



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

The Need for the Return of History: Why Studying History and Human Motivations is the Key to the Future of Warfare

Grant Martin

As I was reading David Brooks' March 25 *New York Times* op-ed, *The Return of History*, I couldn't help but play a game I have come to enjoy ever since reading Eric D. Beinhocker's book *The Origin of Wealth*. What I do is every time I come to the word "economist" when reading a work on economics, I substitute the words "military theorist" in my mind, and every time I come to the word "economics" I replace it with the words "the study of warfare". Since the switch seemed to fit so well with Beinhocker's book, I was not too surprised when it seemed to fit Brooks' article as well.

At the risk of appearing to plagiarize and with apologies to Mr. Brooks, I have replaced most of the words in his article below that dealt with economics with a word or words that had more to do with warfare. I have left his words in italics, except for the title of books, and put my words in regular font.

What I think the scholar of military studies might find interesting is a possibly different perspective with which to look at warfare: one that more closely resembles trying to understand human economic behavior. For if we can understand economic behavior better using certain perspectives, is it possible that we could use some of the same perspectives to understand human behavior in warfare, or at least behavior in insurgency environments?

Title: "*The Return of History* to Preeminence in the Study of Warfare"

(Date: 2012- written as if Afghanistan is viewed as a failed venture then, much like the near-collapse of the U.S. banking system in 2008 that Brooks writes about in his *New York Times* opinion piece.)

Some brilliant scholar has to write a comprehensive history of modern warfare because the evolution of this field is clearly one of the most consequential things happening in the world today.

Act I in this history would be set in the era of warfare scientism: the period when military theorists based their work on a crude vision of human creatures involved in warfare (the goal-oriented, Center-of-Gravity-focused, Western-values-infused and homogenous group of rational

people that one calls “the enemy”) *and then built elaborate (and even overly-simplistic) models based on those creatures and how to analyze them and, in the end, defeat them.*

Act II would occur over the past few decades, as a few brave theorists tried to move beyond this stick-figure view of human groups engaged in warfare. Herbert Simon pointed out that people aren't perfectly rational. Gary Becker analyzed behaviors that don't seem to be the product of narrow self-interest, like having children and behaving altruistically. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman pointed out that people seem to have common biases when they try to make objective decisions. Colonel Gian P. Gentile wrote of the folly of applying one method in the conduct of counterinsurgency¹ operations.

This part of the history would be the story of gradually growing sophistication and of splintering.

Then the story would come to Act III, the counterinsurgency crisis of 2010 and 2011. This act is a climax of sorts because it exposed the shortcomings of the whole counterinsurgency field (and thus the contemporary operating environment of “Full Spectrum Operations”²). Warfare experts spent 2002 to 2006 engaging in trial and error in Iraq with the result being a new Army (and Marine Corps) bible: Field Manual 3-24. Two years later and the new manual was deemed a success: Iraq proved the new theory worked and thus it was applied, albeit in a limited manner, in Afghanistan. Yet these theories did not account for the differences between the two countries. In fact, cutting-edge military simulations contributed to the wrong-headed paradigm by getting behavior very wrong — helping to wipe out billions in American wealth as we bounced between different means with which to “win hearts and minds” in an area of the world in which that was all but impossible.

This would bring the historian to Act IV, the period of soul-searching that we are living through now. More than a year after the event, there is no consensus on what caused “the loss”. Military theorists are fundamentally re-evaluating their field.

*“Where were the intellectual agenda-setters when the loss in Afghanistan was mounting?” asked Colonel Gent O. Gianile of The Citadel, in *Small Wars Journal*: “Why did they fail to see the train wreck coming?”*

In The Combined Arms Center blog site, Dr. Ryex Alan of the School of Advanced Army Studies wondered why the study of warfare is even considered a science. Real sciences make progress. But in military theory, old thinkers cycle in and out of fashion. In real sciences, evidence solves problems. Dr. Alan asked his colleagues if they could think of any military study so well done that it had definitively settled a dispute. Nobody could think of one.

“The bottom line is that we should expect less of military theorists,” Alan wrote.

