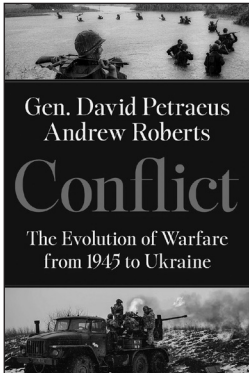


Book Review



Conflict:

The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine

by **David Petraeus and Andrew Roberts**

Harper Collins, 2023, 544 pp.

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In the book *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine*, retired U.S. Army General David Petraeus partners with the British historian and member of the House of Lords, Andrew Roberts, to analyze the course of warfare from the end of World War II to the present. As the former commander of Multi-National Force (MNF) Iraq, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), and U.S. and International Security and Assistance Forces (ISAF), Petraeus brings significant military command experience to the shared endeavor.¹ Petraeus also authored the U.S. Army's Counterinsurgency Manual and lead the surge strategy employed by the Bush Administration in Iraq in 2007.² Subsequent to his retirement from the Army, Petraeus served as the Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) between 2011 and 2012.³ Roberts contributes his expertise as a military historian specializing in the leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte, Winston Churchill, and other World War II commanders.⁴

Petraeus and Roberts are candid in saying that they have not attempted to comprehensively chronicle all wars fought over the last eighty years, as such an effort would require multiple volumes. Instead, focus their analysis on patterns and lessons of “conflicts that have contributed to the evolution of warfare” as a means of predicting future warfare trends.⁵ To that end, the authors examine the Chinese Civil War, Israel's War of Independence, the Korean War, the Six Day and Yom Kippur Wars, the Vietnam War, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, the Falklands War, El Salvador's Civil War, the Iran-Iraq War, the U.S. invasions of Grenada and Panama, the Gulf War, the South Ossetian War, the Wars in the Balkans, peacekeeping efforts in Somalia and Rwanda, and the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The authors also address wars of decolonization in Kashmir, Malaya, French Indochina, and Algeria. The longest chapters of the book are reserved for the U.S. conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, in which Petraeus writes from personal experience.

The authors invoke the Clausewitzian idea that all wars share common characteristics, and that leadership is the difference-maker in the outcome of any given conflict. The book is not simply a narrative of past struggles, but rather Petraeus and Roberts attempt to analyze how well military commanders and political leaders have mastered four major tasks in conducting these varied

conflicts. Petraeus and Roberts argue that to be successful, military and political leaders must comprehensively grasp the overall strategic situation (“get the big idea right”); communicate the idea strategically throughout the depth and breadth of their organizations; oversee the implementation of the big idea in ways that drive the campaign relentlessly; and continuously look for necessary ways in which to refine or adapt the idea as a conflict progresses.⁶ They argue that the leader who is successful in all of these four tasks is as “rare as a black swan.”⁷

Petraeus and Roberts offer Great Britain’s high commissioner for Malaya in 1952, Field Marshal Gerald Templer, as an example of a leader who demonstrated that winning “the hearts and minds of the people” was more effective than increased troop levels.⁸ Petraeus and Roberts argue that Templer’s principle “remains the most succinct explanation for how to win a counterinsurgency.”⁹ Likewise, the authors argue that British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and her military commanders during the Falklands campaign were successful in employing the four tasks and enhanced Great Britain’s standing on the world stage.¹⁰ It is perhaps not surprising that many of those deemed of having completed the four requisite tasks well are British and that Margaret Thatcher is amongst them, considering Roberts is himself a Brit and a proponent of “Thatcherism.”

In contrast, Chinese nationalist forces, French forces in Algeria, Americans in Vietnam, and Russians in Afghanistan typify the failure to meet the four tasks. Chiang Kai-Shek failed to master the four key tasks while his opponent Mao Zedong succeeded in mastering the tasks and advancing the “big idea.”¹¹ The humiliating defeats faced by superpowers in Algeria, Vietnam, and Afghanistan were all to some degree due to failures by the powers engaged there to get the big idea right. In Algeria, French Jacques Mussy, while winning the Battle of Algiers, did not take efforts to prevent the Algerian population from growing alienated, sapping his ability to provide strategic leadership, ultimately leading to a failed counterinsurgency effort.¹² In Vietnam, American political and military leaders unsuccessfully fought a conventional-style war when a counterinsurgency was needed, showing that they failed to understand the four key tasks; however, the authors conclude that even had the Americans perfectly performed the tasks, a successful outcome was unlikely given Vietcong determination, difficult terrain, enemy sanctuaries in neighboring countries, and Russian and Chinese interference in the conflict.¹³ In Afghanistan, Russians proved unable to distinguish between friend and foe, waging an indiscriminate campaign of massacres, depopulation programs, probable chemical attacks, and other brutal tactics which resulted in a near-genocide.¹⁴ This is, in essence, the exact opposite of the strategic winning of hearts and minds that Roberts and Petraeus argue effectively determines counterinsurgency conflicts.

