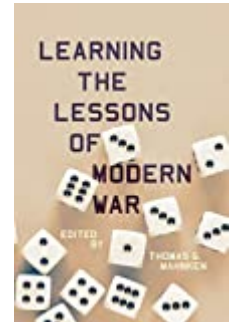


Thomas G. Mahnken. *Learning the Lessons of Modern War.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020. 344 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5036-1226-6.



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The purpose of this compilation of essays, edited by Thomas G. Mahnken, is to examine the lessons of recent conflicts and extract an understanding of how continuity and change influence the character and conduct of war. Mahnken has produced a useful resource for any practitioner or scholar who wants to understand the challenges of applying lessons from history to future conflicts. Section 1 of Mahnken's collection endeavors to illustrate the importance and challenges of learning the lessons of military history and makes an argument for a contemporary, interdisciplinary approach to educate the next generation of military leaders. Section 2 examines protracted, irregular wars in the context of American and allied experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. The authors give specific attention to adversary perceptions and the challenges inherent in formulating and implementing counterinsurgency strategy. The final section focuses on the lessons from other global conflicts, particularly where counterinsurgency (COIN) and counterterrorism (CT) strategies are

predicated on small force commitments and building local security organization capability.

To set the stage, Michael Evans makes a convincing argument for a contemporary, interdisciplinary approach to history. He argues that a holistic view of events, combined with analytical techniques from the social sciences, yields a military practitioner or scholar who can operate across two mental planes: functional (historically informed expertise) and dialectical (knowledge of how the past, present, and future interact). He concludes that past experience does not guarantee accurate predictions of the future but may allow practitioners to anticipate emerging trends.

Williamson Murray complements Evans's case with a brief historical outline of attempts, or lack thereof, to learn lessons in the wake of conflicts. He illustrates the tendency to misapply or misunderstand experiences at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels, which results in repetition of grievous errors in the next conflict. The difficulty of collecting and applying lessons is inher-

ent in the process because it requires practitioners to challenge their assumptions and basic beliefs. Additionally, he states that a successful lessons-learned process, regardless of the level, requires an open and honest organizational culture led by people who value debate and analysis.

Section 2 begins as Peter R. Mansoor and Ben Barry make the case that Iraq's primary lesson for policymakers is to carefully consider the decision to initiate a war before committing the nation's resources. War should not be the primary option, based on optimistic assumptions and inadequate contingency planning, but a last resort. There is myriad literature on the 2003 invasion of Iraq and thus there is nothing particularly revelatory in either analysis. Both authors do a good job of assessing the failure of US planners to account for the difficulty of postconflict stability operations and note the recurring theme of tactical and operational skill dissociated from strategic success. Barry makes an additional assessment of the British experience as a member of the coalition and outlines how battlefield adaptation in twenty-first-century warfare must occur more quickly than in the past.

Kevin M. Woods rounds out the section on Iraq with a useful summary of the Iraqi strategic perspective. He reveals that Saddam prioritized regime security against an internal uprising ahead of regional threats or a United States invasion to depose him. Woods asserts that Iraqi political-strategic factors had the most impact on how Iraq's military prepared for the conflict because it was internally focused. Without disparaging the tactical and operational skill of coalition forces, Woods makes the case that lessons learned from Iraq must incorporate the Iraqi leadership perspective to avoid codifying incorrect assessments of success into future doctrine.

The final chapters of section 2 are devoted to analysis of CT, COIN, and efforts to build local security capability in Afghanistan. Carter Malkasian, Theo Farrell, T. X. Hammes, and Todd Greentree

explore the difficulty both the United States and Britain encountered as they pursued mixtures of CT and COIN strategies against the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The authors note that the allure of CT is a focus on killing enemy fighters and leadership, often with unmanned attack platforms or special operations forces (SOF), with fewer personnel required for security operations among the populace. The military and political leadership of both coalition partners was slow to fully commit to the more manpower-intensive, time-consuming COIN mission. During the delay, public support in the United States and Britain waned. In addition to slow adaptation to COIN, innovations were poorly disseminated throughout the force, which further retarded successful operations. The expanded time to adapt and innovate, while executing a strategy disconnected from the economic and political conditions at home, led to delayed Afghan security capacity. Finally, the authors note that poor postconflict stabilization planning, combined with inadequate political, social, and cultural awareness, led to disjointed interagency efforts and a stalemate in Afghanistan.

Section 3 contains analysis of case studies where military adaptation, innovation, and whole of government alignment yielded largely successful outcomes. Ahmed S. Hashim examines Sri Lankan efforts to battle the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, noting that, while the process took time, government counterinsurgency operations eventually succeeded as they adapted and synergized across agencies. The Sri Lankan government has the distinction of being the first organization to defeat an insurgency in the twenty-first century.

David S. Maxwell supplements Hashim's assessment of successful COIN efforts with his own analysis of Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines. He claims that successful COIN was largely the result of effective relationships, intelligence sharing, interagency coordination, and influence operations to enhance Philippine government legitimacy. Special operations in support of a host

nation require trained personnel who can support and assist while focusing on the long-term strategy rather than short-term tactical gains.

In the final chapters, Svante E. Cornell examines Russian performance in Georgia and Ukraine followed by Phillip A. Petersen's discussion of emerging Russian military doctrine and exercises. Both authors note that Russia appears to have made a deliberate decision to change its international behavior and no longer follows established political norms. Cornell analyzes how Russia learned from its experience of nonlinear warfare during the Georgian conflict and applied the lessons to Ukraine. He argues that Russia's "hybrid war" approach is a mix of strategic planning and operational opportunism. He also states that Russian leaders seem particularly unhappy that Orthodox Christian Georgia and Ukraine are trying to assert themselves. He argues that this displeasure is because of their lack of respect for Russia given their shared religious affiliation as former Soviet republics. He contrasts Russia's values-based motivation in dealings with Georgia and Ukraine to the more business-like approach toward non-Orthodox states.

Petersen rounds out the Russia discussion by analyzing the General Staff's adaptation to American "noncontact" and "netcentric" warfare. He provides a compelling case for how Russia is seeking to overcome its loss of strategic depth on the western border and attempting to compensate for weaknesses by adopting an asymmetric strategy.

Learning the Lessons of Modern War provides a useful, interdisciplinary look at the challenges inherent in seeking to adapt and innovate as states prepare for, and conduct, warfare. Recurring themes arise throughout the compilation. First, it is a challenge to learn from history because it is difficult to separate enduring truths from those unique to a specific conflict. Second, institutional adaptability and willingness to innovate are critical. Coordinated, flexible strategy from the whole government is critical to any conflict, particularly in the

context of the COIN cases presented throughout. Finally, it is vital to study adversary perspectives. The discussions of Iraq and Russia clearly indicate that misunderstanding and misperception are even more likely when practitioners do not give appropriate consideration to how those on the other side of the hill view the world. It is clear that practitioners in future conflicts will face events that span the intensity spectrum and success will require innovation, adaptation, and strategic alignment, with a strong desire to learn from the past.

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