



**Sean McFate, *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder*. New York, NY: William Morrow, 2019.**

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Three words characterize the modern way of war in the 21st century: “Adapt or die.” Modern warfare thrives on an exceedingly tenuous, lethal, and politically complex global landscape and calls for a new set of rules. So how does a state, or even non-state, actor now achieve victory in this newly established type of war? In *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder*, author Sean McFate skillfully addresses how to achieve success in modern warfare, thereby strengthening an actor’s regional and global salience. McFate, a former US Army officer and private military contractor, and currently a professor of strategy at the National Defense University and Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service, illustrates how to think about modern warfare

by marrying personal experience, historical examples, and the application of hybrid tactics. After establishing this definition, he subsequently, chapter by chapter, introduces ten rules which meet the demands of both present and future warfare. As such, this is an insightful book for the strategically invested, as it challenges what Western powers—the United States and its NATO allies—believe to be the status quo and what must be done to maintain relevance in current and future conflicts.

McFate first provides context for the ten rules with a declaration that the Western approach to war remains wrongfully stuck in the past despite a substantial transformation in the nature of warfare over the past 70 years. Thus, in an exploration of the West versus the world, McFate drives home the necessity for the West, particularly the United States, to apply his ten rules or forfeit its influence as a global hegemonic power. McFate asserts that conflicts fought between nation-states engaging in a standard form of warfare, such as in World War II or the Korean War, are important to study, but do not define the modern way of war. McFate contends that national armies, expensive weapons developed in support of a new age Revolution in Military Affairs, or clearly established battlefields no longer define the current state of warfare. Instead, belligerents remain focused on dominating the information space or maintaining physical influence through persistent small-scale conflicts that are fought by mercenaries, proxy militias, irregular forces, or a combination of the sorts.

Before exploring McFate's ten rules, it is worth noting that he believes the liberal order is failing, as there is no longer a definitive line between war and peace—a condition McFate characterizes as “durable disorder.” Consequently, modern conflict lies somewhere in the middle, as war continues to prevail as the norm rather than the exception, as in much of the Middle East and Africa, significant portions of Asia and Latin America, and even in regions of Eastern Europe. McFate believes the only way to deal with the durable disorder is to study how to operate within its confines and adjust according to his defined rules. The dominant theme of *The New Rules of War* is how to challenge, and ultimately defeat, those already succeeding in this arena—Russia, China, Iran, terrorist organizations, and drug cartels. To do this, actors must find ways to beat them at their own game, and McFate's rules are a good starting point.

McFate's ten rules rely heavily on people, finances, and an array of influencers—mercenaries, the “Deep State,” proxies, foreign legions, and new elites—as well as wars

unconstrained by physical borders, and the budding importance of information operations. McFate's first two rules, "Conventional War is Dead" and "Technology Will Not Save Us," highlight an evolving type of warfare, one in which states continue to move away from nuclear and large-scale wars due to mutual deterrence and super-power escalation. McFate asserts that those who live by technology will die by it, too; thus, it is vital to invest in people, not in machines or platforms. Therefore, he emphasizes a proliferation and increased salience of peripheral, low conflict, and unconventional wars fought by elements like Special Operations Forces to achieve objectives without upsetting the balance of power. McFate's emphasis on people is important; however, conventional forces and assets, including improved carrier strike groups and fighter jets, are necessary for sustained deterrence and multi-domain operations.

McFate's third rule, "There Is No Such Thing as War or Peace—Both Coexist, Always," implies modern warfare operates where the lines between war and peace are perpetually blurred. As a result, the belligerent with the best troops, most training, more advanced technology, and a surplus of resources does not always win. To succeed in this type of environment, McFate maintains an organization must clearly define its strategy, which 1) is not restricted to war, 2) is dynamic and flexible, 3) harnesses all elements of national power, 4) can be offensive and defensive, and 5) endures over a long time. It is difficult to argue against the idea that an organization's success hinges on its ability to form and, as necessary, adapt a strategy based on emerging threats, the operational environment, political landscape, and organizational changes.

Foreign Legions and Information Operations serve as the respective nucleus of rules four and five, "Hearts and Minds Do Not Matter" and "The Best Weapons Do Not Fire Bullets." The premise of rule four is simple: state actors should strongly consider establishing Foreign Legions in regions where a persistent presence is critical to achieving strategic objectives, especially when it is necessary to counter an adversary's direct and indirect actions. Moreover, in today's digital age, information can be disseminated rapidly and widely. Information can easily be weaponized, thus, making rule five much more prominent. The tactic of gaining influence by weaponizing information remains challenging for Western powers to combat. As a result, McFate

correctly asserts that shaping people's perception of reality is more powerful and dangerous than conventional military means.

As a former private military contractor, McFate's rule six, "Mercenaries Will Return," seems right at home in his list of rules. Rules seven, eight, and nine complement rule six, as they focus on new types of influencers—the "Deep State," proxies, mega-churches, cartels, regional powers, media, and new elites—which, in his estimation, will redefine the tactical, operational, and most importantly, strategic aspects that give war its character. McFate categorizes the rules as "New Types of World Powers Will Rule," "There Will Be Wars without States," and "Shadow Wars Will Dominate." His use of future tense indicates that rules six through nine serve as predictors of entities that will successfully challenge states and their rules-based order. Ultimately, the takeaway is that war remains war, albeit without clear diplomatic, informational, military, or economic boundaries.

McFate's final rule, "Victory is Fungible," serves as an antithesis to the age-old military adage that the more powerful and technologically advanced military force will emerge victorious. To truly defeat an adversary, McFate emphasizes the importance of understanding what sparked the conflict in the first place, and said adversary's strategy and objectives. If these factors are not clearly understood, it may still be possible to degrade an organization's capability; however, defeat is highly unlikely to be the result.

McFate's argument necessitates an adjusted consideration of modern warfare, a dispersed reality with blurred lines, moving us away from a technological and conventional monopoly. McFate's rules are not the keys to success in solving every strategic situation, but instead, serve as necessary assumptions or jumping-off points for the type of critical thinking and actions required to attain victory in modern warfare. For that reason, Sean McFate's *The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder* is an excellent book for company and field grade military officers interested in exploring a range of innovative means to frame and address current and future foreign policy and national security strategy.

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