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Analyzing the American civil rights movement of 1954–68 from the perspective of a military operation, *Waging a Good War* is a tour de force. Thomas E. Ricks masterfully pieces together the overarching strategy of the movement’s key leaders and their selective tactics and provides a studied analysis of the battlespace. Utilizing his long association with the study of military operations, he turns his professional eye to the civil rights movement and artfully demonstrates how, without overt knowledge, its leaders used a brilliant military model to achieve their objective—true equality within American society.

Unlike America’s recent military planning experiences, Martin Luther King Jr. developed a clear strategic vision and converted it into a diverse, carefully crafted series of tactics based on the analysis of local conditions and anticipated reactions. This clarity of vision and its conversion into nuanced tactics is akin to Ho Chi Minh’s direction of the Vietnam War and President Ulysses S. Grant’s adoption of General Winfield Scott’s Anaconda plan during the American Civil War. King was a modern-day Grant, directing the larger vision into highly effective pinpoint tactics at the most vulnerable bastions of segregation.

Sun Tzu’s classic strategy of studying the enemy first and then building tactics to support that analysis was absorbed and translated by King, though King likely would have rejected the comparison. Inspired largely by Mahatma Gandhi’s teachings of nonviolence, King articulated his vision, trained subordinate leaders, built focused tactical objectives in the Deep South, read the political atmosphere with acuity, and applied highly effective operational oversight. While Grant had Napoleon Bonaparte and Antoine-Henri, baron de Jomini, as his lodestars, King had Gandhi. While Gandhi won his point
with significant loss of life, King—a brilliant student—achieved his objectives through the courts and public opinion with minimal violence.

The campaigns waged by King and his followers resonate today; Nashville, Birmingham, Chicago, Selma, Ole Miss and the March on Washington are analogous to Grant’s campaigns throughout the Deep South. The local events became stepping stones for future operations. Ho Chi Minh leveraged his localized actions in Indochina that culminated in his campaign for the Battle of Dien Bien Phu. King followed the same model, building on individual events to reach a larger victory. Although King and his immediate subordinates would probably reject these models if they were alive today, Ricks makes clear they are parallel, if not the same.

The most poignant matter in the book is the effect of the civil rights movement on its participants. Many of King’s subordinates suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, like military combatants often do. Ricks displays this human—and often overlooked—aspect of the campaign to show the parallel between the civil rights movement and war. Many of King’s lieutenants, exhausted by their efforts and the stress placed on themselves and their families, succumbed to neuroses like those seen in the veterans of Iwo Jima, Hue, and Fallujah.

While readers may generally understand the events of this period, little documentation of the underlying nature of the actions, leaders, and operations from a larger strategic viewpoint exists. Ricks fills the void by masterfully interpreting one of America’s most consequential social movements as a classic military operation. He uses his military analysis expertise to produce a highly readable dissection of the movement. *Waging a Good War* deconstructs each of King’s campaign nodes with great clarity and a firm military eye, allowing readers to see the collection of intelligence, the political analysis, the training of local leaders and participants, the operational guidance, and the coalescing of all these factors to achieve a “signal victory.” *Waging a Good War* is a unique analysis of the American civil rights movement written from an unexpected perspective with a degree of insight, analysis, and irrefutable truths that make it a history of the first order. Bravo!