

Intelligence in Public Media

Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine

David Petraeus and Andrew Roberts (Harper 2023), 544 pages, maps, bibliography, notes, index, photos.

Reviewed by Michael J. Ard

Former CIA director and USCENTCOM commander David Petraeus and renowned historian and biographer Andrew Roberts join forces to present an often insightful, if conventional, overview of how war has evolved since the end of World War II. Roberts serves as lead author, with Petraeus contributing an analysis on Vietnam and his first-person perspective on our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The book is strong on detail and Roberts, a virtuoso of narrative history, spices the account with telling anecdotes and quotations. The book joins other notable efforts, like Lawrence Freedman's *The Future of War* (2017) and Sean McFate's *The New Rules of War* (2019), that assess and forecast the nature of contemporary armed struggle.

Conflict has two purposes: tracking the uneven evolution of conflict and emphasizing the importance of leadership in command. The authors describe war's protean nature; on one hand, its increasing reliance on high-tech, civilian-driven technology, and on the other, its inexorable tendency to regress to more brutal forms. War's rapid advances can shock—as can its sudden reversals.

At 442 pages of main text, the book is hardly short, yet it is selective in what it covers, focusing on conflicts the authors judge contributed to warfare's evolution. (2) The book surveys a variety of unique conflicts of our era, such as the "slow burn" of Kashmir (39), and near-forgotten wars in Borneo (1963–66) and Oman (1962–76), which later influenced counterinsurgency theory. This reader would have welcomed the authors' views on the Middle East twilight wars now led by Iran's "axis of resistance" militias.

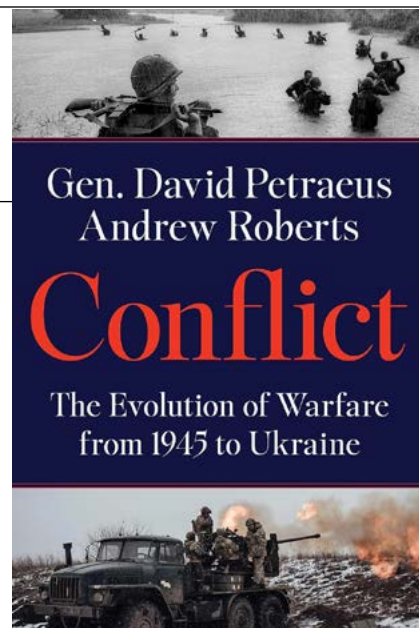
What are the main lessons of war in our era? The authors point out that the Korean conflict (1950–53) foreshadowed how modern wars end "more messily." (35) Likewise, they maintain that superior technology not always—or even often—is the deciding factor. Training and morale still are decisive. In the Arab-Israeli War of October 1973, the superb training of Israeli soldiers enabled them to prevail. High morale was key to Britain's

Falklands War (1982) victory over Argentina. (163) In Ukraine, superior training and morale have permitted Ukrainian forces to stave off defeat. Even in high-tech modern warfare, "Man still stands at the center of the picture." (152)

Another lesson is the paradox of war's regressions. The use of gas in the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) is one example; the use of famine in Somalia (1991–) another. In Yugoslavia (1991–96), militias employed rape and death squads and commandeered UN peacekeepers as human shields. (Meanwhile, their NATO opponents employed precision guided munitions.) (219). In the South Ossetian War (1991–92), virulent nationalism, ethnic cleansing, deliberate attacks on civilians, cities divided into warring zones—all sinister elements that reappear in later conflicts. (209)

Modern sensibilities about war also come into play. The authors claim a new feature—especially seen in the 1991 Gulf War—is "democracies worried about the acceptable level of enemy deaths." (199) Likewise, if a democratic government fails to recognize that "all wars are profoundly political," (230) its army may be undermined by betraying its nation's principles, as happened to the French Army in the Algerian War (1954–62). (65)

Modern commanders must understand the type of war that they're in—not always an easy feat. (44) As disciples of Clausewitz, Petraeus and Roberts insist that strategic leaders master four major tasks: grasp the overall strategic situation, the "big idea"; communicate sound strategy effectively; press the campaign "relentlessly and



