



SIR LAWRENCE FREEDMAN 1948 -

Sir Lawrence Freedman is since 1982 Professor of War Studies and since 2003 Vice Principal (Research) at King's College London. His education started at Whitley Bay Grammar School in England and was continued through studies at the University of Manchester (BA), the University of York (B Phil) and the University of Oxford (D Phil). Successive research positions at the University of York, Nuffield College and Balliol College in Oxford and the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London provided him with a wide range of contacts in his particular field of research interest: contemporary defence and foreign policy issues. Next to these positions, he has close links to the Centre of Defense Studies, the Royal College of Defence Studies and the British Academy. Freedman started publishing in the late seventies and since then, almost every year a book or edited reader has come out carrying his name. Next to being a well known figure in the current academic landscape, his policy orientated research is appreciated at the relevant British ministerial departments. His status in official circles has been confirmed by his appointment as official historian for the Falkland Wars, and the award of a Knighthood in 2003.

Sir Lawrence Freedman's broad interest in 'defence and foreign policy issues' can easily be narrowed; he seems to be under the spell of war and all fundamental strategic concepts associated with it. In his own words "war makes headlines and history books. It has shaped the international system, prompted social change and inspired literature, art and music. It endangers some of the most intense as well as the most brutal human experiences and it raises the fundamental questions of human ethics".^[1]

With the threat and in the conduct of war human nature is exposed in its most bare form. Who is able to understand the notion of war might be able to understand all facets of human nature. Throughout his extensive work, Freedman seems to be caught in a quest to unravel these facets by focusing on the nature of fundamental strategic concepts. With the passing of time - Cold War, détente, hegemony and currently the asymmetrical threats posed to a hegemony - Freedman argues that not only has the international environment changed, but so have the sets of values underpinning the intangible strategic concepts that surround war and conflict, such as 'deterrence', 'escalation' or even 'war' itself. In his view, what counts is the examination of the changes in meaning of those concepts. As changes in semantics of fundamental conflicts can lead to changes in conflicts themselves and consequently to differences in adopted strategy, this examination is needed in order to get control over the variables that change the concepts or the understanding of them.

Next to providing a theoretical definition of the concepts and building up models in which these concepts are to be caught, Freedman's research focuses for a great deal on how people, mostly policy makers, translate the meaning of these emotion and behaviour capturing concepts into policy outlines. When policy makers use these terms in policy documents, they sometimes explicitly define their meaning and at other times leave the interpretation open to the reader. One consequence is that words put on paper some time ago, can cause friction in adjustments – after a change in the context the document was written in, although quick adjustments could be needed in situations of war.

One of the first ideas that became central to Freedman's research was that of threats and escalation, linked to an ever increasing arsenal of nuclear weapons in the global sphere. Freedman conducted his first studies in the sixties and seventies, in the context of Cold War events such as the Vietnam War, SALT I and SALT II. When working on his B. Phil. Dissertation at the University of York in 1970 he developed a specific interest in US intelligence and the influence of the Soviet strategic threat to US defence policy. For three years he worked full time on this topic at Nuffield College in Oxford, under the supervision of Sir Michael Howard and Sir Philip Williams. Michael Howard was a former British Army officer who expanded military history beyond the traditional tactical analysis by including the sociological significance of war and Freedman's relationship to him has been crucial in his academic development, as Howard stayed a mentor and a source of inspiration for Freedman. Howard became president emeritus of the International Institute for Strategic Studies and in 1992, together with colleagues Robert O'Neil and Paul Hayes, Freedman published a series of essays in his honor.

Freedman's thesis on the relationship between US intelligence and Soviet threat perception was examined by late Peter Nailor (Royal Naval College) and late Alastair Buchan (first director of the IISS). His D. Phil studies resulted – after a substantial revision - in the publication of his first book in 1977, *The definition of the Soviet threat in strategic arms decisions of the United States: 1961-74*. In the late seventies, the debate on nuclear weapons had a mainly technical twist, in which academics tried to keep up with the latest technological developments in order to analyze nuclear threats and defence policy. Influenced by Howard, Freedman went beyond the technical, suggesting that there was also a political dimension to the judgments on the threat of the Soviet Union. The nature of the prevailing strategic doctrine in the US and the leading attitudes towards the defence budget and arms control in the administration and the intelligence community were as crucial as estimates on the evolving Soviet force structure, he argued. Freedman rejected the simple action and rational reaction schedule based merely on who had more and better weapons. Taking this topic to a more theoretical and comprehensive level, in 1981 he published *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy* (second edition 1989, third edition 2003). Michael Howard again played a mentor role and Freedman could count on an impressive sounding board for his ideas, including individuals such as Richard Burt, Richard Haas, Frank Klotz, Barry Posen, Greg Treverton, Phil Williams, the late Albert Wohlstetter and the late James King.

The strategic concept central to his writing during and about the nuclear arms race in the Cold War, was that of 'escalation'. Freedman's focus on the dynamic nature of the set of values that the term 'escalation' tries to cover, and came to regard escalation – when set in motion – not as a hopeless, unstoppable development as many others at the time did, but rather as one of deliberate, critical decisions and choices.[2] A great deal of the research focused on the role of intelligence in the decision making process, by analysing the interaction between policy and strategy and the objectivity of intelligence in all this. Freedman's judgment was that the power

resources behind the intelligence rather than any intellectual qualities made the end product of the intelligence process be considered valid. He stated that military intelligence officers were socialised into a particular worldview and the institutional link between producers and consumers limited the independence of the intelligence product. The background of these critiques was that in the 1970s politicians had a cynical attitude towards the role of experts and academics in policy-making.

