertainment. While there is not one publisher that has sole command of what is authoritative out of the PLA, it would be extremely unlikely this particular publisher would produce something authoritative.

UW is reminiscent of a long form version of the “Military Forum”^{vii} section of the PLA Daily. However, it is important to note anything published in the PLA Daily has far more authority than the publisher of UW. Nothing in the “Military Forum” will be published without an extensive vetting process. In this section of the newspaper military personnel often write about different concerns and issues they believe are important. It is a space provided to get ideas and thoughts to generate dialogue, giving a glimpse into how at least some of the military are thinking. The “Military Forum” is far more useful for understanding China’s military thinking now than a two decades old book and should be prioritized over UW. UW does give interesting insights on such issues as cyber security, information dominance and U.S. overreliance on technology, but they are not original thoughts of the authors and have been well known by military strategists, academics and policy makers well before UW was published.^{viii}

Finally, it is true that UW is talked about in China in the present day, but it seems more a result of just how much the United States and the West as a whole have covered the book. China has taken notice of the vast number of publication companies that have published the book and numerous articles and academics that have praised the book as “China’s Master Plan”. This has given the authors a certain level of notoriety, but popularity does not equate to authoritativeness.

UW Contradicts Own Thesis

UW’s lack of authoritativeness is less important to discerning if UW is in fact a “master plan” than analyzing if the authors core argument is both sound and applicable. By the authors own words in Chapter 6 they refute their own thesis writing:

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^{viii} The latest version of “Science of Military Strategy” (战略学) is a much better source for understating China’s strategic intentions. The document, unlike UW, acts as a core textbook for senior PLA officers on how wars should be planned and conducted at the strategic level. A translation can be found here: <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2913216/in-their-own-words-2020-science-of-military-strategy/>

In fact, even in ancient times, war was not always confined to one single sphere. Lian Xiangru's diplomatic battle of "returning the jade in an undamaged condition to Zhao" and the virtual war conducted by Mo Zi and Gongshu Ban were classical examples of winning or precluding a war with nonmilitary actions.²¹

The whole idea of the book is that war is fundamentally changed and become "unrestricted", going beyond the sphere of the military. However, the authors correctly point out this is rarely if ever the case with this example in ancient times.

The book also quotes and mentions the ideas of Sun Tzu who observed nearly two millennia ago how to defeat an adversary without fighting, or in other words use all means (not just military) to win a conflict. They even say, "human beings will use every conceivable means to achieve their goals".²² Essentially the authors are rehashing an old discovery, likely not even first made by Sun Tzu and selling it as something new in modern warfare.

While the authors may want to indicate war is fundamentally changed in their thesis they make a solid argument as to why war has simply evolved as technology improved as they trace major historical changes from smokeless gunpowder to cyber-attacks. However, the authors never make a case the nature of war itself has changed. Technology simply enhances capability and lethality, but the basic idea of warfare stays the same whether you are throwing rocks or firing missiles.

UW in History

Aside from the example of UW in ancient China provided by the authors, versions of UW can be seen throughout history. History has shown that trying to limit war to the military sphere would only greatly hinder a nation's ability to win war. If there are available means to win a war they are likely to be used baring certain moral standards in some cases. In the book "World History: Since 1500: The Age of Global Integration" the authors discuss powers from the Mongols to the Nazis strategy to win wars by organizing all available resources, including military personnel, non-combatant workers, intelligence, transport, money and provisions.²³ War has really never been "restricted" to the battlefield or the "military sphere", but has been pervasive in all aspects of society.

The Cold War is mentioned about a dozen times in UW, but only in the context of what the world was like after its conclusion. In a now declassified document titled, "The Inauguration of Organized Political Warfare" by George F. Kennan dated April 30, 1948 on the very first page it defines political warfare as, "the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives".²⁴ This sounds suspiciously like the nebulous definition the authors provide for unrestricted warfare. Interestingly enough the 1948 document cites Clausewitz, who the UW authors also cite heavily, as a major influence and the application of his ideas during times of peace.

In another example during the Byzantine Empire diplomats introduced three step diplomacy, "foster rivalry among the barbarians, secure the friendship of frontier tribes through flattery and bribes, and convert as many heathens as possible to Christianity".²⁵ The basic idea the diplomats understood is that force alone would not keep the "barbarians" at bay, but other methods were necessary. From ancient China to modern day, diplomacy, whether through foreign aid, trade, loans or other means, is used to "win wars" without the need of the military sphere. While the authors view UW as a paradigm shift, as they state in their thesis, where there

is no longer a need to use armed forces to compel the enemy to submit to one's will, this has been a common strategy for millennia.