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determinedly;” and adapt strategy to changing circumstances, “again and again.” (4) Successful leaders like Mao Zedong in the Chinese Civil War (1927–49) and David Ben Gurion in Israel’s war for independence (1948) intuitively executed these tasks; unsuccessful commanders, like General Westmoreland in Vietnam, did not. (130)

In Vietnam, we “failed the Clausewitz test” (79) by misunderstanding the nature of the conflict. The authors believe a better strategy emerged after 1968, which also featured the CIA-led Phoenix program to weaken the Viet Cong. But efforts were made too late to secure the population. Vietnam ended messily indeed; the Paris Peace Accords in 1973 permitted 200,000 North Vietnamese troops to remain in the south. (123) Getting “the big idea” right ultimately might not have mattered against a more determined enemy.

The Afghanistan chapter is a frank portrayal of the challenges of counterinsurgency. With its tradition-minded population and mountainous terrain, obstacles to success in Afghanistan were well known. Petraeus acknowledges our rapid early success outstripped policy. (246) We never solved the Taliban sanctuary problem, and many of our warlord allies were abusive and corrupt. We lacked an able and willing partner in the distrustful President Hamid Karzai. Moreover, the war never achieved the wholehearted commitment of Presidents Bush and Obama. After a major troop reinforcement, Obama compromised by announcing a timetable for withdrawal. Petraeus calls this a failure of policy and strategy. (274) He still believes success was possible if we had maintained our commitment while the Afghan National Army matured. (277)

Petraeus also presents the painful tragedy of errors in Iraq. The policy of firing Saddam’s military and civilian leaders—“de-Baathification”—led to self-created insurgency, an outcome CIA predicted. (297) Eventually by employing a new counterinsurgency doctrine and the surge of more troops, we better secured the population and reduced violence. Theory can look a lot smarter with more well-armed and highly motivated battalions behind it. As in Afghanistan, we were foiled by a local partner, the vengeful Shia Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (ironically backed by our enemy Iran), who dismantled our

progress with the Sunni Arab tribes and opened the door to the ISIS insurgency.

Petraeus argues he executed the major tasks of counterinsurgency theory, and he clearly believes sound strategy leads to success. But after two attempts employing his counterinsurgency model, Petraeus might have offered more analysis on how theory matched practice. Did our lack of ultimate success in Afghanistan and Iraq reveal some inherent flaws in modern counterinsurgency strategy? Can we win in the long run against an enemy fighting for their homes—a key factor he recognizes in other conflicts—with an American public tired of long-running conflict and unclear of the “big picture”? Petraeus laments the inconsistent support from Barack Obama for US efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq. But Obama did seem to recognize that wars are indeed political, especially those fought by our impatient democracy.

Conflict offers an inspiring chapter on Ukraine’s innovative and spirited defense against Russia’s clumsy invasion in 2022. The book underscores the importance of President Zelensky’s inspiring leadership and the “moral forces” of people fighting for their homes. Russians, the supposed asymmetric-war masters, were surprised by their own non-military tactics. (363) The authors highlight this first “open-source war” and enthuse about the Ukrainians’ embrace of new technology. As of now, the Russians are still in Ukraine and far from beaten. Yet the authors strike a hopeful note. Since 1914, they ask, when has a war of aggression ended in a positive result? (361)

How do modern wars end? They don’t, really. War and peace are blurred, perhaps because new technology and hybrid-war concepts make it easier to compete without open combat. (406) Petraeus and Roberts emphasize that money spent on deterrence is well spent, and we should not skimp on air-power dominance—no F-35 second-guessing here. Nuclear weapons have placed undefined limits on war (435), but otherwise, the authors avoid contemplating the worst outcomes of the nuclear age. As for disinformation, we must get there “first with the truth.” (439) *Conflict* says little about what war might look like for modern navies, but if Beijing maintains its Taiwan ambition, we may find out before long.



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