

## Might of the troglodyte

By: *WHIT MASON*

[Click here to search for full page image in PDF format](#)

The old paradigm of interstate industrial conflict has been replaced by 'war among the people'

Swords and Ploughshares: Bringing Peace to the 21st Century

By Paddy Ashdown

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 352pp, \$35

The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World

By Rupert Smith

Penguin, 448pp, \$27.95

The Secret History of Al Qaeda

By Abdel Bari Atwan

Abacus, 256pp, \$27.95

The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban

By Sarah Chayes

University of Queensland Press, 400pp, \$34.95

Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq

By Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor

Atlantic Books, 728pp, \$26.95

Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq

By Thomas Ricks

Penguin, 496pp, \$26.95

WAR isn't what it used to be. It still brings out the best and the worst in human beings and causes untold suffering, while providing the crucible that makes young men mates for life. But we -- the Allies, the Anglo-Saxon world and our friends -- used to win.

We won the two world wars. In the following few decades we lost or drew some police actions, but we beat our Cold War rivals hands down and continued the inexorable technological progress that has made Western military and naval forces the most lethal the world has known. Yet despite this awesome firepower, in the past 15 years the West's (and Russia's) great military machines have repeatedly failed to deliver. And now we're being harried and bled by cranky men in caves and internet cafes.

There are two reasons we're not winning. First, war can no longer be won in the sense that the Allies won the world wars. Those cataclysmic trials of strength ended on VE Day and VJ Day; there will be no VW Day to mark the end of the war on terror. In *The Utility of Force*, retired British general Rupert Smith argues that this is because it is not a war at all, but an ongoing confrontation punctuated by a series of inconclusive conflicts.

The other reason we're not winning, as each of the books under review painfully

brings home, is that we're using forces trained for a different role and the wrong tactics to fight in a battlefield that is dimly perceived and towards ends that are hazily defined.

It's almost enough to make you want to give up fighting, but that, unfortunately, doesn't seem to be an option. Competition for natural resources, the recrudescence of militant faith and a shift in power from west to east make ours a combustible era, of which failed states are a conspicuous feature. Failed states are not new, but their potential to disturb us and our potential to ameliorate them is. Until 1991, superpower rivalry limited the scope for intervention, but the UN was involved in a dozen peacekeeping missions in which lightly armed soldiers oversaw ceasefires. The end of the Cold War created new possibilities and new demands. Since the UN created a division of peacekeeping operations in 1992, there has been an average of 28 conflicts a year, the bulk of them internal. Though military actions have not been as decisive as hoped, recent studies have found that the accelerated pace of intervention has dramatically reduced the number of conflicts, and even more dramatically reduced the number of those killed and wounded in them. Unsurprisingly, peacekeepers have been most successful where there has been a reasonable degree of peace to keep, such as in Namibia, where Australian forces have played a prominent role.

But the record of recent military intervention, particularly in Afghanistan and Iraq, is hardly inspiring; citizens in Western democracies could not be blamed for believing we're better off leaving failing, predatory or despotic states to their own devices. THE books under review shed light on the nature of contemporary conflict and why rich and powerful Western countries have fared so poorly in recent trials of strength. Insofar as diagnosis is the first step towards a cure, they are all hopeful. They cannot prove that effective interventions are possible or that liberal democracies can win what Smith calls war among the people, but their authors do persuasively demonstrate that recent interventions, from the Balkans and East Timor to Afghanistan and Iraq, were by no means fated to fail as spectacularly as they mostly have. They show, on the contrary, that Western failures have resulted from fundamentally misunderstanding the essence of contemporary conflicts and how force and persuasion must be blended to prevail in them.

Our arrangements for managing conflict are, to borrow a phrase from evolutionary biology, adapted for our ancestral environments. The cornerstone of the present international system was laid 140 years before the First Fleet entered Botany Bay. In 1648 the Treaty of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War by enshrining the right of every sovereign to be the final authority within their domains. Intervening to support co-religionists would no longer be an accepted pretext for invasion, at least among Christian monarchs.

For the next 400 years, international institutions and practices evolved on the basis of Westphalia's principle that states are inviolable and that they are the only entities with legal personality. The state-centric system was initially undermined by nationalist movements inspired by the French Revolution, then set on a collision course with popular norms by US president Woodrow Wilson's embrace of the principle of self-determination after World War I. Thenceforward any group could challenge a state's sovereignty simply by declaring that it preferred not to be a part of that state. Many did and still do, but the system affords them no non-violent recourse.

