

Book Review: *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* by General Rupert Smith

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by [Nader Elhefnawy](#)

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Introduction

That recent decades have been a time of transition in military affairs is by now a tired cliché. However, despite the profusion of theorists that have attempted to explain, define, and label the changing mode of warfare, the nature of this transition remains a subject of heated argument. Earlier this year, former Deputy Supreme Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, General Rupert Smith of the British Army, offered his take on this subject in *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*. The premise of Smith's book is that industrial war, the model which emerged from the French Revolution and which predominated until World War II, has declined in relevance because of the advent of nuclear weaponry, increasingly successful insurgencies, and its own high cost, and has thus effectively ceased to exist.

Smith's book is lucid, plainly written, accessible to non-experts as well as specialists, and richly illustrated with specific cases. However, the story it tells is familiar to students of the issue. (Martin Van Creveld made a similar case in his 1991 book *The Transformation of War* and subsequent works, to name but one example.) What really sets Smith's book apart from the crowd is his analysis of those events, and the theory of contemporary warfare he derives from them: namely "war amongst the people."

War amongst the people has six defining characteristics. The first is the different ends of military action in such conflict. Rather than physically destroying the enemy or seizing and holding territory to achieve a decision, its purpose is to create conditions in which other "means and levers of power" may be brought to bear to achieve the decision, one generally having "to do with the individual and societies that are not states."^[1] In World War II, for instance, the destruction of the German and Japanese militaries and industrial bases, and the conquest of their territory, achieved the goal of their unconditional surrender. In Bosnia, however, the United Nations did not use military force to resolve the issue by destroying Bosnian Serb forces outright, but instead deployed it selectively to "create a condition in which humanitarian activities could take place, and negotiation or an international administration could lead to a desired outcome."

The second, given the nature of the new objects of war, is that "we fight amongst the people, not on the battlefield." The people become an object of war, because they may be the support-base of the opposing force, and also because of their proximity to that force. Guerrillas and terrorists in particular conceal themselves among the people, rather than separating themselves in the

manner of mechanized divisions, fleets of battleships and squadrons of combat aircraft. Additionally, modern media bring the war home to those not directly involved, and whose opinions may also be relevant to policymaking, such as national electorates.

The third is that the conflicts "tend to be timeless, even unending" because the conditions that are the purpose of military action are ones in which it may take those other "means and levers of power" years or decades to attain a definitive outcome. While American troops remained in Germany and Japan six decades after the war, this quickly ceased to be motivated by fears of renewed aggressiveness on their part, and was instead driven by the exigencies of the Cold War. In fact, the United States had for decades encouraged Germany and Japan to develop their military capability more than they have, first to contribute to the Cold War, and later to peacekeeping and other missions. U.S. troops, however, remain in South Korea precisely because the Korean War remains unresolved.

The fourth characteristic is the premium placed on preserving the forces performing the mission—rather than achieving the aim at any cost. This is a function not only of the oft-cited political sensitivity to casualties, but also the difficulty and expense of replacing professional soldiers and advanced equipment. As Smith noted, a commander in World War II "knew there were reserves of equipment elsewhere in the service, and an industrial base behind them capable of rapidly producing replacements." This was not the case in, for instance, 1991 when he commanded Britain's First Armored Division in Desert Storm. In his words, this made him "the first British general in a long time who had to consider how to fight so as not to lose the army."

The fifth is that established organizations and weapons systems are constantly being put to new, unforeseen uses. The conventional weapons of today's major militaries were generally designed to fight an "industrial war" in Central Europe. Those capabilities, however, have been of decreasing relevance, and in practice they have been used for other purposes, such as patrolling no-fly zones and counterinsurgency in Iraq, with varying levels of effectiveness.

The sixth is that the combatants tend to be non-state—on *both* sides. Not only is it the case that non-state actors like warlords, terrorists and guerrillas play a more prominent role, but the states fighting them tend to come together in "some form of multi-national grouping" such as NATO or the United Nations when they combat them. While non-state actors did participate in World War II as guerrillas, and the United Nations emerged from the conflict, few would contest that it was a conflict between states in a way that more recent wars have not been.

As this list demonstrates, "war amongst the people" is not an entirely new condition, but the result of a long line of development, which the book expertly traces. The "antithesis" to industrial war, in fact, first emerged at almost the same time as industrial war. The Napoleonic Wars produced industrial war, but modern guerrilla warfare originated with the Peninsular Campaign. Non-state actors have participated in warfare ever since, and have been one of only several factors forcing major militaries to put their organizations and weapons to unforeseen uses throughout that period.

