Victory in Today's Wars: New Insights on the Role of Communications

James P. Farwell
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Over 100 years ago, the philosopher-strategist Carl von Clausewitz wrote that a trinity of passion, chance, and political purpose drives the vicissitudes of war. In *Carnage & Connectivity*, David Betz supports this view. He offers a concise, witty, insightful argument for the proposition "war itself has not changed," though changes in technology have complicated its dynamics. He states his case up front and through his review of literature and evolving military doctrines marshals compelling evidence to support his proposition.

As Betz sees it, "quixotically, the major military powers in the West have serially tried and failed to use technology to disconnect from war's enduring nature." They chase solutions using high-tech weaponry that increase the speed at which combat is conducted, but do not affect the forces in Clausewitz's trinity that continue to govern warfare. The consequences can prove costly. They espouse a form of war that largely replaces forces on the ground with force delivered by long-range weapons. "Each time," he observes, "all they have managed to grasp is a slow, bitter, indecisive war."

One cannot achieve victory, Betz argues, by replacing chance in war with information systems, including weaponized malware (cyber weapons), and passion with long-range weapons and spin and compensating for failures of policy and strategic vision with tactics that avoid contact with the enemy—and, one might add, casualties. Indeed a criticism skeptics level against current US policy is it too often seeks to wage a "bloodless" war through the use of drone and air strikes, rather than with boots on the ground. How bloodless such a war may be depends greatly on whether you sit on the sending or receiving end.

Betz skillfully examines how emerging new technologies and a globally connected world have altered warfare. He recognizes the benefits of empowering individuals, but cautions about the darker side. Connectivity provides revolutionary new tools for persuasion. These tools can help articulate a strategic narrative that shapes perceptions, beliefs, and ideals of target audiences, changes behavior, and effects a desired end-state. New technology has altered the capacity of parties to forge and execute strategies, operations, and tactics. What it does not do is change the core truths Clausewitz's trinity embodies. The West may have bigger, more high-tech weapons, but as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have demonstrated, Betz says, these cannot compensate for the "deficit of passion" that motivates enemies comprised of moderately organized and loosely affiliated non-state groups. For them, while chance may always

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CARNAGE & CONNECTIVITY

LANDMARKS IN THE DECLINE OF
CONVENTIONAL MILITARY POWER
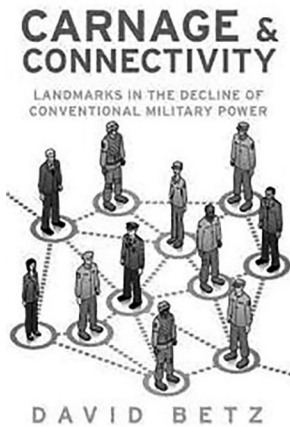
DAVID BETZ

David Betz, *Carnage & Connectivity: Landmarks in the Decline of Conventional Military Power* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 261 pages, $45.00

play a role, intensely motivated, purposeful enemies using low-tech methods can still defeat high-tech opponents.

Betz cites several examples to show how new technology in prior eras misled commanders into believing the nature of war had changed. Cyber tactics can employ social engineering or "phishing" to mislead enemies. The technology is new; the concept is old. During the American Civil War, Confederate cavalry seized Union telegraph communications—then new technology—to send false orders and reshape the information environment. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, clever Germans trained falcons, turning them into weaponized predators to intercept French carrier pigeons delivering messages. In World War II, radar helped destroy German U-boats. None of these examples altered the importance of passion, chance, and purpose in war, although new technology broadened the capacity and ability of actors to wage war.

Connectivity has increased the number and types of actors who can influence outcomes, empowering non-state as well as state actors. It has enabled violent movements to operate in networked, distributive forms that counter conventional military tactics. It increases the capacity for intellignece, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR)—but also makes operations more transparent, complicating efforts to execute tactics through stealth. For liberal democracies, articulating coherent, credible narratives that support military operations is more challenging. Indeed, Betz points out, connectivity renders disrupters more flexible, adaptable, and dangerous. In a prior era, logistics presented problems more easily avoided today. Disrupters can now focus on ideas and move them in digital form rather than allow for logistics.

Technology has rendered modern armies more lethal. Yet that can produce illusionary victories. Betz cites the 1991 and 2003 Iraq Wars as examples. Our technology and the remarkable skill of our forces were so exceptional they overwhelmed enemies who were never really in the fight. Here, Betz returns to Clausewitz for a pivotal insight. Clausewitz observed war consists of "acts of force to compel our enemy to do our will." Defeating the enemy kinetically in a battlespace does not necessarily equal winning. Winning requires the enemy to recognize it has been defeated and to subject itself to the victor's will. Saddam's resurgence after Desert Storm and the long war waged by al-Qaeda and other insurgents after the fall of Baghdad in 2003 attest to the pitfalls that occur when an enemy denies it is defeated.

