

[Carignan on Pokrant, 'New Principles of War: Enduring Truths with Timeless Examples'](#)

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Marvin Pokrant. *New Principles of War: Enduring Truths with Timeless Examples*. Lincoln: Potomac Books, An imprint of the University of Nebraska Press, 2021. 376 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-64012-222-2.

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In *New Principles of War*, Marvin Pokrant argues that the principles of war expressed in US and British military doctrine are flawed and proposes replacing, removing, or amending them in ways that better help commanders align their efforts to succeed in warfare. Pokrant briefly surveys the principles of war from early history to the present and then takes on current principles one by one, using history to pick them apart and offering alternatives that better align with “what works” in war. For Pokrant, a useful “principle” is one which “distills enduring lessons of military history to provide practical guidance about fundamental elements of warfare that often determine the difference between victory and defeat” (p. 285). Pokrant thus takes particular aim at current principles that may be transitory, are so obvious they need not be stated, or are not important enough to effect victory or defeat.

Each chapter of Pokrant’s analysis provides thought-provoking and useful insight, particularly considering how well the claims hold up in the light of the Russia-Ukraine war of 2022. Pokrant skewers the useless: does one truly need dueling principles of “economy of force” and “security” when they combine to tell the commander to use the appropriate amount of resources to accomplish the mission (pp. 232-236)? He validates the accurate (the principle of “objective” remains for Pokrant and only grows in importance given how essential it is for a military campaign’s success or failure), and he analyzes aptly the areas where current doctrine can lead commanders astray.

Pokrant is most successful in pointing out the glaring flaws with the principles of mass, offensive, and unity of command. For example, doctrine states the commander must mass combat power at the decisive time and place, but the claim is tautological. For many battles, the decisive time and place is the point where the commander chooses to amass and deploy combat power! The principle of the offensive also faces Pokrant’s criticism, as one need not be an expert historian to reflect on how an unthinking commitment to offensive operations can result in strategic failure (p. 110). Rather, Pokrant proposes “sustained initiative” as a better principle, emphasizing the advantage of forcing the enemy to react to one’s own activity instead of passively accepting the conditions of warfare as static or reacting purely to enemy activity; the enemy poses less danger if it is constantly reacting to one’s own actions (p. 118). Pokrant notes correctly that warfare oscillates between giving relative advantage to defenders and attackers as the character of war changes (pp. 108-110), and in a future conflict between the United States and China, the anti-access/area-denial investments of the current

era make prosecuting offensive operations more difficult than in previous wars. “Offensive” in the context of a war over Taiwan could be a recipe for disaster, but “initiative” is something any US commander could seek to impose on an adversary. Finally, Pokrant notes that “unity of command” needs an update: the Air Force, Navy, and Marines all espouse unity of command at different command *levels*, so all are adhering to the principle even though the results of that adherence are quite dissimilar (pp. 131-33). For Pokrant, unity of effort is the better option, allowing for greater combined arms success when paired with interoperability, combined unit training, and lower-level initiative. This discussion alone has value for US commanders who may face conflict with China while leading joint and allied forces in a combat environment of degraded communication with subordinate and partner units.

Any historical analysis of the principles of war must strike a balance between depth and breadth, and Pokrant explicitly aims for breadth. Ultimately, the effort is extremely successful; while one can quibble about the lessons to be learned from a particular example, the conclusions Pokrant reaches are sound. For example, the lesson of Pickett’s charge may not be only that current military doctrine is flawed (p. xvii) but also that objective remains an essential principle for all levels of military operations. The Confederates’ Gettysburg campaign objective was not as clear as Pokrant summarizes here, but applying Pokrant’s revised principles of war to the Gettysburg campaign shows how a sequence of prior failures put Pickett in the position to make the charge in the first place. Without relatively aimless maneuver by Confederate cavalry, disunity of effort (though not command) leading Heth’s men to bring on a general engagement before the Confederates could mass, and a poor choice of objective (not just a Southern victory on Northern soil, but *without accepting the possibility of withdrawing once battle began*), Pickett would never have been in a position to lead such a catastrophic attack.

Pokrant’s *New Principles of War* meets his stated objective of providing relevant, practical advice for commanders arranging operations in future wars that will require operational art and a historically informed mind. If Clausewitz and Gray are masters but in some cases too general for practicing commanders, Pokrant’s application here is an important next analytical step. With joint doctrine due for an update to align with the current phase of great power competition, doctrine writers in Western militaries should take note.

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