However, there has been a change in emphasis. During the Cold War confrontational industrial war had already been rendered obsolete by nuclear weaponry, but the superpowers and their allies based their planning on it nonetheless. Meanwhile, in the "hot" conflicts fought after 1945, from Korea to Malaya, from the Arab-Israeli Wars to Vietnam, warfare tended in the direction of war amongst the people. With the end of the Cold War, war as the term is commonly understood—industrial war—no longer exists. Only the non-industrial wars amongst the people remain as actualities or even possibilities.

Smith does not rule out the possibility of large-scale fighting of some sort in the future, or traditional territorial defense (which are not excluded by the principles of such warfare). In fact, he advocates the development of missile defenses. However, he believes that states will concentrate

on protecting themselves from challenges by non-state actors, rather than each other. The continuities, moreover, should not obscure the very real points of rupture, not least of all the different goals of military action, which change everything else.

That said, Smith's case is not entirely without weaknesses. One is a discussion of the media that may exaggerate its impact on operations.[2] At the same time, his analysis of the application of technology and organization to unforeseen circumstances is more indicative of the continuing pervasiveness of industrial war thinking than a necessary part of his theory. However, these are quibbles compared with what the book gets right, and Smith's successful use of his theory to examine the conflicts of the Cold War and post-Cold War era (including a full chapter on his experience as commander of the UN Protection Force in Bosnia) amply demonstrates its explanatory power. In the end, the combination of his discussion of the changing means and ends of war with the changes non-state actors have introduced into armed conflict has produced the most coherent and comprehensive theory of "post-industrial war" to date.

Of course, this raises the question of how political and military decision-makers ought to respond to such changes. Despite the invocation of the "art of war" in the book's subtitle, Smith does not presume to be the Sun Tzu of this new way of war, and rather than a solution he offers a change of "conceptual approach." The first step is recognizing the enormity of the change, particularly in regard to the more intricate relationship between politics and military force, which may in fact leave militaries with a smaller role in achieving solutions than they previously held. As Smith notes, in considering action "it must be clear that the answers to the questions lie with a wide range of agencies, of which the military is but one, and maybe a minor one at that." [3] The author also explores some of the implications of this thinking for planning and institutional thinking, as well as the military's treatment of the law and the media. He also identifies the art as:

seeing the campaign as a whole from the outset... [and] conceiv[ing] of the application of force... as a raid at theatre or strategic level rather than a sustained operation.[4]

While the discussion tends toward the general, the author predicts that future security operations will be expeditionary, multinational, long in duration and closely coordinated with other agencies in and out of government. Indeed, even staffs will need to be "both military and civilian, multidiscipline as well as multinational." [5] He also predicts that the military elements used in information collection will increase as the number of striking and support elements decreases, in part to minimize an occupation's exposure and visual signature. However, Smith suggests that the necessary changes will be evolutionary rather than revolutionary, and is careful to warn readers that while technology can help, there will be no "silver bullet" technological solutions.

On the whole Smith's recommendations are reasonable, but less sweeping, provocative and original than his assessment of the situation might lead one to expect. At least in part, this may be because the sheer complexity of the new operations defies elegant solutions, and because the military instrument on which he is focused plays only a limited role in his vision. Arguably, a grander theory of how to execute such actions successfully will be more likely to come from political rather than military science. Nonetheless, this book could prove to be seminal, and analysts and scholars may well be applying its lessons in the years to come. Deserving of the widest possible readership, it should be regarded as mandatory reading not only for those concerned with contemporary security and international politics, but post-war history as well.

About the Reviewer

Nader Elhefnawy has published widely on international security issues in forums including *Parameters*, *Astropolitics* and *International Security*. He has a B.A. in International Relations from Florida International University and a Ph.D. in Literature from the University of Miami, where he currently lectures.

Book Information

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References

1. The sociologist Daniel Bell observed in his seminal *The Post-Industrial Society* that industrialism involved a game between man and a fabricated nature; post-industrialism, however, is a game between persons. The same arguably applies to industrial and the "post-industrial" warfare Smith describes, with their "hard" and "soft" objectives respectively—the alteration of behavior instead of the destruction of tangible targets. "War amongst the people" may be what happens when war becomes a game between people.
2. Martin Van Creveld makes the argument in his most recent book. "Taking a more general view, the role played by the media... in bringing about the defeat of numerous post-1945 attempts at counterinsurgency has been grossly overstated." Martin Van Creveld, *The Changing Face of War: Lessons of Combat From the Marne to Iraq* (New York: Ballantine, 2007), 217. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that "'media' has become an excuse for failure."
3. General Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 394.
4. Ibid., 412-413.
5. Ibid., 413.