Betz challenges the view that the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) has altered the character and conduct of conflict. RMA advocates believe advanced technology and the developing "system of systems" give commanders a clearer, more-rapid grasp of complex situations. This technological edge enables forces to operate within an opponent's decision and action cycles, make the right decisions, and outthink and

outmaneuver an opponent. Betz believes RMA symbolizes a "blind faith in technology" that could prove self-defeating in fighting today's less-encumbered opponents. As Betz sees it, today's conflicts demonstrate "the near impossibility of operating within the decision-cycle of any opponents without a high degree of political clarity about the purpose [and] the issue of force in the first place," something he argues is increasingly difficult to identify. Betz offers a compelling case for his key point, that evolving technology does not replace the Clausewitz trinity in understanding the dynamics determining outcomes in war.

Betz's points invite competing views. He agrees with C. E. Callwell who argued a winning outcome requires contact with the enemy and defeating it in battle. Still, Betz acknowledges insurgent dominance of the narrative, aided by Al Jazeera's biased reporting, determined the outcome of the April 2004 battle for Fallujah. But the pivotal role information warfare played there merits stronger recognition. Information is one of many elements that comprise combined arms warfare, and too few people seem to grasp this truth. In November 2004, information warfare was a crucial element that was well integrated into kinetic strategies and operations responsible for winning the second battle for the city. Still, adroit propaganda by insurgents effectively exploited the after-effects of the battle across Iraq in 2005, arguably the most chaotic year of the war.

Betz is skeptical about Army Col. (Ret.) Thomas X. Hammes' notion of Fourth Generation Warfare. But I think Hammes is astute, especially in showing how the Palestinians leveraged strategic communications rather than weapons to win the political battle—the one that in that context mattered most—during the First Intifada.

None of these questions detracts from Betz's central argument. He has written an outstanding analysis as to how connectivity has affected warfare, pointing out its potential, as well as its key traps, for warriors, political leaders, and commanders to avoid. I was pleased to see him quote Phillip Bobbitt, who warned non-state actors might produce a cataclysm using a nuclear device, dirty bomb, pathogen, or pandemic in an American city.[1] Neither the United States nor any other Western nation would be the same after that, with one potential consequence being the eclipse of civil liberties in the name of security. Betz empathizes with Bobbitt, who believed evolving technology mandates strategies that focus on the sensitive issues raised in protecting against vulnerabilities, not just mounting threat deterrence.

A second contribution to this topic—*Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion, and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War*—offers a

Beatrice De Graaf, George Dimitriu, and Jens Ringsmose, Editors, *Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion, and War: Winning Domestic Support for the Afghan War* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2015), 379 pages, $155.00

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1   Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History War* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 819.

collection of penetrating essays on how NATO governments employed strategic narratives well (or badly) to mobilize support for their participation in the war in Afghanistan. The first part of the book offers theoretical debates on "narrative" and "strategic narrative." Case studies on NATO and other partners follow.

Strategy has proven notoriously difficult to define. Lawrence Freedman's *Strategy* offers superb insights; but most campaign professionals would find novel his definition of strategy as the "art of creating power." They would puzzle over Fabrizio Coticchia and Carolina De Simone's concept of framing as "bricks for building" a broader story-line presented in "The Winter of our Consent? Framing Italy's 'Peace Mission' in Afghanistan." None of the writers in the volume adequately places strategic narrative in the context of a story from which narrative emanates, or the themes and messages that flow from narratives. They tend to conflate story and narrative and omit theme and message. Distinguishing each of these elements is vital in developing strategies. Still, it is interesting to see how others think about these notions and apply them to concrete studies.

The authors also neglect a critical dimension in measuring the impact of narratives: resonance. Reason persuades, but emotion motivates. Narratives shape behavior when they strike a responsive chord rooted in emotion. Allied messaging in World War I and World War II respected that precept, personalizing the enemy and selling the idea the Germans were monsters we had to vanquish. While true for the second war, it was not for the first. Even when fighting the Nazis, stirring up public support to beat Hitler proved challenging.

In his fascinating study of American attitudes and opinions towards entering the war, historian Steven Casey makes the point many Americans, even after Pearl Harbor, were reluctant to fight to exact revenge against Japan.[2] Americans showed surprisingly little interest in fighting the entire German nation. Most Americans had difficulty believing the Germans were collectively guilty of mass atrocities. Too many viewed the Nazis as an aberration whom the "good" German generals would soon topple. Franklin Roosevelt, who towers as both a political leader and a military strategist, understood the existential threat Hitler posed. He had a good message in the "Four Freedoms" about the values America stood for.

But in that era all but devoid of mass communications, how could Roosevelt motivate Americans to oppose Hitler? He realized they might not give credence to claims the Nazis were committing mass murder; however, they might believe reports about smaller-scale barbarities.

