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## The Transformation of War

D.E. Showalter

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# BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

## “War Is a Thing in Itself”

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D.E. Showalter

Van Creveld, Martin. *The Transformation of War*. New York: The Free Press, 1991. 254pp. \$22.95

**M**A RTIN VAN CREVELD has established an enviable reputation as a military historian and analyst. In this work he assumes a new role as a theorist of war. He offers a challenge both to Carl von Clausewitz and to the scholars and *epigoni* who have elevated Clausewitz's ideas to the status of a universal paradigm. Van Creveld describes Clausewitz as one who viewed war as a balance between governments, armies, and people. The author, however, states that at least one element of this “trinity” has been nonexistent for most of history. In particular, Clausewitz assumes that wars are made by states; van Creveld argues that not only is the state a modern, Western institution, but it is increasingly anachronistic because of its inability to sustain a monopoly of effective violence.

At the high end of war's spectrum, nuclear weapons make it impossible to use armed force for meaningful political ends. Since no one has yet developed a convincing idea of how nuclear war can be fought without devastating the planet, even the risk of such a threat serves to inhibit conventional war as well. At the opposite end of the spectrum, states and their armed forces are eroding due to various forms of low-intensity conflict. The author argues that such conflict has been by far the most politically effective form of war since 1945—not least because it has highlighted the relative impotence of its opponents. “Counterinsurgency” has established a dismal record of failure. No more than

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could the old colonial powers, both the United States and the Soviet Union have been unable to develop combinations of technique and technology consistently effective in a low-intensity environment. In short, the world's most powerful armed forces have become irrelevant to waging war.

This irrelevance reflects Clausewitz's misunderstanding of war's moral element. War is more than the servant of politics, more than the means to an end. The author believes that war is a thing in itself—a form of “play” in the anthropological sense, the only human activity that both permits and demands the commitment of all human abilities from the highest levels to the lowest. Such an elemental force denies any paradigm, much less the rational cost-benefit analysis at the heart of Clausewitz's system.

Van Creveld predicts that the combination of nuclear weapons and low-intensity conflict will do more than render states unable to fight each other. Domestic authority may diminish as the techniques of low-intensity warfare become more widespread. With governments no longer able to safeguard the lives of citizens, van Creveld hypothesizes a global descent into tribalism. Bureaucratic armed forces will be replaced with groups that are constructed on personal and charismatic lines. Wars will be fought for beliefs and existence. “Interest” and “reason of state” as defined by Clausewitz will become relics of a specific historical episode. Van Creveld's dystopian vision of a world transformed brings to mind the clear image of Beirut.

Yet *The Transformation of War*, for all its intellectually stimulating qualities, is vulnerable to the same criticism that the author makes of Clausewitz. It is a straight-line extrapolation that is based on a historically specific set of circumstances. Low-intensity conflict achieved its results in two contexts. One was the Cold War, which pitted thermonuclear superpowers against each other under conditions that not merely favored but fostered war by proxy. When either the United States or the Soviet Union became involved in low-intensity conflict, its rival usually found reasons for aiding the other side. Participants in low-intensity conflict became increasingly sophisticated in soliciting such aid—a behavior pattern that is also common to medium-ranking powers with local interests, such as Israel and Iraq. The end of the Cold War and the eclipse of the Soviet Union offer significant possibilities for an alternate future scenario of “gunboat diplomacy” in a revived form. For example, similar to the Gulf War, states having an interest in stability might temporarily unite to suppress challengers of international order and contain the scope of the conflict.

The successes of low-intensity conflict have also depended significantly on the moral weakness of the contemporary state. Communist and Third World governments have lacked any legitimacy except that conferred by force. The West has been disabled by a creeping utopianism that denies legitimacy to any system falling short of perfection. In each case, the result has been a tendency to paralysis. The insurgent's battle is half won before a shot is fired. Events of the

past five years suggest a new pattern. States of the twenty-first century may be smaller than their predecessors, but they are likely to be more stable and confident. Their firmer moral base will facilitate the deterrence and defeat of the kinds of threat posed by low-intensity conflict.

Of course, these hypotheses are as open to challenge as are van Creveld's. However, they are offered not so much to refute his arguments as to highlight the cunning of history. As van Creveld demonstrates in his critique of Clausewitz, using the past and present to structure the future is at best a risky undertaking. The skills of the historian are not the gifts of a prophet. It would be an intellectual loss if van Creveld, in his efforts to supplant Carl von Clausewitz, should forget how to be Martin van Creveld.

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Chernavin, V.N. *Voyenno-morskoy slovar'* (The naval dictionary). Moscow: Military Publishing House, 1991. 511pp. (No price given).

The *Naval Dictionary* is the latest in a series of "encyclopedic dictionaries" offered by the Soviet military over the past decade. This work is part of an overall Soviet general staff effort which took over twenty years to complete. In it the entire core of military knowledge has been organized, defined, systematized, and centralized. As such, each encyclopedic dictionary is an authoritative summation of official military views that have been assembled and promulgated by the general staff with the participation and concurrence of the service most closely associated with the work.

The *Naval Dictionary's* importance is underscored by its sponsorship by Fleet Admiral V.N. Chernavin, commander in chief of the Soviet navy. By authorizing the use of his name as chief editor, Chernavin placed his imprimatur on its contents. He and his colleagues in the Soviet Ministry of

Defense produced a comprehensive reference work for all Soviet military personnel involved in research or publication of naval issues. It contains up-to-date, crisply worded definitions of all terms and concepts related to naval theory. It remains a valuable tool for any officer of the former Soviet navy given the lack of the clear doctrinal boundaries that earlier guided him, whether the service itself evolves into a commonwealth navy or "devolves" into republic forces.

Such high-level patronage was typical of Soviet encyclopedic reference works. For example, the first edition of the *Military Encyclopedic Dictionary* (1983) credited Marshal Nikolay Ogarkov as its editor in chief, while the second edition (1986) cited his successor Marshal Sergey Akhromeyev. Colonel General Pavel Zhilin, chief of the Military Historical Institute, is listed as sponsor of the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Civil War* and the *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Great Patriotic War*. The most important work of all, the magisterial