

The Utility of Force by General Sir Rupert Smith

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THE UTILITY OF FORCE: The Art of War in the Modern World by General Sir Rupert Smith

Allen Lane £20 pp444

General Sir Rupert Smith is one of Britain's most distinguished soldiers. He commanded the British Armoured Division in the first Gulf war in 1991 and the United Nations Protection Force (Unprofor) in Bosnia in 1995; he was the senior European officer in Nato during the 1999 Kosovo campaign. When there was serious business to be done, he was the man to whom the government turned.

The Utility of Force combines profound thought and practical experience. In particular the experience of Unprofor seems to be burnt into Smith's thinking. The chapter on Bosnia is one of the best short accounts anywhere of the mess we got ourselves into: "The starting point to understanding all operations in the Balkans in the 1990s . . . is that they were without strategies." This book is about achieving workable strategy in a complex world. It deserves to be read at the highest levels.

The unique authority that Smith brings to his subject is not wasted on reminiscences or platitudes. The central thesis of the book is radical. "Industrial war", the all-out sort of struggle that disfigured the 20th century, is dead. Instead, we fight "among the people". The Weinberger/Powell doctrine formulated as America recovered from Vietnam is a doctrine for industrial war: fight only for vital interests; fight only to win; fight only as a last resort; fight with overwhelming force; and finish it quickly. Such a doctrine was right for the second world war. ("What is our aim?" asked Churchill. "Victory. Victory at all costs.") But it hardly fits the kind of wars we fight today. In Northern Ireland, where he was General Officer Commanding, it was important to use minimum force. The fault in Bosnia (one of the many faults) was precisely that we used force as a last resort. Bad doctrine costs lives. We did better in Macedonia in 2000, where we ignored the Weinberger doctrine and intervened early — without many forces but, crucially, with a political strategy.

If war is a matter of national survival, then the only acceptable outcome is unconditional surrender. In that case, the strategic goals are purely military, and overwhelming force is not such a bad idea. But in Smith's view such wars came to an end with nuclear weapons: the absolute war would lead to absolute destruction. In the cold war, both sides prepared vast arsenals for a war they never fought and never intended to fight. ("First we lose the conventional war. Then we lose the tactical nuclear exchange. Then we blow up the world," was Henry Kissinger's summary.) The real cold war was a political struggle with occasional military episodes; Lech Walesa's Solidarity, and western unity and prosperity, were more important than any tank or missile. As a war, it was in some respects an imaginary event.

All this time we were fighting real wars — Britain in Malaysia, Kenya, Cyprus and Northern Ireland; France in Vietnam and Algeria; America in Vietnam. These were Wars among the People. They were political events with military characteristics. They were mostly without battlefields and finished in political settlements rather than military victories. Fighting them as though they were industrial wars did not work. (In Vietnam the Americans even appointed Robert McNamara, one of its great industrialists, to run the war.)

Clausewitz describes war as both a trial of strength and a clash of wills. Industrial war is about the former. War among the People is about winning the battle of wills. The objective is not to crush but to change minds. The confrontation in Malaysia was won by political strategy (the

promise of independence) as much as by military tactics. And the battle of Algiers was lost because there was no political strategy. The objective, as Smith puts it at one point, is to show the people how bad the insurgents are and how good your forces are. Not far from Marshal Foch's comment that war is the domain of moral force.

It may be that the world is not quite as new as Smith suggests. The first Gulf war resembles the limited wars of the 18th century; so does our unwillingness to take large casualties. Then, as now, soldiers were professional, scarce and expensive. And Napoleon's objective also was to change regimes and, in the process, change the map of Europe. Not so different from American ambitions in the Middle East. But Smith's main point is right: the 21st century is quite different from the 20th, though our armies and our mindsets still seem to be formed by the industrial wars of what is now long ago.

It is not just nuclear weapons that have changed the world but also democracy and self-determination. Napoleon changed regimes by overthrowing kings and replacing them with relatives. Today this does not work. If you want democracy then the people are in charge. War among the People is one result of a democratic age. Smith makes much use of the Clausewitzian trinity: army, state and people. The balance between the three has changed. Once armies dominated — as they still do in the country of warlords; later, states were able to command the complete obedience of their people. Now it is the people who are in charge and the strategic objective is their hearts and minds. Wars are now fought for the people, among the people, and it is the people who are the prize and the strategic goal. And whereas aggressors once aimed merely to eliminate a state, now they may want to eliminate a people.

As Smith says, our forces remain configured for wars we will not fight; but he gives only a few hints of what we should do instead. Condoleezza Rice famously stated that it was not the job of the 101st Airborne to take children to their kindergarten; true — but not because this is the wrong task, rather because we have the wrong forces for it. Probably we need less armour and artillery and more infantry, more intelligence, more deployable police, even more linguists and anthropologists. If you fight among the people you had better understand them. And more media specialists: war has become a spectator sport. As Smith points out, the expression "theatre of war" now has an ironic tinge.

Using force effectively is not just a matter of having the right forces. You must also have the right direction and must tune the military campaign to the political goals (has this always been done well in Iraq?). Defence, foreign and aid policy need to be brought together. Clausewitz recommended that the head of the armed forces should sit in the cabinet, not so that the politicians should receive military advice, but so that the army should understand exactly what political goals it was fighting for and could conduct the campaign accordingly. We need to find the modern equivalent.

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