Paddy Ashdown's life has been framed by the tension between the supremacy of sovereignty and self-determination. Born in Northern Ireland to Protestant and Catholic parents, from age 19 he was a Royal Marine officer, working to contain the spillage of conflict across borders into Kenya, Kuwait and Borneo. He went on to serve in the British Foreign Office and the House of Commons, where he headed the Liberal Democratic Party, before serving for three years as the international community's representative in Bosnia.

“There is a mismatch between the realities of our world and the model we use to solve its problems,” Ashdown writes in *Swords and Ploughshares*. “We have been forced to adapt this model by the uncomfortable fact that most of the world's problems today occur in entities which are not states.”

He cites Palestine, Kashmir, Chechnya, Kosovo and Northern Ireland; in Australia's region, one could add East Timor before independence, Papua and rival islands in the Solomons. The difference between those borders that are recognised and those that are felt by the people who live within them gives rise to much of contemporary conflict.

SMITH is Britain's most experienced military commander, having headed the British armoured division in the Gulf War, the inaptly named UN Protection Force in Bosnia, all British forces in Northern Ireland, as well as serving as deputy supreme allied commander in NATO. This resume makes all the more startling the opening sentence of his magisterial study: “War no longer exists.”

What Smith means by war is a clash between the armies of states that decisively resolves a dispute between them. This model, which he calls interstate industrial war, entails “conflict between states, the manoeuvre of forces en masse, and the total support of the state's manpower and industrial base, at the expense of all other interests, for the purpose of an absolute victory”.

This has been the dominant paradigm since Napoleon took advantage of the unprecedented identification of France's masses with the French state to create a huge and highly motivated army with the power not just to tweak Europe's balance of power but to crush and impose its will on rival states. Increasingly massive trials of strength spurred and were enabled by the evolution of powerful, centralised states and industrialisation.

“The paradigm of interstate industrial war was literally blown to pieces on August 6, 1945,” Smith writes, referring to the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. “Mass industrial armies would no longer be effective in the face of a weapon of mass destruction, as the Russians came to call it.” The paradigm lived on through the Cold War, however, because the doctrine of mutually assured destruction required it. Smith writes: Throughout the past 15 years, both the Western allies and the Russians have entered into a series of military engagements that have in one way or another spectacularly failed to achieve the results intended, namely a decisive military victory which would in turn deliver a solution to the original problem, which is usually political ... The force may be massive and impressive, but it is not delivering the required results, nor indeed any result that is in proportion to its assumed capabilities.

Smith argues that we urgently need to discard or reconstruct the model problems

and solutions employed by practitioners of interstate industrial war and shift to a new paradigm: war among the people.

Rather than war and peace, there is no predefined sequence, nor is peace necessarily either the starting or the end point: conflicts are resolved, but not necessarily confrontations. The people are not the enemy. The enemy is among the people and the purpose of any use of military force and other power is to differentiate between the enemy and the people and to win the latter over to you. The failure to grasp the implications of the shift to war among the people underpins the strategically self-defeating occupations in Afghanistan and in Iraq.

In *The Punishment of Virtue*, Sarah Chayes, a former reporter for the US's National Public Radio, who has lived in Afghanistan since 2002, tells a passionately felt personal story about the country since the US-led invasion in 2001. Her book is built on two intertwined stories: her creation of a non-government organisation, *Afghans for Civil Society*, and the murder by a thuggish warlord propped up by US forces of an honourable Pashtun who had become police chief in Kandahar.

What happened in Kandahar, the Taliban's former stronghold, was important in itself, but it was also a microcosm of the Faustian bargains US forces made around the country, undermining Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai and Afghans' hopes that the foreigners would improve on the brutal regime of the Taliban. Chayes writes: There was no strategy for targeting reconstruction dollars so as to produce the greatest positive domino effect. Worse, there was not even a clear notion of what the desired end state in Afghanistan was. The embassy lacked seasoned political officers with regional experience or a coherent vision. And no guidance was coming from Washington. It was as though it had never occurred to anyone to think about what would happen once the Taliban were defeated. As a result, US action was slipshod and haphazard, just when Afghanistan needed legitimacy, direction and consistency. In this void, decisions about which local strongmen to back were made by soldiers in the field, "based on the immediate usefulness in tactical military terms of the gun lord in question". Such tactical compromises vitiated the strategic aim of shaping a new political order.