Two of the most interesting chapters in the book are those on the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, because Petraeus has a personal interest in portraying the cherished counterinsurgency tactics he worked to implement as effective. In both chapters, Petraeus and Roberts reject the idea that the warfare underwent a revolution in the 1990s, and instead purport that the wars represented a backwards evolution in which U.S. military leaders and civilian policymakers were forced to relearn counterinsurgency warfare and strategy. In Afghanistan, the authors point to resourcing failures as the war in Iraq received overwhelming attention, even as the mission of the war shifted from counterinsurgency to nation-building.¹⁵ In the case of Iraq, the authors argue that the US relearned “shock and awe based on high-tech forces is not a substitute for troop numbers.”¹⁶

The Afghanistan and Iraq chapters both effectively support the book’s general thesis of the “big idea,” but are ultimately unsatisfactory in providing a realistic assessment of whether an invasion of such a difficult country as Afghanistan could ever truly result in success. Petraeus bemoans the

2021 withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, writing, “It might have been possible even at the end to achieve a commitment that was doable in terms of blood and treasure and sustained for as long as it took — however frustrating and unsatisfactory it might have been” to prevent the Taliban from regaining control.¹⁷ Here, Petraeus does not seem to apply the same logic that he did in the earlier analysis of Vietnam. Petraeus argues that Afghanistan differs from Vietnam as the latter was “largely a war of choice” while the U.S entered Afghanistan out of necessity after a “brutal and premeditated attack on the homeland.”¹⁸ Petraeus argues the American populace felt more sacrifice under an unpopular draft in Vietnam era, while in Afghanistan and Iraq the wars were fought by less than 2% of the population, all of whom had volunteered to do the fighting.¹⁹ In their Vietnam analysis the authors concluded that factors of Vietcong determination, difficult terrain, enemy sanctuaries in neighboring countries, and Russian and Chinese influence all prevented the war from being winnable.²⁰ Mystifyingly the authors do not provide the same analysis to Afghanistan, when that conflict lasted even longer than Vietnam and has similar factors. Indeed, the Taliban were as equally determined as the Vietcong, Afghanistan contained exceedingly difficult and mountainous terrain, Pakistan served as a sanctuary for many Taliban and Al Qaeda affiliates and supporters, and Iranian interference played a key role in producing U.S. casualties.

The final chapters of the book are devoted to the current conflict in Ukraine and to discussion of trends impacting future warfare. Putin is perceived as having stumbled in Ukraine due to Russian corruption, weak logistics, the inability to gain air superiority, the failure to predict the “Churchillian” leadership of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, and the resulting economic backlash against Russia following its invasion.²¹ In discussion of future warfare, the authors contemplate artificial intelligence (AI), sensors, strategic mineral monopolies and “hybrid” warfare in which combatants employ deepfake disinformation, political manipulation, and increased cyberattacks as part of their weaponry.²² However, the authors are careful to note that like the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan in light of 1990’s advances in technology, that future warfare should look to history rather than over relying on new technologies.

In total, *Conflict* serves as an excellent primer on warfare since the end of World War II and offers the reader an easily digestible account of trends that have shaped conflict and the leaders who have engaged in conflict during that period. While the comparison of America’s two longest wars (Vietnam and Afghanistan) could have been less superficial, it is interesting to gain firsthand insight into a commander who oversaw both the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Only time will tell how the conflict will end between Russia Ukraine and how leaders will grasp “big idea” in future conflicts. The book, *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine* is available on Amazon. **IAJ**

Notes

1 GEN Petraeus served as the MNF-I Commander between 2007 and 2008, as CENTCOM Commander between 2008 and 2010, and as ISAF Commander between 2010 and 2011. U.S Central Command, *Biography: David Howell Petraeus* (July 2010) <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/LEADERSHIP/Bio-Article-View/Article/904777/david-howell-petraeus/> (last viewed on March 30, 2024).

2 Ibid.

- 3 CNN Editorial Research, *David Petraeus Fast Facts* (October 26, 2023) <https://www.cnn.com/2013/03/01/us/david-petraeus-fast-facts/index.html> (last viewed on March 30, 2024).
- 4 Hoover Institution, *Fellow: Andrew Roberts* (2023) <https://www.hoover.org/profiles/andrew-roberts> (last viewed on March 30, 2024).
- 5 Petraeus, GEN David and Andrew Roberts. *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine*. HarperCollins, 2023, p. 2.
- 6 Ibid., 4.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., 54-55.
- 9 Ibid., 55.
- 10 Ibid., 168.
- 11 Ibid., 12.
- 12 Ibid., 60-66.
- 13 Ibid., 132.
- 14 Ibid., 154.
- 15 Ibid., 274-275.
- 16 Ibid., 338.
- 17 Ibid., 277.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., 132.
- 21 Ibid., 350-404.
- 22 Ibid., 405-442.