Perhaps the authors were trying to be a modern day Clausewitz or Sun Tzu, but failed to make a truly unique contribution. As history has shown the basic nature of war has not changed. Nations and groups will use what is available to them to create a winning strategy. While some of what UW wrote may sound profound, the reality is the opposite.

Pseudo Profound

In the academic journal *Judgement and Decision Making* there is an excellent article titled, "On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit". The article defines pseudo profound bullshit as, "seemingly impressive assertions that are presented as true and meaningful, but are actually vacuous".²⁶ Much of UW's only original contributions and most defining features by the authors fall into this category. A great example (of which there are far too many to cite) the authors write:

Six multiplied by 6 is 36. There are stratagems in numbers, and there are numbers in stratagems. The yin and the yang are coordinated. Opportunities are there. It is not possible to manufacture opportunities.

The authors have a great affection towards numbers in the book, particularly the golden ratio, writing, "By casually reading pages of the history of war, you will be certain to be silently amazed by the fact that 1.618, like a golden belt, can be faintly seen in ancient, modern, Chinese, and foreign war"²⁷ There is a large portion of the book referencing the golden ratio and how it is basically in all aspects of war, but not well explained or how it relates to UW. On the Gulf War they write:

When the Desert Sword was taken out of its shield, Iraqi forces had lost 38 percent of their 4,280 tanks, 32 percent of their 2,280 armored vehicles, and 47 percent of their 3,100 artillery pieces, and only around 60 percent of the strength of the Iraqi forces was left. Through such cruel data, the mysterious light of 1.618 began to flicker again in the early morning of 24 January 1991. The Desert Storm ground war ended 100 hours later.²⁸

There is also an incredible amount of ink spilled on how to "combine well" and the "rules of victory". The authors write:

Combine all of the resources of war which he has at his disposal and use them as means to prosecute the war. And even this will not be enough. He must combine them according to the demands of the rules of victory.²⁹

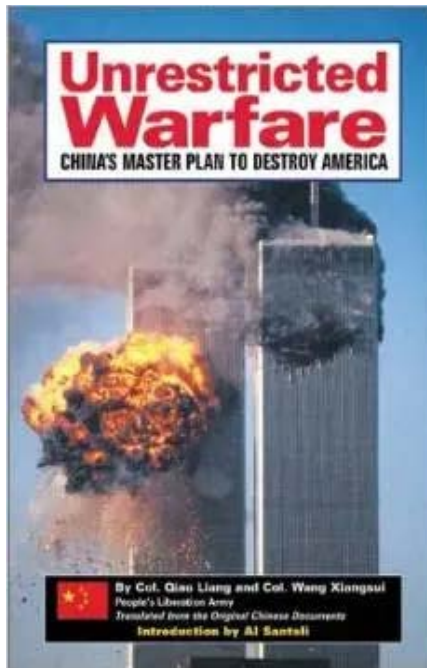
The basic idea is you should use what you have to win war and do not use just one element, but all of them. The authors like to use a "cocktail" as a metaphor to explain their message, writing, "Whoever is able to mix a tasty and unique cocktail for the future banquet of war will ultimately be able to wear the laurels of success on his own head."³⁰ The authors continue on this topic bringing back the use of numbers writing, "One plus one is greater than one".³¹ For example, using only the air force would not be as effective as combining other aspects of the military such as the army and the navy. Again nothing new nor useful.

Finally, there is continuous writing on the “rules of victory” which the authors use all of Chapter 6 and into Chapter 7 to discuss. However, no set rules are actually established, just that there are rules. As the authors write, “rules are hidden in the waves of the military practice of mankind”. The authors go on to write that there are no exact formulas (even though they love the golden ratio), but those that go against the rules will fail. There is nothing to apply or follow here. This is not a plan or even a useful line of reasoning to gain insight into the ideas or strategies China’s military deems important.

So, why did UW get so popular?

Four major factors likely contributed to UW’s popularity: availability, timing, branding and confirmation bias. As one of very few documents in the early 2000s on Chinese military thinking translated to English, sheer accessibility certainly played a role in its rise to prominence. What likely is the greater factor is timing and branding. UW mentions Osama Bin Laden over a dozen times and talks about the effectiveness of terrorism, which is given as an example of conducting war without restrictions. The authors write, “The advent of Bin Laden-style terrorism has deepened the impression that a national force, no matter how powerful, will find it difficult to gain the upper hand in a game that has no rules.”³² It makes sense that after the September 11 terrorist attack people would be interested in this document.

