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## War is about Killing and Destruction, It is Not Armed Social Science: A Short Response to Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham

Gian P. Gentile

I feel sorry for the British Army for they seem to have been taken in by the American Army's consumption with Counterinsurgency and its theoretical premise that military force can "change entire societies" for the better. Of course this quote is attributed to one of America's leading Counterinsurgency experts retired Army Lieutenant Colonel John Nagl.

The irony is that the American Coin experts in their own campaign to transform the American Army to a Counterinsurgency force from 2005 to 2007 used the British Army as an example of the proper way to do "classic" Coin: e.g., Malaya, and Sir Robert Thompson's recommendations for the United States in Vietnam. Yet as the Iraq Triumph Narrative is now written, the British Army lost their way and failed in Iraq where the Americans succeeded. Now, just as with the American Army, the British Army based on this [essay by Mackay and Tatham](#) have succumbed to the flawed theories and notions promoted by General Rupert Smith in his hugely influential but deeply flawed book *The Utility of Force*. The idea that wars are fought "amongst the people" coupled with the American view that military force can transform societies. This is militarized social science run amok. Senior American military leaders are often quoted saying such things with regard to Afghanistan that it is not how many we "kill" but how many we "convince." If you want to appreciate the futility of military force in a very short amount of time trying to do social engineering and transform a society read Jeffrey Race's classic account of a province in the Vietnam War, *War Comes to Long An*.

So nowadays in this flawed thinking everything is war from passing out humanitarian relief in Darfur, to NGO protection, to non-lethal effects, to establishing combat outposts in Mogadishu to eradicate pirates, to the valleys of the Korengal, to fighting off the North Korean hordes. All is war and everything is subsumed within it. But what is the American Army (and the British Army) to do with this new construct of total war? What is the Army's place in it? Should we be optimized to fight using combined arms or to do stability operations. And please, the lovers of the word "balance" don't come back with the B word as magic wand for wishing away tough choices. Tough choices must be made. Yet instead of making choices we find ourselves in a muddle, confused about the true nature of war and of our Army's purpose. Sadly to me, the British Army seems to be in the same rut.

The American Army (as I imagine the British Army too) will be told to do many things but first and foremost it must be able to fight using combined arms at all command levels. If it can do this, it can do most other things. But we in the military should eradicate the notion that military force can act as an engine for quick social change. Until we remove this foolhardy notion we will continue to be enamored with books like *The Utility of Force* which present a one-sided and narrow view that the history of conventional war has ended and we have entered a brave new world of wars fought amongst the people thereby demanding Armies that are optimized for drinking tea with sheiks and built with the purpose to “convince” rather than to “kill.”

To be sure war ultimately is about convincing the other side to do your will. That notion of course is attributable to Clausewitz. But now it seems in the American and British Armies that fundamental notion about the purpose of war has been “tacticalized” down to the lowest levels of military formations so that what is most important for a rifle platoon in Helmand is not to kill using combined arms but to “convince” through the process of trying to win hearts and minds.

In short we are placing the cart of convincing before the horse of killing and in so doing we are quickly losing our way as an Army of the free world.

*The author is a serving American Army Colonel and teaches military history at West Point. He commanded a Cavalry Squadron in West Baghdad in 2006.*

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