

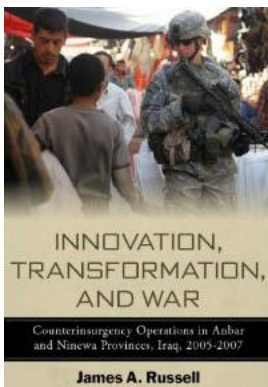


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Adapting to the Utterly Unpredictable, the Entirely Unknown

Book Review by Frank G. Hoffman



James A. Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War, Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005-2007*, Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2011, 288 pgs, \$24.95.

The most respected military historian of our day, Michael Howard, commented years ago that the one aspect of military affairs he believed needed to be studied above all others was “the capacity to adapt oneself to the utterly unpredictable, the entirely unknown.” For a generation we ignored his advice, and instead pursued techno-centric illusions and conceptual dark holes with little payoff.

Reinforcing that advice, now retired Army General Dave Fastabend once encouraged the U.S. Army to seek one operational advantage in the future--to strive to “be superior in the art of learning and adaptation.” The last decade of the Long War has borne out both these arguments and also demonstratively shown how far we still need to go despite the development of counterinsurgency (COIN) and stability operations doctrine in the Army and Marine Corps.

The prevailing narrative from our two ongoing conflicts in Central Asia and the Middle East gives a lot of credit for success to the promulgation of FM 3-24 *Counterinsurgency* in late 2006 and the increased resources commonly called the “surge” in both conflicts. This storyline is an irritation to many commanders who already understood the best practices of successful COIN and applied them successfully in Iraq without benefit of the codified commandments handed down like stone tablets.

In *Innovation, Transformation and War*, Dr. James Russell demonstratively undercuts that simplistic top down-driven narrative of American innovation in Iraq. Dr. Russell is a veteran of the policy wars in the Pentagon, a professor of national security affairs at the Naval Post-Graduate School in Monterey, CA. and a long time expert in Middle East affairs. Russell demonstrates that well before Mr. Bush directed the first surge in Iraq, Army and Marine units had devised and were implementing new COIN competencies and techniques quite successfully at the tactical level. They did so without top down guidance, campaign directives from higher headquarters, or published principles or paradoxes from the past. The author notes “it is somewhat misleading to assert that the new doctrine suddenly and systemically enhanced

battlefield performance that had been notably lagging.” As Russell shows with convincing evidence, the tide had already been turned in Anbar Province, presumably as a result of this diverse set of bottom up initiatives.

Russell seeks to understand the process by which rapid implementation of entirely new solutions and technologies can be forged in the crucible of combat. In contrast, our understanding about military innovation is heavily based upon successful peacetime or interwar innovation. This type of innovation is anticipatory and predicated often by dramatic changes in security threats or new technological breakthroughs such as the combustion engine, aviation, radar, or computers. The literature has focused on such formal systems of deliberate and institutional innovation as reflected in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge 1996) a DOD-sponsored research project, which culminated in a volume edited by the noted U.S. historians Williamson Murray and Allan Millet. Likewise, Stephen Peter Rosen’s *Winning the Next War* focuses largely on the phenomena of directed innovation by military institutions and the variables or environmental factors that lead to successful change.

The literature is sparse with respect to formal theories on how military organizations change or evolve during war. Organizational theorists focus on post-conflict learning, with the exception of Timothy Lupfer’s *Dynamics of Doctrine* research monograph on German tactical experimentation or Dr. John Nagl’s *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* which explored Britain’s successful adaptation in Malaya during the 1950’s, representing exceptions. Whereas Nagl captures both plans of the theater headquarters and its development of the campaign, Professor Russell examined the tactical and operational lessons that field units developed and pursued themselves, in the absence of help from what he calls the “rear echelon.”

The improved performance on the complex battlefield of Iraq commenced in 2005 and was obtaining observable results by 2006 in the absence of explicit top-down direction from the military hierarchy or formal Joint doctrine. What accounts for this success? Russell concludes that an iterative process of organically generated tactical adaptation and innovation unfolded over time in a distinctive progression of trial and error culminating in standard operating procedures and innovative practices peculiar to the circumstances of the units he studied. These included a number of Army brigades (armor, Stryker, cavalry and National Guard) and three Marine battalions (including 1st Bn, 7th Marines commanded by then LtCol Dale Alford and 3rd Bn, 6th Marines led by LtCol Nick Marano in Al Qaim).

This work is not a rambling academic exercise. The field research that supports Russell’s revisionist perspective is based upon extensive primary sources including personal observations and interviews with the participants in country. It is a compelling assessment of current history and recent interpretations of ongoing conflict, written with lucid prose and a mature understanding of irregular warfare.

One of Russell’s key conclusions involves the willingness of operational headquarters to apply decentralized command techniques and a marked willingness to empower tactical leaders. “This organizational flexibility produced wartime innovation,” Russell finds, “that fundamentally changed the conduct of the war against the insurgents in the years preceding the promulgation of

formal, joint doctrine.” This confirms insights found in Meir Finkel’s recent book *On Flexibility* (also published by Stanford’s successful security series).

While this book reflects an extraordinarily deep grasp of the literature on innovation and organizational learning, the book raises questions about institutional culture and officer education. Dr. Russell notes that the Army and Marine units were culturally different, but that this distinction was not a variable that affected their development of creative solutions. Other research (Wick Murray, Deborah Avant, Elizabeth Kier, and Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff) suggests that elements of Army and Marine culture influence how culture impacts Service command styles, operational art, and the role of education in preparing commanders and staffs for changing tactics and techniques by building up their storehouse of historical models and past best practices. Each Service has a *Mask of War* that it wears and this mask can retard or facilitate evolutionary changes. Last, the role of intensive educational preparation as part of the profession of arms has been emphasized by Generals Paul Van Riper and Jim Mattis over the past decade and merits attention in this rich vein of scholarship.

The author’s bottom up model of tactical adaptation is original and worthy of further development. RAND’s Adam Grissom, writing in the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, may have been the first to shed light on this subject. To expand this inquiry, a wider set of historical cases, including both offensive and defensive examples would be useful, as well as conventional operations including both ground and aviation applications to broaden our research base and to improve our ability to generalize from the insights with greater confidence beyond just U.S. ground units involved in COIN. Additionally, the process of capturing and rapidly disseminating lessons learned between units, and between successful field units and the rear echelon to improve the performance of units being trained for subsequent deployment is worth study. Finkel’s book shows how critical this can be to learning organizations especially by transmitting the learning among adjacent or follow on units—what might be termed “horizontal dissemination.” If counterinsurgencies are learning competitions as FM 3-24 suggests, then this aspect of the competition should be studied in more depth as it expands the speed and breadth of the learning cycle.

In the future, the ability to change rapidly may well be our major source of asymmetric advantage. If nonlinear modes continue to characterize modern warfare, the corresponding need to be adaptive without recourse to extensive doctrinal, organizational or materiel retooling could mean the difference between success and failure. *Innovation, Transformation and War* offers numerous insights on abetting this degree of agility and is recommended with great enthusiasm for its conclusions on adaptation and operational flexibility, as well as for its provocative assessment of the prevailing Iraq history. No professional library devoted to modern conflict or the study of how our military needs to prepare for war in the 21st century would be complete without this study. It represents the front edge of a major research thrust, and will surely prove to be a lasting contribution to our growing grasp of the challenges of modern conflict and measurably adds to our understanding of military innovation. It is strongly recommended for senior military leaders in the Joint and Service combat development community and all students of innovation and history.

Mr. Hoffman is a retired Marine Reservist and frequent contributor to Small Wars Journal.

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