In terms of branding, NewsMax while titling it “China’s Master Plan to Destroy America” also made the cover of the World Trade Center being destroyed. This branding connected what every American was most deeply concerned about at the time. From their 2002 edition of the book they wrote the description, “As incredible as it may be to believe, three years before the September 11 bombing of the World Trade Center—a Chinese military manual called Unrestricted Warfare touted such an attack—suggesting it would be difficult for the U.S. military to cope with.” While UW does talk about terrorism it by no means mentions using commercial planes as weapons or that terrorism is a good strategy for China to utilize. The authors very clearly state that UW does not mean that the most extreme means will be or should be used in warfare.³³ The description goes on to tout China’s continued economic connections with both Taliban and al-Qaeda. With access and appeal to Americans' emotions in 2002 UW was bound to be widely read.



Confirmation bias also plays a role in the popularity of this book. The authors quote Sun Tzu throughout the book and use the classic quote of, “the other army is subdued without fighting.”³⁴ “The Art of War” is very well known in the West, any reference that China will use similar tactics just falls under general assumptions about China. Many of the stereotypical expectations of Chinese military strategy are met in the book involving indirect conflict and deception. Moreover, the simple fact that the authors explicitly state that nations should engage in conflict in all domains certainly has an appeal rather than the opaque language typically used by official channels in China.

UW continues to be popular, likely for the same reasons mentioned above. It is very accessible, with free pdfs available online and continued branding as a “master plan”. With China notoriously difficult to understand, this book may appear like a secret document giving a true insight into the mind of China.

Conclusion

As a whole UW is a dated book providing no unique or new insights that very clearly contradicts its own thesis. Boiling UW down to its core, the basic message is nations should not be “restricted” when thinking about how to win wars and wars are not the sole responsibility of the military. This is not unique to modern warfare (as even the authors point out), nor useful information in any meaningful way. UW is defined in such a nebulous manner that almost everything could be considered UW such as the battlefield is “everywhere” and “everything is changing”. UW does provide valid advice, such as a nation should “combine well” its capabilities, be open to different ideas and keep costs to a minimum, but basic pragmatism does not make a military strategy. If China is indeed calculating their strategy based on the golden ratio and searching for the rules “hidden in the waves of the military practice of mankind” the

U.S. would be in a much better strategic position. There is not an intuitive way to actually apply these ideas.

The CCP leadership is not incompetent and the U.S. military and policy makers cannot gamble that China's strategy is based on UW. UW is not a textbook or a "master plan" to lead China in conflict against the U.S. and never was intended to be. Understanding China and its strategic intentions is difficult. While it would be nice for China to give us all the answers in an easily accessible pdf translated into English, with UW it is simply not the case.

Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of the Air University, the Department of the Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other U.S. government agency. Cleared for public release: distribution unlimited.

Endnotes

¹David Barno and Nora Benshahel. "A New Generation of Unrestricted Warfare," War on the Rocks. April 19, 2016. <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/a-new-generation-of-unrestricted-warfare/>.

²Qiao, Liang ; Wang, Xiangsui. Unrestricted Warfare (Beijing: PLA Literature and Arts Publishing House, 1999), 7.

³ Unrestricted Warfare, 192.

⁴ Unrestricted Warfare, 48.

⁵ Unrestricted Warfare, 41.

⁶ Unrestricted Warfare, 43.

⁷ Unrestricted Warfare, 59.

⁸ Unrestricted Warfare, 65.

⁹ Unrestricted Warfare, 104.

¹⁰ Unrestricted Warfare, 118.

¹¹ Unrestricted Warfare, 120.

¹² Unrestricted Warfare, 125.

¹³ Unrestricted Warfare, 125.

¹⁴ Unrestricted Warfare, 181.

¹⁵ Unrestricted Warfare, 188.

¹⁶ Unrestricted Warfare, 201.

¹⁷ Unrestricted Warfare, 207.

¹⁸ Unrestricted Warfare, 216.

¹⁹ Unrestricted Warfare, 223.

²⁰ Unrestricted Warfare, 227.

²¹ Unrestricted Warfare, 169.

²² Unrestricted Warfare, 49.

²³ Janice J. Terry, James P. Holoka, Jim Holoka, George H. Cassar, Richard D. Goff (2011). "World History: Since 1500: The Age of Global Integration". Cengage Learning. p. 717.

²⁴ Kennan, George. "The Inauguration of Political Warfare [Redacted Version]. " Wilson Center Digital Archive. April 30, 1948.

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²⁶Gordon Pennycook et al. "On the reception and detection of pseudo-profound bullshit." Judgment and Decision Making, Vol. 10, No. 6 (2015): 549-563. <http://journal.sjdm.org/15/15923a/jdm15923a.pdf>

²⁷ Unrestricted Warfare, 155.

²⁸ Unrestricted Warfare, 158.

²⁹ Unrestricted Warfare, 182.

³⁰ Unrestricted Warfare, 142.

³¹ Unrestricted Warfare, 143.

³² Unrestricted Warfare, 54.

³³ Unrestricted Warfare, 181.

³⁴ Unrestricted Warfare, 147.