ELEVEN weeks of bombing by US warplanes and an assault on the al-Qa'ida stronghold of Tora Bora failed to kill or capture Osama bin Laden or his lieutenants. "Though its leaders had avoided capture or death, this could have been the beginning of the end for al-Qa'ida," Abdel Bari Atwan writes in his illuminating book, *The Secret History of Al Qaeda*.

"The US onslaught in Afghanistan had succeeded in destroying more than 80 per cent of its military capabilities and infrastructure. They lost their safe haven and their training camps there; they lost support among more moderate Muslims who felt tremendous sympathy for the victims of the September 11 attacks and, crucially, there was dissent within al-Qa'ida itself."

Atwan, the Palestinian-born editor-in-chief of London-based newspaper *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*, expresses the consensus view that bin Laden and his lieutenants escaped across the border into Pakistan. And then, Atwan writes, "in a moment of great historical irony, just 18 months after it had been sent reeling from Afghanistan, al-Qa'ida's flagging fortunes were revived by the US when it decided to invade Iraq". The invasion fulfilled the great hope bin Laden had expressed to Atwan during a two-day interview in Tora Bora in 1996: "If we can fight them on our own (Muslim)

territory we will beat them, because the battle will be on our terms in a land they neither know nor understand."

While in Afghanistan the Pentagon had thrown together an invasion plan on the fly, no such urgency can explain the gaps in the plan for Iraq. Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor's *Cobra II* and Thomas Ricks's *Fiasco* detail the dysfunctional planning and prosecution of the invasion and the bungled first months of occupation that set the stage for the ongoing insurgency and civil war.

*Cobra II* focuses on the military through the first months of occupation, while *Fiasco* takes the story almost to the present. Both books emphasise the absence of any detailed plan to provide public order and security and to win the indispensable support of Iraqis. Despite warnings from senior officers and US government agencies, then defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld ignored concerns about creating a power vacuum and forced his view that the goal was to conquer Baghdad and depose Saddam Hussein with a minimum of troops.

And despite years of indoctrination in the abstract principles of what the US calls military operations other than war, US commanders had no idea what to do after Baghdad fell. One general ingenuously acknowledged: "I read all that stuff. Read it many times and thought about it. But I can remember quite clearly, I was on a street corner in Baghdad, smoking a cigar and watching some guys carry a sofa by, and it never occurred to me that I was going to be the guy to get that sofa back." Iraqis wondered why a country that had put men on the moon couldn't restore the electricity. As the locals struggled with this new level of privation, the occupiers outfitted their bases with coffee bars, satellite television and internet cafes. In a chapter titled *How to Create an Insurgency*, Ricks writes:

In the two to three months of ambiguous transition, US forces slowly lost the momentum and the initiative they had gained over an off-balance enemy. During this calm before the next storm, the US Army had its eyes turned toward the ports, while the former regime loyalists and budding insurgents had their eyes turned toward the people. The US, its army, and its coalition of the willing have been playing catch-up ever since.

Ricks quotes a marine colonel describing one of countless instances when US troops sacrificed their strategic aim in order to expediently remove an immediate irritant: "They had been taking sniper fire from a building for six nights. So that day, they send a civic action team to the high-rise building it came from and they ordered everyone to evacuate the building because the building was going to be destroyed. That night, two AC-130s pumped rounds into it until it was reduced to rubble. Made lots of friends that way."

As popular disenchantment mushroomed, Paul Bremer, the cocky head of the civilian administration in Iraq, seized on the bright idea of disbanding the Iraqi army and other security services, thus immediately creating a pool of hundreds of thousands of men who were armed and dangerous and had little to lose.

Atwan refers to two studies, one Saudi and one Israeli, that conclude the majority of insurgents in Iraq became militants only in reaction to the US occupation: "Eighty-one per cent of Iraqis view the US troops as occupiers rather than liberators and a mere 13 per cent say the invasion was morally justified."

