BOOK REVIEWS

War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics
by Emile Simpson
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Reviewed by Michael Goodspeed

During the last 20 years, we have been presented with a smorgasbord of new theories about war and its recent evolution. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, numerous popular descriptors of modern war have been coined. These terms illustrate a broad range of conceptual thinking on the subject: Asymmetric Warfare, Net Centric Warfare, Cyber War, Iwar, the Three Block War, the Revolution in Military Affairs, the COIN Revolution, the Long War, the Greater War against Terror, and Fourth Generation War. All these labels in their turn have had a degree of validity and have served as important pieces in viewing the larger puzzle. One of the most perceptive and searching examinations of modern war in this tradition is found in a recent book entitled: War from the Ground Up: Twenty First Century Combat as Politics. This is an important examination with respect to, not just how armies, but how liberal societies should think about the changing nature of modern war. War from the Ground Up was authored by Emile Simpson, a recently-retired captain in the Royal Ghurkha Rifles. Prior to writing this book, Simpson had three company level tours in Afghanistan, followed by a year-long defence fellowship at Oxford. This insightful book is an offshoot of those deployments and his academic sabbatical.

Although War from the Ground Up makes frequent references to the author’s personal experiences, it is not a memoir. Simpson writes about much broader issues. He intermeshes his own counter-insurgency experience with an oblique analysis of the “Clauswitzian paradigm,” and finds Clausewitz to be inadequate in explaining and describing war as it has recently evolved. Much like the work of some of his predecessors writing about the theory of warfare, such as Thomas Hammes and Rupert Smith, Simpson believes that the nature of war has changed, and that the models based upon more conventional inter-state wars no longer suffice. Where Simpson departs from other contemporary theoretical predecessors is that, among other things, he argues that the West requires a greater understanding and expertise in the use of “strategic narratives,” a phrase he uses to describe messaging designed to address the conflict’s “strategic audiences.” He views a war’s strategic audiences as being all those critical groups within the war zone, as well as all other factions affected by the war. In developing these two lines of thinking, he assesses the “kaleidoscopic” nature of counter-insurgency and the diverse groups or audiences that are affected by modern insurgency. In this respect, Simpson views modern war, not in the polarized Clauswitzian dimension, but rather, he likens it to a political arena, one which is substantially more complex, multi-faceted, and dynamic than the relatively straightforward two-way struggle between opposing sides in inter-state conflict. And, just as in a political contest, Simpson believes that the winner in modern insurgencies will never satisfy all factions or audiences, and therefore, victory can never be absolute.

Simpson spends much of the book examining these twin themes of “narratives” and “audiences” through various lenses: globalization, strategy and the liberal state, ethical dimensions of modern war, and levels of strategy, as well as from several other perspectives. In doing this, his book is less a prescription of how to fight wars, and is more an abstract examination on differentiating the means and effects of modern war. In making his case, he draws in some measure upon his own experience and understanding of Afghanistan, as well other campaigns. Most notably, he also cites Borneo and Dhofhar, but makes passing reference to a number of other campaigns as well.

One of the salient points Simpson makes is that modern liberal states have frequently failed to understand the nature of war, and, in doing so, they have conflated war and international political action. War, in his view, has morphed from being Clausewitz’s policy by other means, to international politics by other means. The heart of this argument is best encapsulated in his own words:
...The confusion between means and effects relates directly to the interpretation of Clausewitz’s dictum of war being an extension of policy by other means. The narrow interpretation of this dictum recognises only the actual use of force as the “instrument” that war provides to policy. However, war itself as the interpretive structure which gives meaning to that force is equally an instrument. If the strategist fails to understand this, strategy will associate a ‘message’ with a given means; that confusion of means and effects is intrinsically associated with a conception of war as a fixed, single structure in which the actions of armed forces will be interpreted in terms of their military significance.

Some might say that there may not be a lot that is new in this insistence upon a more discriminating analysis of ends, ways, and means. After all, the long-established concept of winning an insurgency via ‘hearts and minds’ as opposed to ‘body counts’ has always intuitively acknowledged this notion, and, the concept of complexity in war is surely not original. In coalitions, the member states have, since ancient times, fought for very different reasons, and often with radically different war aims. So too in complex inter-societal conflicts do various groups and classes view the motivations, practice, and consequences of war from very different perspectives. However, what is original and valuable in this book is that Simpson takes a comprehensive overview of the perspectives, impact, and utility of war, and he argues effectively for a new level of sophistication in thinking about conflict; and, how the actions and messaging surrounding war should be expressed. He contends that Western societies have not thought seriously enough about the employment of force in furthering international policy, and that liberal democracies have failed to make the distinction between “Clausewitzian” inter-state war and modern insurgency.

Although Simpson does not baldly say it, he is implicitly demanding a less insular approach to war and international affairs. As he points out, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, there were far too many officers, diplomats, and politicians who were surprised that, after the initial invasions and occupations, there were subsequent insurgencies. Few strategists had paid sufficient heed to Galula - or even appeared to understand the major power experiences with regard to the length and difficulty of conflicts such as Vietnam, Northern Ireland, and the Russian experience in Afghanistan.

From a Canadian perspective, where, at least since the 1960s, our national leaders’ thinking about the complexities of war and international instability has been notably feckless and blurred, this book is particularly relevant. Perhaps this is because our wars have largely been discretionary, and for most Canadians, our recent participation in wars in Korea, the Gulf, Kosovo, and Afghanistan were remote, had little impact upon daily life, and, to most citizens, were seemingly inconsequential. Yet, in this highly globalized world, where failing states, uprisings, and violent extremism can have a rapid impact far from their epicentres, it is especially important that our leaders be familiar beforehand with the issues, problems, and nature of modern conflict. War from the Ground Up makes a solid contribution for those wishing to understand this aspect of human behaviour.

This book is an engaging study, but it is not a quick read. Simpson’s analysis is measured, intensely methodical, and regularly interspersed with aphorisms that invite the reader to pause and consider his broader implications. Indeed, some of his pithier pronouncements may well survive as quotable military rubrics. Because of its density, War from the Ground Up will unlikely be of any interest or appeal to the average citizen. It is, nevertheless, an important book and will be profitably read by virtually all military officers, international journalists, diplomats, academics, and federal politicians.

As recent developments, such as armed drones and new surveillance techniques, change the nature of conflict, they force us to rethink strategic ends, ways, means, audiences, and narratives. This is an unremitting process, and War from the Ground Up will not, in any sense, be a final or conclusive summary of the scope and impact of modern war. However, it will serve as a valuable frame of reference from which to think about conflict and its evolving nature.

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