Hitler provided Roosevelt the opportunity after British commandos mortally wounded Hitler's trusted confederate, Reinhard Heydrich, in May 1942. The Gestapo thought the assassins came from Lidice and Lezaky so it executed, or sent to concentration camps, about 400 people from these towns—a sufficiently small number Americans could get their minds around. Roosevelt spotlighted this atrocity and mobilized celebrities like Albert Einstein to denounce the Nazis and expose them for what they were. The strategy defined the Nazis in emotional and

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2   Steven Casey, *Cautious Crusade* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001).

personal terms. It worked. It is a good example of how framing a story, narrative, theme, and message in a way that evokes an emotional response is crucial to influencing attitudes and opinions and shaping behavior.

Arguably, the true reason the United States went to war against Saddam Hussein in 1991 was oil. Andrew Bacevich well summarized what many political insiders felt was the primary reason for American military intervention in the Middle East: "to preserve the American way of life, rooted in a specific understanding of freedom and requiring a cheap abundance of oil."[3]

President George H. W. Bush and his team of closest advisers—James Baker, Brent Scowcroft, and Dick Cheney—understood mobilizing support for countering Saddam's seizure of Kuwait and the threat to Saudi Arabia required sparking emotions. Talking about oil or geostrategy was not going to gin that up. They believed American voters liked to put angel's wings or forked tails on political players. Hence, they conceived and executed a strategy that demonized Saddam while portraying intervention as a bold stroke to preserve democracy for Kuwait. Bush mobilized overwhelming support for the war.

The US presidential elections in 2016 offer a good example of how emotion can evoke an extraordinary response in target audiences. Consider Donald Trump. Skeptics argue Trump's narratives lack substance, a problem that may prove fatal in the November general election. But, Trump defeated 16 candidates, many considered political powerhouses, to win the Republican nomination. He did so, almost entirely, by tapping into the deeply held emotional hostility to a sense the US government had left its constituencies behind in favor of wealthy insider elites whose agendas ignored their hopes and dreams.

None of these questions detracts from the book's high merit, especially in the specific analyses of the dynamics governing each nation's strategic narrative. Each writer is incisive and illuminating, presenting convincing cases for the conclusions argued. A powerful question raised is how one can forge a viable war-fighting coalition among actors with different political systems, agendas, interests, resources, and scope of flexibility to participate in foreign conflicts. The case studies of country perspectives highlighted next impressively dissect how each nation employed strategic narratives to mobilize public support.

Quoting Johns Hopkins scholar Michael Vlahos, the editors note it is critical to root policies in a foundation of "truths" people can easily accept because they appear to be "self-evident and undeniable." Or, put in campaign terms, the rationale for expeditionary interventions needs to be credible, defining the stakes and explaining persuasively why and what action is taken, how it will unfold and for what purpose, and how it benefits both foreign and domestic actors.

Netherlands, Italy, and Canada failed to produce coherent, persuasive, consistent narratives, costing their governments vital public support, but not necessarily with the same result. The Dutch government, which operates through consensual politics, collapsed. Italy's executive traditionally has wide power in security matters, but poor messaging drained

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3   Andrew J. Bacevich, *America's War for the Greater Middle East* (New York, NY: Random House, 2016).

public support. Both governments drew down their International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF). In Canada, elite consensus based on a pro-NATO strategic culture enabled it to sustain ISAF's fourth largest combat presence in Afghanistan. A similar scenario enabled Australia's government to hold firm in providing its forces.

Adroit leadership in Germany, notably by defense minister Zu Guttenberg, produced security-driven arguments and sustainable elite consensus. These overcame lack of public support. In a system attuned to consensus politics, the Danes articulated a narrative "attuned to shared national values and ideals—such as the promotion of human rights—while still preserving the argument of protecting Danish security…" Germany's and Denmark's ability to present "consistent, compelling, and clear" narratives that contained elements of purpose, legitimacy, and success underpinned their engagements.

One striking finding was most governments changed their narratives. Rather than building public support, those actions diminished it, partly because the new narratives embodied new rhetoric not new strategies. This political gamesmanship inspired counter-narratives and undercut scope of action.

Consider France. Traditionally, France accords its executive wide authority on security matters and debates there have tended—as its many interventions in Africa illustrate—to occur among elites. Even during the Algerian civil war, the explosive issue of the use of torture by the armed forces, which threated to subvert republican values, transpired among elites, not the general public. Elites still matter, but in this era, public opinion that translates into votes at the ballot box counts, too.

This lesson proved costly as President Nicolas Sarkozy saddled himself with an incoherent narrative manifested in a four-page leaflet expressing elusive objectives for French intervention. Sarkozy regularly leveraged his frenetic leadership style to muscle his way through such problems. What the French read in newspapers conflicted with on-the-ground realities. Confronting election defeat, mounting casualties and strong counter-narratives forced Sarkozy to pull back. His party lost the next election. Sarkozy's rhetorical approach in talking about problems rather than solving them contributed to the loss.