¹ Kilcullen, Dr. David. *Counterinsurgency*. Oxford University Press, 2010. ... if you cut the qualifying adjectives out of the field manual's definition of counterinsurgency, you are left only with “actions taken by government to defeat insurgency”. Counterinsurgency is, simply, whatever governments do to defeat rebellions.

² Full Spectrum Operations entail the application of combat power through simultaneous and continuous combinations of four elements: offense, defense, stability, and civil support.

In a column called “A Crisis of Understanding,” Cordy Anthonesman of CSIA pointed out that the best explanation of the crisis isn’t even a work of warfare analysis. It’s a history book — The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam: by Barbara Tuchman — that is almost entirely devoid of theory.

One gets the sense, at least from the outside, that the intellectual energy is no longer with the military theorists who construct abstract and elaborate models. Instead, the field seems to be moving in a humanist direction. Many theorists are now trying to absorb lessons learned by psychologists, neuroscientists and sociologists. They’re producing books with titles like “Animalistic Spirits,” “The Irrational Warrior,” and “Identity Warfare,” about subjects such as how social identities shape warfare.

This amounts to rediscovering the humility of an earlier time. After all, the great military minds of history were “readers of men” more than theorists, Clausewitz built his philosophy on an awareness of our own ignorance, and the great lesson of Vietnam and McNamara was supposed to be not to sacrifice realism to mathematics (wasn't it?). Warfare is a “moral science,” someone famous should write. If someone did write this- they'd say it deals with “motives, expectations, psychological uncertainties. One has to be constantly on guard against treating doctrine and theory as constant and homogenous.”

In Act IV, in other words, military theorists are taking baby steps into the world of emotion, social relationships, imagination, love and virtue. In Act V, I predict, they will blow up their whole field.

Warfare studies achieved coherence as a science by amputating most of human nature. Now military theorists are starting with those parts of emotional life that they can count and model (the activities that make them military scientists). But once they're in this terrain, they'll surely find that the processes that make up the inner life are not amenable to the methodologies of social science. The moral and social yearnings of fully realized human beings are not reducible to universal laws and cannot be studied like physics.

Once this is accepted, warfare studies would again become a subsection of history and moral philosophy like it was under the Ancient Greeks. It will be a powerful language for analyzing certain sorts of activity.

Military theorists will be able to describe how some people acted in some specific contexts. They will be able to draw out some suggestive lessons to keep in mind while thinking about other people and other contexts - just as historians, psychologists and novelists do.

At the end of Act V, warfare studies will be realistic, but it will be an art, not a science...

The bottom line is that studying what drives humans at the fundamental level is much more important than lists of principles with which to follow when bullets are flying. Of course, what drives human groups is a somewhat more complex matter, and acknowledging the differences between groups is very important, but perhaps most important is understanding those differences.

If we can figure out why a certain product sells well in a certain district in Afghanistan, it is probably not too much of a stretch to say that we could figure out what motivates people in that district to go to war or to sue for peace.

And that is not necessarily all touchy-feely and worrying about “winning hearts and minds”. Let’s face it, we probably did not win too many hearts and minds in Iraq and we surely will not in Afghanistan. That phrase possibly describes an era of political warfare as opposed to a struggle infused with cultural and religious undertones. But, it IS about influencing hearts and minds. Anthropologists and military psychological operators get squeamish when anyone talks about “influencing” others with military might, but- all PC-ness aside, what more does a military do than influence others? When an insurgent in Afghanistan lays down his weapon, that event is due to some kind of influence on him. Why is influencing populations always looked upon as bad by the anthropological community?

I guess what we really are talking about is anthropology. Figuring out why groups do what they do. If we can figure that out and keep people from attacking others, then I would think everyone would win.

David Brooks’ point about “*emotion, social relationships, imagination, love and virtue*” underlying economic behavior fits perfectly with what I would call warfare behavior. People pick up weapons and try to kill others based on those things as well, and it is about time we acknowledge that and study it instead of treating insurgency as if it were a few divisions of enemy armor with a center of gravity and best met with Brigade Combat Teams and one doctrine.

Major Grant Martin is an Army Special Forces officer currently serving in Afghanistan with the NATO Training Mission. The opinions expressed herein are his alone and do not represent the official position of the Department of Defense or the United States Army.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)

