

# Book Review: Useful Enemies: when waging wars is more important than winning them

Tadesse Biru Kersmo

Keywords: Useful Enemies, New War, Ethiopia

Citation: Kersmo, T. B. (2021). Book Review: Useful Enemies: when waging wars is more important than winning them. Academia Letters, Article 2403.

<https://doi.org/10.20935/AL2403>

There is conventional wisdom that wars are waged to be won (UN Official Record, 1976); and that “victory is the outcome preferred by most actors” (Wallensteen, 2019:16). This book challenges these assertions.

According to Keen, “there are great many [wars] where winning” is not an important objective (p.235). Some actors may not want to end certain types of wars even when they have the necessary military capacity to achieve a decisive victory over their rival(s). These actors consciously drag the wars to further their hidden economic, political, or psychological goals (p.235). Some of the contemporary civil wars and “war on terrorism” may fall into such categories of wars. This may explain why these wars are fought for too long and cost too many lives that defy any “rational” military explanation.

The actors who may want a war to continue may come from all sides of the war; they can be warlords, leaders of “liberation” fronts, government officials, groups from neighbouring countries, business organisations, peacekeepers, representatives of Western countries, and aid workers; together, they form a “war system” (p.235). These actors may illicitly collude to benefit from the war (p.3, 13, 145).

The author analyses specific wars to support his claims. He shows how the wars in Sierra Leon, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Colombia were used to lubricate the subterranean trade on diamond, oil, gold, cacao, or cocaine (chapter 1). The book documents that “violence has been strongly concentrated in resource-rich zones” (p.27).

The war in Afghanistan, on the other hand, lingers partly due to ideological agendas that are not mentioned in official statements. This can explain why the Taliban still exists despite its declared defeat in the year 2001 (p.64). The author argues that “Western intervention has provided another major ‘boon’ for the Taliban” (p.69) fuelling the Afghan’s war economy. This hidden agenda has undermined “attempts to build a modern, legitimate and responsive state” (p. 69) in Afghanistan.

In Yugoslavia, the real cause of the war has not been a demand for self-rule, as it has been officially declared by the warring factions; rather, it was the need to exact on ethnic hatred. That is why “those who refused to hate” were the ones to be targeted first (p.103).

Yugoslavia is not the only country in this case, in Kenya and Uganda, for example, the political elite has been successful in presenting “ethnic faultlines as natural and inevitable” (p.115). Introducing “a reviled enemy (whether external or internal) and a ‘state of emergency’” (p.115) are common tools used by authoritarian regimes across the world to use war to further their own hidden agenda.

The author argues “war on terror” has been used as an excuse by authoritarian regimes to quash opposition. During the reign of Meles Zenawi’s premiership, the Ethiopian authoritarian government managed to secure the multifaceted support of the USA, UK, and other Western governments by disguising itself as a dependable partner in the “war on terror”. It “has attracted huge aid resources from the West” and has used a great amount of it “to deepen the repression on its own people” (p.125 -126). The author notes that “poorly directed aid fed into war economies” (page 70) have encouraged “abusive rebel groups in Nicaragua, Angola, Mozambique and elsewhere” (p. 118) during the Cold war and after.

In chapter 9, the author discussed the role “shame” plays as a psychological driving factor of wars. He argues that “avoidance of shame” has been what fighters sought to achieve rather than simply winning the war (p195). The book explains that shame impacts wars in four different ways: (1) violence offer an immediate solution to the deep-seated powerlessness and injustice; thus fighters use violence as an easy cover for their weaknesses (2) shame can be manipulated in various ways; for example, a guerrilla group can use the community’s collective shame to instigate anger and facilitate recruitment, financial and other supports; (3) when fighters commit an atrocious crime, they will face condemnation and criticism, the fighters will try to overcome this sense of shame by committing even more appalling crimes than the previous ones, and (4) shame fuels violence since the victim will want to revenge; thus a spiral of shame-violence set in motion (chapter 9). Both material and spiritual deprivation exacerbate the shame-violence spiral.

## **Reviewer’s reflection**

The idea that most wars in developing countries are fought for hidden interests, and that a good number of them are proxy wars between much mightier forces have been around in public discussion and conspiracy theories. However, for this reviewer, Keen’s “Useful Enemies: When waging wars is more important than winning them” is the first book to systematically present the common wisdom and support it with evidence. Graham Hancock (1991) argues that approximately 60 billion USD annual aid budget has been misused due to grand and petty corruption, inefficiency and ineffectiveness, and misguided policies. Hancock has observed, that “the money of the international development agencies is enough to enforce acceptance of any scheme” (p.150). When Keen’s argument that some contemporary wars are not fought to be won is added to Hancock’s argument that billions of aid money have been embezzled by colluded agents, one cannot help himself from being terrified by the fate of the developing world.

The major strength of Keen's book lies in its ability to explain the disturbing facts of wars Keldor (2012) refers to as "New Wars"; it explains concepts like "wars within wars" (p.117) and "war system" (p.235). However, the book does not offer any solutions. Readers are likely to be thrown into melancholic depression.

## References

Hancock, G. (1992) *Lords of Poverty: The freewheeling lifestyles, Power, Prestige, and Corruption of the multibillion dollar aid business*. Octopus Publishing Group.

Kaldor, Mary. (2012). *New and Old Wars*. Third edition Polity Press

Keen, D. (2012) *Useful Enemies: When Waging Wars Is More Important than Winning*. Yale University Press

UN Official Record (1976) 'Verbatim Record of the 36th UN General Assembly Meeting.' Wednesday, 17 November 1976 Available at:<https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/A/C.1/31/PV.36> (Accessed: 31 October 2019)

Wellensteen, P. (2019) *Understanding Conflict Resolution*. Fifth Edition, SAGE publications Ltd