Hungarian voters are less interested in foreign policy although they pay attention to casualties. The Hungarian government managed by sticking to its basic narratives of helping Afghans and allies in Afghanistan without being directly at war, and, crucially, showing support for the NATO alliance. "This is about NATO, not Afghanistan," Minister of Defense Ferenc Juhász declared. Important was his insistence against taking offensive action or even detaining anti-Afghan government forces. That dismayed ISAF allies. With uncertain public support for sending troops, Hungary never altered the rules of engagement or aimed to win hearts and minds for the provincial reconstruction teams (PRT) it deployed. It consistently characterized its mission as peacekeeping, and its refusal to adopt a more belligerent stance enabled it actually to increase its forces.

Poland stressed the need to be counted as part of an alliance, knowing the same alliance might one day be called upon to defend it against Russia. Combined with a narrative about strengthening Polish

military capabilities, the posture enabled the government to achieve important goals despite vocal opposition.

Sweden—which is not a member of NATO—provided troops. It justified its actions through a catch-all narrative that ranged from fighting terrorism to enhancing Afghan democracy. It consciously declined to specify clear policy goals. This approach reflected domestic imperatives to balance interests among competing target audiences in order to forge consensus. The Swedes questioned whether Afghanistan posed a terrorist threat at home, and the military felt uncertain about the purpose of its mission. The government narrative stressed the need for Afghan and Swedish security. It argued the use of force, but not war, was necessary to attain democracy, political stability, governance, and gender equality. The strategy worked, giving legitimacy to the use of force by appealing to humanitarian needs, Swedish self-interest, and an argument for strengthening collective security organizations like NATO by participating in NATO actions.

The British approach reflected a strategic culture that stresses the US-UK alliance. Like Americans, the British public takes pains to show support for its military—even when it may disagree with government policies. All three UK political parties supported intervention, and a clear narrative emerged that balanced protecting UK security and joining international partners in the fight against terrorism. A global outlook and elite consensus bolstered support for participation in the ISAF. Critically, the campaign reflected a strong belief that protecting security at home required international engagement.

Britain's steady hand in the face of mounting casualties after troops were deployed to Helmand Province in 2006 suggests fatalities do not necessarily erase popular support in some societies. Curiously, after 2009 the government muddled its narrative by adding humanitarian concerns to national security goals. Was Britain engaged in peacekeeping or warfighting? Foreign Secretary Jack Straw moved to finesse the issue by stressing the "astonishing success" British forces were achieving. When British forces withdrew, it pegged the withdrawal to progress made on the ground. The Brits declared victory and went home. How that might affect future actions should the current stalemate in Afghanistan continue or should the Taliban seize power poses interesting questions.

The final chapter addresses the United States. It is an interesting analysis centered on *New York Times* stories and how they shaped elite discourse on Afghanistan. Yet, it is somewhat irrelevant to decision-making by Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Priding himself as pragmatic and down-to-earth, Bush did not read the *Times* or many newspapers. He relied on his instincts as the "decider" and, at least until 2006, surrounded himself with circles of neoconservatives who pushed their ideological agendas.

An intense intellectual, Obama reads voraciously, but is a self-contained leader who trusts his judgment above all others. Both presidents produced incoherent narratives for Afghanistan. Neither laid out a story, narrative, or themes and messages tied to clear policy goals or that effectively shape an audience's behavior to achieve a desired end-state. Not surprisingly, most objective observers severely question what US actions have achieved or what price propping up the Ashraf Ghani

administration is worth paying. In a recent *Atlantic* interview, Obama expressed deep skepticism over whether the United States could solve the problems in the Middle East. One infers he feels the same about Afghanistan, whose challenges one can reasonably suggest he understated before taking office. Both of these presidents were strong-willed individuals for whom media reporting has relatively little effect on national security decisions.

Strategic Narratives, Public Opinion, and War ends with a commendable chapter that summarizes conclusions and raises questions for the future. The current political environment in the United States and Europe has elicited a healthy debate about the future of NATO. In the 2016 presidential elections, major differences on the issue have emerged between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. This book admirably contributes to that discourse. With clarity it lays out the political dynamics that challenged NATO countries who grappled with joining an American-led coalition in Afghanistan. Have NATO nations done their fair share in shouldering the burden of European security? With varying success and the employment of distinct strategies, NATO political leaders tried to support the US intervention in Afghanistan. Domestic considerations affected the extent and terms of each nation's engagement there. But as a group, these leaders recognized a strong NATO represents vital hope to deter or defeat potential Russian aggression. Maintaining alliance with the United States mattered to all of them.