His research also dealt with the uneasy interaction between policy makers and experts, an interaction in which he himself was much involved. All outcomes of his research confirmed Freedman's belief that developments and decisions cannot be understood as single objects, but are influenced by past perceptions and future perspectives. It is the flow that interests him and this interest raised the urge of making sense of the understanding of why the decisions made were made, as it seemed to him too easy to say with hindsight that they were wrong.[3] In that time, US approaches towards communism shifted from Eisenhower's massive retaliation to Kennedy's flexible response. In 1996, a conversation with Robert S. McNamara impressed Freedman deeply. He decided that a Kennedy biography could be a good form in which to express his views - even though there were at that time already too many of them. In his views the Kennedy years were the perfect background to show the causality of events and the extent to which experiences of one crisis created the background assumptions and expectations that led to the next. One of the reasons to write the book was, according to Freedman himself, the urge to counter the biography written by Seymour Hirsch, which he considered awful, poorly argued and misinterpreting almost all sources. Another urge was to recreate the emotions, attitudes and assumptions of the Cold War, as to pundits in the post Cold War era it seemed hard to believe that Russia was regarded as a serious threat to liberal democracy at the time Kennedy made his decisions.

The book *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* became silver medalist of the Arthur Ross Book Award 2002 (an award given by the Council on Foreign Relations). Robert S. McNamara himself said about the book: "In this superbly researched and elegantly written book, Lawrence Freedman sheds new light on the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' handling of foreign affairs... While I do not agree with every interpretation, *Kennedy's Wars* challenges common knowledge about what happened and why and points to lessons we can apply to the future." [4]

More than thirty years in the academic field, Freedman, knows how to adjust his research to prevailing changes in threats in the global environment and to link his research to policy orientated issues. He has put himself in the forefront of policy debates, thereby making himself known to the Administration, which is interested in his views. Freedman is also well known in the 'undergraduate world', as he edited a reader, straightforwardly titled *War*, which is often used as to introduce students to strategic studies.

Moving towards the analysis of current and future defence issues, nowadays, the focus is on the asymmetry of conflicts. Governments now feel primarily confronted with terrorist threats. As until recently they were mainly prepared for interstate conflicts, governments must adapt their policies to new characteristics, new parameters. The best strategy to cope with this asymmetry is yet to be found. However, what has been agreed upon is that more is needed than mere military force to counter these threats. Force has to be combined with political, socio-economic and cultural leverage. Therefore there has to be a clear understanding of the local political situation and its balance of forces. According to Freedman, the variables to be interpreted are the changes in the coverage of the fundamental concepts and the way these concepts enter

into the policy debate.

The fundamental strategic concept at the forefront of Freedman's thinking is 'deterrence'. In 2004 he published a book on deterrence, naming it one of the most remarkable demonstrations of the interaction between an apparently abstract conceptual discourse and some of the most challenging issues of military strategy and practical politics. The aim of the book is to develop a particular framework for thinking about deterrence with as a starting point the idea that deterrence does not offer a self-contained strategic relationship but is part of a wider set of relationships. He adds the importance of emotions and values to a utilitarian approach, proposing a norms-based as much as an interest-based model. Norms mostly reflect the leading interests within a power structure and when such a framework is adopted by policy-makers, it is likely to be both eclectic and self-contradictory as systemic and rigorous, but, according to Freedman, that still does not mean that it can be readily dismissed.

The shift in the US security policy language from deterrence to pre-emption, prompted by its Global War on Terror, is explained by Freedman as a consequence of a loss of confidence, as it has as underlying rationale the idea that some threats can not be deterred and must be dealt with before they could be realized. The ambiguity about situations in which war might be justified means that the US elevates this notion to a security doctrine rather than an occasional stratagem. As a consequence it creates opportunities for states that might use new-fangled notions of pre-emption as a rationalization when embarking on old-fashioned aggression. As an exception, Freedman did not consider the events of 11 September 2001 as a surprise. Keeping in mind his escalation thesis and the flow of history and the causal chain of events, he argued in an account written for the BBC that there was a slow but certain build-up to that day. He saw what happened, and what is happening, as a function of US involvement in international affairs starting in the early eighties. 9/11, in his view, was the latest, and most far-reaching, of a long series of painful encounters between the United States and the forces of terrorism. [5] He also thinks pre-emption of limited benefit as a guide to what form US security policy should take in the future and what form it is likely to take. As so often written by the main thinkers on military strategy he sees it as a multisided story and focuses also on the perceptions of the other powers in the world. When these states reflect on what kind of superpower the US is in the changing global power environment and how its use of power therefore should be interpreted, than it might be that other states see building up its nuclear strength as the only obvious way left to counter a perceived US threat.

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[1] <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/schools/sspp/ws/ps/tpg/wimw/freedmanvideo.html> (visited 22 March 2007)

[2] <http://www.igs.berkeley.edu/publications/par/spring2001/kennedywars.html> Lawrence

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[3] <http://www.igs.berkeley.edu/publications/par/spring2001/kennedywars.html> Lawrence

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[4] <http://www.us.oup.com/us/catalog/general/subject/HistoryAmerican/Since1945/?view=usa&ci=9780195152432> (visited 22 March 2007)

[5] http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/recent/sept_11/build_up_01.shtml (visited 19 March 2007)

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