

Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine

by General David Petraeus and Andrew Roberts,
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The meaning of the word evolution in its most basic form is ‘the gradual development of something’. Herein lies the problem: the scale and scope of the evolution of warfare cannot be effectively captured within a selective commentary on conflicts from 1945 to the ongoing Ukraine conflict. However, what the authors do achieve is a commentary on selective conflicts from a US perspective.

The authors argue that strategic leaders need to do four tasks correctly. ‘Firstly, they need comprehensively to grasp the overall strategic situation in a conflict and craft the appropriate strategic approach—in essence, to get the big ideas right. Secondly, they must communicate those big ideas, the strategy, effectively throughout the breadth and depth of their organisation and to all other stakeholders. Thirdly, they need to oversee the implementation of the big ideas, driving the execution of the campaign plan relentlessly and determinedly. Lastly, they have to determine how the big ideas need to be refined, adapted, and augmented so that they can perform the first three tasks

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again and again and again. The statesmen and soldiers who perform these four tasks properly are the exemplars.' In most of the chapters, Roberts and Petraeus try to assess the military and political leadership against the four tasks outlined above.

The authors work to outline the genesis of the Cold War and examine the Chinese Civil War and the Korean War. Joseph Stalin is the prime villain, and so is his limitless desire to expand communist influence, which had to be challenged by both ideological and strategic responses. This is far too simplistic a narrative and conveniently overlooks the fissures in the world in 1945. However, it fits the standard American discourse of the great ideological fight led by Western powers for the survival of the world. On China, the authors argue that Mao got his strategic leadership right while Chiang Kai-Shek squandered the numerous advantages that were on his side. The authors deride MacArthur's leadership during the Korean War and highlight the sound leadership of Ridgway. The Korean War highlighted the growing prevalence of the idea of a negotiated peace and that an adversary may not be vanquished at the end of a long-drawn battle. The Korean War also changed warfare in several significant ways, proving that limited wars could be fought under the so-called doctrine of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) and introducing the United States to many of the problems that it was to face in the future in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Delving into the demise of the colonial powers, the authors argue that the rapid disappearance of European empires over one generation in the mid-twentieth century had significant ramifications for the evolution of conflict. The typical face of war since 1945 took the form not so much of traditional state-on-state conflict as of insurgency and guerrilla warfare, especially in the era of decolonization when the British fought in Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, and Aden, and the French in Indo-China and Algeria. They discuss Kashmir, the Israeli War of Independence, the British in the Malayan and Borneo insurgencies, the Dhofar rebellion, and the French in Indo-China and Algeria. Through the commentary on these insurgencies, the authors repeatedly try to measure strategic leadership and their approaches to handling insurgencies. Petraeus's penchant for counter-insurgency strategies and their pertinence in these conflagrations is also an omnipresent theme.

General Petraeus writes in insipid prose three long chapters on the U.S. wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. On Vietnam, he argues that the failure to understand the true nature of the war and the enemy led to the failure to craft a correct strategy before war weariness in the United States undermined the ability to continue the war. It took far too long in Vietnam for

the appropriate emphasis on the security and well-being of the population to be established. The authors argue that Vietnam was a complete and repetitive failure of strategic leadership. The nature of the war was never understood. On Iraq, Petraeus highlights that, as Winston Churchill had postulated, policymakers must never assume that the conduct and aftermath of war will be easy. The US stepped into the war with vague ideas of a post-war Iraq with no plan for transition from the disbanded ruling Bath dispensation to a democratically elected government. They also had no understanding of the delicate balance of ethnic, sectarian, tribal, and political elements that had kept Iraq from disintegrating. Over time, experiential learning and consequent reactionary measures by the US threw Iraq into a full-blown insurgency. The US learned at considerable human expense that shock and awe based on high-tech forces is not a substitute for troop numbers in counter-insurgency operations or for the proper employment of those troops.

