Reviews

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Quagmire in Civil War

Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl

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Reviewed by Sascha Dov Bachmann

Our understanding of civil war is shot through with the spectre of quagmire, a situation that traps belligerents, compounding and entrenching war’s dangers.¹

This important work by Schulhofer-Wohl provides an authoritative analysis of the origins and application of the empirical concept of ‘quagmire’ in modern civil war.

Schulhofer-Wahl defines ‘quagmire’ as a strategic situation in a civil war context where foreign states and internal warring parties interact and at least one belligerent faces a strategic dilemma: where ‘continuing to fight costs more than the expected benefits’ but also where withdrawal ‘will increase rather than avert those net costs’. Quagmire as a strategic challenge and form of entrapment is ‘not found but man-made’ by political and military decision-makers.

Modern history is rich with examples of conflicts where a military force has become bogged down in a costly but eventual unwinnable war. Vietnam, the USSR war in Afghanistan, Syria and the US and its allies war in Afghanistan are examples that come to mind: all have been conflicts where both winning and withdrawing were difficult, even impossible, and that led to political and strategic dilemmas which were hard to navigate.

In the first two chapters, the author provides his introduction to the subject and provides a conceptual framework for quagmire as a concept of asymmetric conflict before turning to his main case study, the Lebanese Civil War of 1975 to 1990, which he uses to examine the theory’s application, manifestations in the conflict and mechanisms (chapters 3 and 4). He then turns to other civil wars between 1944 and 2006 to identify quagmire scenarios and applications; thus Lebanon, Chad and Yemen provide comparative case studies for analysing the evidence of the existence of quagmire in the civil wars. The author’s analysis of civil wars in a comparative and actor-focused approach draws from his extensive knowledge on the subject of civil wars in the Middle East from a comparative, even empirical, angle.

The author’s work is the culmination of his core research projects on the ‘study the interaction between civil war belligerents at three levels of analysis:

[Q]uagmire as the macro-level result of the interaction between the warring parties; warfighting choices, focusing on alliance behavior and the operational goals of fighting, both meso-level behaviors; and, at the micro-level, the behavioral determinants of individual actions in situations of group conflict.2

The author’s empirical work on the quagmire notion is grounded in solid formal analysis using various civil war case studies in the empirical application of his evolving concept. One of the strong points of the book is the application to concrete case studies of Schulhofer-Wohl’s empirical formulation of mechanisms, probabilities, interactions of actors, interests and costs in civil wars worldwide from 1944 to 2006 as a multi-case study reflecting on the subject from a multitude of facts, considerations, strategic and tactical circumstances and conditions.3 This chapter (chapter 5) is for me the highlight and could have perhaps been expanded on in a subsequent chapter. In my opinion, the overt focus on the Lebanese Civil War may limit the overall impact the book could have in terms of military and strategic studies. If the analysis were to be expanded and applied to other conflict scenarios outside the nexus of civil war (but still within the asymmetric conflict parameter) it would qualify as one of the seminal books on the strategic risk and dilemma of quagmire in the wider strategic and war studies context: both 20th century conflict and now.

Quagmire serves as a conceptual framework, even development tool for critical military case analysis and definition for a ‘catch 22’ risk in foreign policy, national security and international affairs that should affect our decision-making process in respect to operations. Its lessons can also be applied to current challenges in the context of great power competition and its manifestations in hybrid, grey zone and unrestricted warfare. Strategic entrapment, for example, can be witnessed in the current Chinese–United States ‘below the threshold’ rift, which has various strategic, economic and diplomatic consequences for Australia. Using quagmire as both consequence and a strategic choice by policymakers and strategists alike allows us to look at the strategic interactions among the players and do a cost–benefit assessment when defining the next strategic positioning.

3 Schulhofer-Wohl, Quagmire, pp 134–175, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108762485.005
This book has been written for both the academic and the professional to identify, understand and perhaps mitigate the risk of quagmire in current and future civil war and other asymmetric war scenarios. *Quagmire in Civil War* serves (or should serve) as a warning to policymakers and military strategists alike.

Schulhofer-Wohl’s work advances scholarship on two key questions around one of the most devastating types of conflict in terms of human and political costs. Firstly, why do some civil wars turn into quagmires? And secondly, what lessons can we – as strategists, policymakers, academics and flagship officers – learn from this dilemma in order to avoid being once again dragged into a strategic quagmire?

The major contribution of Schulhofer-Wohl’s work lies in the empirical understanding it provides and the application of quagmire as a theory of defining and identifying a state of strategic entrapment that binds both foreign backers and domestic belligerents, ‘bogging’ them down in an unwinnable conflict. This strategic dilemma ties neatly into the game theory applicable to modern conflict and closes a void in literature regarding ‘how political-military organizations fighting civil wars make decisions resulting in quagmire’. Practitioners and operators considering today’s great power competition and grey-zone conflict should give this book a second look. The asymmetry of civil war and its potential for strategic entrapment might very well provide lessons to be learned regarding the costs and benefits of current and future below the threshold conflicts.