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War From The Ground Up: Twenty-First-Century Combat as Politics

By Emile Simpson

Reviewed by Dr. Richard M. Swain, Colonel, USA Retired

War From the Ground Up is a theoretical reflection on the meaning of the Afghanistan counterinsurgency for war theory. It was written during an Oxford Defense Fellowship by a wonderfully literate infantry officer who served in Helmand with the Royal Gurkha Rifles. The author's core insight is that counterinsurgency differs from traditional interstate war in the sense that, whereas the latter seeks to create, by battle and maneuver, a military condition that can be the basis of a political result; military action in counterinsurgency "directly seeks political, as opposed to specifically military, outcomes . . ." The result, at least in Afghanistan (elaborating on David Kilcullen and Antonio Giustozzi), is a conflict more like a domestic political contest than a Clausewitzian "bipolar" struggle. The value of the book is less this observation than what the author does with it, and how well he does what he sets out to do. He presents an argument that stands, as Sir Michael Howard has observed elsewhere, as a "coda" on Clausewitz, filling out the master's description of limited war in the particular context of the early twenty-first century.

Simpson points out that Clausewitz's simplifying description of war as a two-sided ("bi-polar") confrontation does not fit the highly fragmented, largely "domestic," political struggle in Afghanistan or the expansion of the relevant strategic audience imposed by the ubiquity of immediate global communications. He adopts the view that combat becomes a form of public communication. From this, he draws a distinction between the idea of strategy as the instrumental use of force, and the now especially critical function of providing an interpretive framework within which to convey a desired meaning to critical audiences. Not just battle, but war itself is instrumental.

In addition to constructing a sophisticated updating of Clausewitzian theory, Simpson addresses the importance of what this reviewer might characterize as "dialogic command," an authoritative relationship sensitive to the need for negotiating the tension between the desired and the possible outcomes from policy to execution. Simpson calls this "Strategic dialog . . . the reciprocal interaction between policy, in the sense of the political decisions and intentions of the state, and how policy is articulated as actual operations . . ." His concern involves the compound danger of naive decisionmakers at the top and the ubiquity below of the figure Americans call the "strategic corporal," the relatively minor tactical leader whose actions or inactions can advance or derail the grander efforts of which they are part.

Here again, Simpson shows his mettle with a critique, perhaps a bit rigid, of Samuel Huntington's 1957 treatise on civil-military relations, *Soldier and the State*. Simpson's point, very much like Eliot Cohen's *Supreme Command*, is that strict separation of the military function and civil direction has long since become counterproductive. He might have, but does not, observe that the descriptive social science on which *Soldier*

and the State was based was old at the time Huntington wrote, and the character of professions has evolved a good deal since 1957. Simpson makes a minor historical error subordinating Moltke to Bismarck in their famous struggle outside Paris in 1871. In that event, the struggle took place because the general and chancellor were parallel officials, both directly subordinate to the Prussian King. To use Huntington to draw a sharp distinction between constitutional and strategic imperatives of civil-military relations, Simpson ignores the advisory function that professional soldiers owe to their constitutional masters as well as final obedience, Cohen's "unequal dialog."

The structure of the book seems a bit out of balance, first between emphasis on the particular case of counterinsurgency as opposed to the broader category of limited war, then on the relative importance of action versus interpretation. In the first case, a fine chapter on the "British Strategy in the Borneo Confrontation, 1962-6" approaches making the more general case, but never quite closes on the point. In the latter, the penultimate two chapters, which address strategic narrative, leave a sense that the entire discussion has been pointed toward predominance of interpretation over action. Grounded on concepts from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, they are excellent in their own right, but might better have been located earlier in the text.

Neither the introduction nor conclusion conveys fully the great wealth of thought that lies between. The great strength of the book is in the author's clarity of explanation and his theoretical sense, firmly based on useful definition and clear, didactic distinctions. This book should find an important place in War College, School of Advanced Military Studies (SAMS), Marine Corps School of Advanced Warfighting (SAWS), and Air Force School of Advanced Air and Space Studies (SAASS) seminars.