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Book Review: Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine

John A. Nagl

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The aftermath of the long war against al-Qaeda has spawned numerous memoirs, though the most important of the war’s commanders, General David Petraeus, has not yet added his own to that number. The closest thing to a memoir that leaders are likely to get from Petraeus is his new book, *Conflict: The Evolution of Warfare from 1945 to Ukraine*, written in partnership with Andrew Roberts, a noted British military historian.

Petraeus clearly took the lead in writing the chapters on the American wars in Vietnam (the subject of his doctoral dissertation), Iraq, and Afghanistan. Indeed, the latter two chapters are written in first person—the Iraq chapter concluding with four appendices, one providing Petraeus’s “Commander’s Counterinsurgency Guidance” and the other three containing PowerPoint slides from his tenure as commander of Multi-National Force – Iraq and US Central Command. It would be safe to assume Petraeus also took the lead in writing the concluding chapters on the Russia-Ukraine War and the future of warfare. While there is nothing wrong with the chapters examining the post–World War II era for lessons for future conflicts, potential readers will not buy this book for those chapters. *Conflict* achieved its *New York Times* bestseller status because of the success and notoriety of Petraeus, who concluded his public service as the director of the CIA for President Barack Obama.

Future commanders and staff officers will find value in the book’s introduction, which forms the skeleton for the analysis of each of the dissected campaigns. Petraeus argues there are four major tasks leaders (whether politicians or generals) in any war must master: get the big ideas right, communicate those big ideas, execute those big ideas, and “determine how the big ideas need to be refined, adapted, and augmented, so that they can perform the first three tasks again and again and
again” (4). If these tasks sound simple, read the book to see how many politicians and generals failed at them—particularly at getting the big ideas right, which is far harder than it sounds.

For instance, history might have been much different if President Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ), as he chose between Generals William Westmoreland and Creighton Abrams for command of the American war in Vietnam in 1965, had asked each candidate what his big idea was for that war and how he planned to implement it. Westmoreland, of course, would have gotten that question wrong. When asked what the answer to insurgency was at a press conference, he answered “Firepower. Next question?” Whether LBJ would have understood that it was the wrong answer is a different question entirely. Petraeus, from his study of the Vietnam War and his experience in two counterinsurgency campaigns, clearly knows better, and the conclusion of his Iraq chapter, the heart of the book, is worth quoting at length:

Keeping counter-insurgency doctrine current and educating mid-grade and senior leaders about it (while understandably focusing more on major combat operations given the developments of the past decade) will be a small price to pay to ensure that when the United States is again confronted with a messy, irregular conflict the leaders of its armed forces are intellectually prepared to cope with it (340).

Petraeus notes that “the U.S. Army required more than three years in Iraq to regain the competencies so unwisely jettisoned after the end of the Vietnam War” without noting how influential he was, as the commander of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth, in helping it regain those competencies (340). Written in Petraeus’s 71st year, this book is likely to be the best first-person account in history of his efforts and results in Iraq and Afghanistan that made him the most important Army officer of his generation. All Army officers and national security officials who bear the responsibility to ensure America does not lose a war again as catastrophically as it did in Afghanistan—or come within a hair’s breadth of doing so, as it would have in Iraq without Petraeus’s big ideas and extraordinary focus on implementing them—must read this book.

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