



## *Contemporary Military Strategy and the Global War on Terror: US and UK Armed Forces in Afghanistan and Iraq 2001–2012* by Alastair Finlan.

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Alastair Finlan (Aberystwyth Univ.) has written a detailed and perceptive examination of a conflict that has preoccupied military planners and theorists for over a decade—the so-called Global War on Terror. His introduction poses two salient questions that frame his analysis. Why were American and British authorities so slow to grasp the “new realities of transnational terrorism/twenty-first century warfare” (1) and why have they failed to defeat the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan? The author’s answers invoke interrelated approaches to strategy, emphasizing historical and cultural contexts, as well as key personalities and institutions.

Finlan begins by defining the essential elements of what has been called the “western way of war,” reaching all the way back to the ancient Greek term *strategos* (general or commander). “Strategy,” in his view, denotes an evolving effort to apply centralized, rational measures to enable one country to win a war against another. Over time, concepts like “grand tactics” and “operational strategy” (8) have been used to articulate various subcomponents of war-making.

The idea of strategy presupposes some clear agency over it. The Greeks, for instance, considered strategy “the exclusive realm of the general” (3). Carl von Clausewitz introduced some important distinctions; by establishing a point of demarcation between strategy and tactics, for example, he clarified the links between action and purpose. Moreover, he redefined responsibility for strategy in the context of the modern nation state. By placing war-making firmly within the sphere of civilian power, he expanded the domain of strategy to include a much broader set of priorities and transcend the exclusive control of military leaders. One result has been an axiomatic tension between military and civilian leadership.

Looking beyond the civil vs. military dichotomy, Finlan argues that we must understand the cultural influences on the primary actors responsible for crafting strategy. “Ways of warfare are rooted heavily within the social and cultural milieu of a nation state that produces them” (77). Culture serves as the lens through which leaders perceive threats to national security, set strategic goals, craft policy, and gauge success or failure. It also connects civilian and military institutions, setting benchmarks for virtues (duty, honor) and vices (insubordination) relevant to normative behavior. Culture shapes the boundaries of cooperation and deference governing civil-military relations.

To illustrate his point, Finlan compares historical German and American approaches to warfare. In the nineteenth century, Prussia was the model of superior military practice. American military leaders sought to emulate the highly efficient organizing principles behind the Prussian general staff system, in order to keep pace with the growing complexity and scale of modern, industrialized war. After the Civil War, the US Army adopted many Prussian organizational innovations, but without benefit of a corresponding cultural context. German civilian and military elites were agreed that soldiers should possess significant strategic and operational freedom in the active conduct of war. This entailed a balance of centralized institutional precision and command flexibility in the field.

The United States adopted the best features of German military centralization while reinforcing the culture of civilian control. During the twentieth century, the American military establishment became better organized and more skilled in the art of war. Technological breakthroughs improved weapons yields, mobility, and communications. By the First Gulf War in 1991, American arms enjoyed unparalleled supremacy on the modern battlefield. Grand strategy, however, remained in the hands of civilian officials, as seen in President Franklin Roosevelt's World War II summit meetings. During the Cold War, legislation like the 1947 National Security Act and President Harry Truman's firing of Gen. Douglas MacArthur at the height of the Korea War hammered home the ultimate preeminence of civilian authority in military affairs.

These trends of increased military proficiency and civilian micromanagement reemerged with a vengeance during the post-9/11 War on Terror. Despite the unmatched power and reach of the post-Cold War US military, it was unprepared for the asymmetrical nature of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, as became painfully obvious during Operation Enduring Freedom. Absent coherent strategic direction from civilian leaders, the US invasion of Afghanistan devolved into discrete, badly coordinated efforts by the several service branches and an institutional inertia reminiscent of the Cold War era. A prime example is the US Air Force, whose bombing campaign exhausted viable strategic targets within weeks after operations commenced.

Civilian control was dysfunctional in its own way. Finlan demonstrates that the Departments of State and Defense, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the National Security Council pursued their own separate and uncoordinated agendas after 9/11. In the absence of institutional continuity, individual and cultural prerogatives prevailed. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and a coterie of like-minded officials came to dominate all stages of strategic planning and discourse. Rumsfeld's neoconservative principles, corporate management style, and generally dismissive attitude toward uniformed military leaders produced a "tense and frosty" atmosphere in the Pentagon (35). The placement of compliant senior officers, most notably Gen. Tommy Franks, guaranteed military obedience to civilian decision making.

Modern communications technology exacerbated this situation. Video conferencing gave senior military commanders and civilian officials real-time links to the Defense Department and subordinate commanders, but, Finlan points out, this ease of access yielded no clearer appreciation of the tactical realities faced by combat commanders. Instead, it worsened the already existing penchant for micromanaging. "Group think" replaced innovation, skewed perceptions of unfolding events, and constrained tactical operations (138).

For all its impressive resources and global power, the United States lacked a cohesive strategy before and during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This blinded civilian and military leaders to the potential bad effects of premature troop withdrawals from both countries. Pundits and historians have compared the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan to America's war in Vietnam. Finlan's particular contribution is his demonstration that, in many ways, the Global War on Terror was a quagmire before it began.

In the end, Finlan argues, the American military has succeeded despite itself. Subordinate agencies and individuals filled the vacuum left by civilian and military leaders who had effectively forfeited control of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. The CIA, for example, partnered with military special forces during Operation Enduring Freedom, using "brilliant" weapons, field operatives with advanced targeting equipment to guide air strikes, and indigenous fighters to resolve the policy muddle that threatened to engulf the invasion of Afghanistan. In the last analysis, Finlan argues, success was "a fortuitous accident or form of *deus ex machina*, that came about through organic processes on the ground" (81).

The book does have a few minor weaknesses. One is word choice: the frequency of phrases like “marginalized endogenous elements” (87) will put off many readers. More significantly, belying its subtitle, the book disproportionately concentrates on the United States.

*Contemporary Military Strategy and the Global War on Terror* is an excellent book, well suited for college courses in military history and international relations. It will also make instructive reading for policymakers in an age of asymmetrical conflict.