In Afghanistan, the authors identify a failure of resourcing as the war in Iraq took centre stage even as 'the Bush administration's goals in Afghanistan expanded.' The failure of the United States in Afghanistan had multiple causes and more than its share of fathers. The most critical failure, as is usually the case in lost wars, was one of policy and strategy. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the US was not able to provide the security required for any initiative to succeed. However, it was heartening to note that Petraeus is very critical in his account of the War in Afghanistan and the Second War in Iraq. He scathingly critiques the political leaders at the time, especially Rumsfeld and Bremer,¹ who are chastized for their decision-making, or lack thereof. In both wars, the critique, however, is again more in the poor political or organizational execution than in questioning the nature of the intervention. Eventually, Petraeus does concede that US intervention devastated both nations. Considering the book's partisan posture on most issues, this aspect is praiseworthy, especially when coming from a man of his stature. To his credit, he concedes the US did lose the war in Afghanistan. He also admits in the subtext of some of his arguments that the US presence in the Greater Middle East has largely been destabilizing, fomenting insurgencies by damaging the fragile social fabric. He quips in retrospect that 'every army of liberation has a half-life before it becomes an army of occupation.'

The account of the ongoing war in Ukraine is well-written. The authors highlight how Zelensky has proved to be a strategic leader of substance, way beyond the skewed assessment of the Russians that he and Ukraine would fold over almost instantaneously. The authors compare Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's leadership with Churchill's enigmatic leadership

during the Second World War. Amongst the organizational, technological, and strategic reasons for the consistently underperforming Russian Army, the authors specifically highlight, ‘the vast over-estimation of Russian capabilities along with the gross underestimation of Ukrainian capability; the lack of unity of command; a campaign design so ambitious that it exceeded the ability of the theatre commanders to follow it; failure to achieve combined-arms effects; wholly inadequate training; the employment of massed twentieth-century style armoured formations inadequately supported by other arms; the lack of a professional non-commissioned officer corps, with, instead, a top-down command system that does not promote initiative at lower levels.’ However, they steer clear of predicting the outcome of the war and limit their analysis to the events and their consequences.

Based on their commentary on the conflicts from 1945, Petraeus and Roberts pontificate on trends that could shape the war of the future. Some of the domains they highlight are hybrid warfare, robotics and artificial intelligence, nuclear weapons, open-source intelligence, disinformation, drones, sensors and electronic jammers, and cyber warfare. The aim of this chapter is to assess trends in warfighting and examine their possible trajectories. The book concludes strongly and emphatically on principles including the risk of superpower isolationism, the criticality of an army that learns fastest, and leaders remaining involved from developing an idea to validating its implementation. They argue that war is a human endeavour and investment, understanding, and communication on the part of strategic leaders and individual soldiers can often overcome vast disparities in technology. They also highlight that wars will not be short, and the volume of ordnance required in long wars will be the Achilles heel of most nations. The authors underline how leaders have failed in assessing the nature of the war, as Clausewitz had emphasized ‘The first, supreme, most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish... the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.’ The authors ‘accentuate the critical need to deter war whenever possible, keeping in mind that deterrence is a function of two factors: a potential adversary’s assessment of our capabilities on the one hand and our willingness to employ those capabilities on the other.’

As a US-centric commentary on major conflicts since 1945, the book is well written, but as a book on the evolution of warfare, the scope and scale of the examination are limited. Resultantly, the scrutiny of the explanations for the US entering each of these wars is not fleshed out adequately. The authors also do not sufficiently outline the viewpoints of the opposing parties in each

of the conflicts. Petraeus also seems to carry the baggage of hyper-patriotism and command in both Iraq and Afghanistan. He writes with the latent desire to convince the reader of his methods and how they made a difference in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In doing so, he often overlooks the underlying fact that, irrespective of what happened on the ground, in the end, both nations were devastated as a result of untimely US interventions. His writing is also plagued with lower-level tactical details and is in sharp contrast with Robert's lucid, balanced authorship as a seasoned historian. Consequently, the book appears to be written in two halves, with contrasting styles hastily put together at the seam. The evolution of warfare cannot be divorced from the geopolitics of the time, and disappointingly, the authors do not adequately set the geopolitical context for the conflicts. Each of these wars had huge human costs, which are mentioned only in passing, more to justify US intervention than as a consequence of such intervention.

Amongst the aspects that are well written are the examination of the ongoing Ukraine conflict, conveying the US party line on major conflicts, repository of places and characters in notable conflicts since 1945, and a fine selection of quotes attributed to authors and scholars of repute. The bibliography is substantial and serves as a good starting point for further reading.

Overall, if you desire a primer on wars from 1945 with a pro-US leaning, then go for it; however, it is far from a comprehensive treatise on the evolution of warfare from 1945 to the present.

NOTE

1. Donald Rumsfeld was the Secretary of Defense, and former US Ambassador L. Paul Jerry Bremer III led the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), with the mandate to resurrect Iraq.