Americans in Iraq in 2003 knew little of this, ``operating in a relative vacuum of Iraqi sentiments'', as a study by the Centre for Army Lessons Learned reported several months later.

The occupiers' self-inflicted disasters are made the more tragic by the fact that there has always been a minority of Americans, soldiers and civilians, who knew and did better at every stage. A Special Forces major ran a very different operation in Iraq's western desert, as he told Ricks: ``I understood this was a war of liberation and therefore the people were the centre of gravity. As a result, it was natural for us to focus on the people and build positive relationships with them."

The highest-ranking exception to the US's ham-fisted approach was Major General David Petraeus, who first commanded the 101st Airborne in the Kurdish area and is now commander of all coalition forces in Iraq. One perceptive major observed of the 101st: ``Winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people was the guiding purpose of all civil-military actions in the north."

The Bush administration seems to regard Petraeus as its last hope of finding a way to recover from years of mishandled occupation. Under him, the US is teaching all unit commanders the importance of understanding the culture of the communities in which they are operating. Combat units live among the population, do more foot patrols, talk and interact with locals.

Australia's Chief of Army, Lieutenant General Peter Leahy, recently visited a counter-terrorism training centre in Iraq and expressed disbelief that it took so long for commanders to realise the need to engage with the local population and win their trust. In the two southern Iraqi provinces where Australians have been operating, they have reportedly developed links with tribal leaders and consulted widely before undertaking operations or reconstruction projects. While such an approach undoubtedly generates local goodwill, it's doubtful that Australia reaps much benefit given its worldwide identification with US policy and everything done in its name. ASHDOWN and Smith sketch out the principles that will allow the West to use force effectively within the new paradigm of war among the people. In *The Seamless Garment*, the central chapter of his book, Ashdown argues that efforts at each stage of a forceful intervention -- prevention, conflict and post-conflict -- need to reflect a single, coherent narrative about the interveners' intentions.

First, a convincing case must be made that change in the targeted territory is necessary, generally in terms of internal respect for human rights or international behaviour or both. Then a desired end-state must be described in sufficient detail that the people concerned can envisage the new arrangements they are being asked to support; regime change or democracy are not enough. On the basis of an end-state the interveners want to achieve and the local population at least accepts, the plan is conceived. To someone who hasn't participated in such operations, this may seem like stating the bleeding obvious; in practice, interventions normally pursue a narrowly operational agenda that is only obliquely relevant to taking the society from post-conflict chaos to a popularly supported order.

To achieve the popular support on which all order depends, Ashdown writes: ... soldiers, though absolutely necessary, are the least useful people to have around when you are attempting to rebuild a state after conflict ... The reason for this is simple. After security has been established, it is the establishment of the rule of law,

the connection of basic services and the setting up of effective administration which enables you to win the battle for hearts and minds. Even more than fighting the war which preceded it, the struggle to reconstruct a state and society cannot be won without first gaining the support of the local population. This central fact has to shape all that you do and all that you plan to do.

Al-Qa'ida understands this very well: its militants film almost all acts of carnage in Iraq and put them on the internet; al-Qa'ida benefits whether it is they or the coalition who is responsible.

Smith emphasises that since creating stability entails establishing some form of the rule of law, acting outside the law, as the US did in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib, directly undermines its own strategic objective. With pointed understatement, he notes that in industrial war, dealing with civilians is a secondary activity and ``as a general rule selection for this branch would not be considered career-enhancing. However, in our modern conflicts, dealing with the civilian population is directly associated with the objective and is a primary and not a secondary activity."

In war among the people, intelligence acquires an outsized importance and more resources have to be devoted to finding the enemy than hitting them. This again depends on a modicum of goodwill among the population. And since in the new paradigm perception becomes reality and most people's perceptions are based on the media, military commanders must integrate considerations of how their actions will be reported into all their planning.

Prussian military thinker Carl von Clausewitz wrote the West's most celebrated and influential treatise on strategy, *On War*, after Napoleon destroyed the Prussian army at Jena and took him captive in 1806. Following Clausewitz's blueprint, the Prussians revolutionised their army and their use of force, and nine years after Jena, alongside the British, defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. We have thinkers who recognise the futility of the old paradigm and the outlines of the new one as clearly as did Clausewitz; the question is whether we have leaders who will heed them.