2019

War in 140 Characters: How Social Media Is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century

Marc D. Beaudreau

David Patrikarakos

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review

Commerce brings cultural exchange. Art and architecture reflect the sea and its significance to society. Yet although Lambert tries hard to focus on the cultural aspects of seapower, he has trouble defining culture. Too often, his cultural arguments drift into economic and hard-power factors, for these allowed seapowers to exert disproportionate influence on the international system. Seapowers have sought great-power status, but Lambert claims they have been limited in the courses of action available to them. They must play to their naval and economic strengths while avoiding land campaigns that are beyond their ability to sustain. They have neither the population to field large armies nor economies capable of sustaining large armies and navies simultaneously. Instead, seapower states prove most effective at fighting protracted naval wars for limited objectives, building wealth, and avoiding overextension.

Although they possess great wealth and powerful navies, seapowers are fragile—continental entanglements can spell disaster. In the case of the Dutch, landward threats proved inescapable, and Venice was weakened by terrestrial distractions. Britain's continental commitment in World War I "shattered the British seapower state" (p. 302). Lambert claims that Britain was both the greatest and the last of these states. Because of the twentieth-century world wars, Britain passed the mantle of global maritime dominance not to a seapower but to a sea power—the United States.

It is important to grasp what this book is—and more particularly what it is not. We should not consider this definitive history, for there is much with which to quibble. Lambert's evidence and interpretations are deliberately selective.

Although some may consider this a weakness, understanding this mitigates the issue and allows the reader to focus on Lambert's compelling interpretations. The book's primary value becomes its argument about what the sea means to different states, by highlighting competing worldviews. Lambert claims that seapower states are inclusive and dynamic, while the great powers that have destroyed them often were "terrified" by what seapowers stood for.

Although Lambert writes from his own (British) perspective and reflects particularly on what he considers to have been the last and greatest of the seapower states, his argument has noteworthy contemporary application. He forces the reader to ponder the sea's significance to contemporary China and the United States. Lambert claims both are continental powers. The sea is not integral for either in the manner that it was for seapower states; rather, the ocean becomes a frontier to be defended and exploited. The argument has substantial implications when understanding national objectives, strategy, and long-term sustainability. Lambert's argument certainly should spur controversy, for the author builds, through a series of carefully constructed arguments and case studies, a thesis that questions the nature of the international maritime environment of the future.

KEVIN D. MCCRANIE

War in 140 Characters: How Social Media Is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century, by David Patrikarakos. New York: Basic Books, 2017. 320 pages. $17.99.

Social media has deployed far-reaching global communication abilities,

pervading nearly every aspect of our lives, and there is a growing awareness of foreign adversarial attempts to interfere with our democratic processes through this evolving technology. Yet we never consider how a cell-phone-embedded camera and an application could affect the conduct of war. David Patrikarakos's *War in 140 Characters* deftly demonstrates this new relationship with the eyes of a professional correspondent who is observing a revolution not only in journalism but also in military affairs. He contends that we may be witnessing the near fulfillment of Clausewitz's notion of total war, enabled by a new virtual *levée en masse,* through "the extraordinary ability of social media to endow ordinary individuals, frequently noncombatants, with the power to change the course of both the physical battlefield and the discourse around it" (p. 4).

Through the author's travels and interviews, the book details the rise of *Homo digitalis.* Patrikarakos offers profiles of individuals who, decades ago, would have had perhaps a minimal impact in the war zone. But such actors in contemporary battle spaces can be surprisingly effective. For example, a sixteen-year-old Palestinian girl who used Twitter to influence an Israeli military campaign in Gaza and a Ukrainian mother of two spearheading a Facebook logistics support effort against pro-Russian forces highlight the contrast between civilians and the traditional state hierarchies with which they contend. Patrikarakos's other profiles offer a picture of struggling social media responses by teams of individuals working for organizations such as the Israel Defense Forces and the U.S. State Department. He rounds out his analysis by exploring the effectiveness of social media usage by postmodern

authoritarian leaders such as Vladimir Putin and militant groups such as ISIS.

Patrikarakos contends that social media enables vast participation in a realm once controlled almost exclusively by state organizations. Social media is suited perfectly to enable interference by mobilizing mass popular support to pressure extraregional governments to act on belligerent forces embroiled in regional conflicts. The traditional barriers to entry into conflict, including military training and geographical proximity, among others, are disappearing. "Content that once would have required a team of cameramen, trained journalists, editors, and news anchors to reach a national or international audience can now be produced and disseminated in seconds" (p. 20). This results in a lower cost for participation in conflicts, particularly as the narratives of war are more important than the physical acts that typically govern it. Ubiquitous capabilities for coercive messaging allow for the exploitation of vital communication space once controlled exclusively by the state. A recurrent theme throughout this work on twenty-first-century conflict is that "the military dimension, events on the physical battlefield, no longer stands *alone* as the most important arena of conflict" (p. 245). This notion is particularly salient in the realm of war termination, as the global population influences when and whether a conflict truly has concluded. As an essential component of warfare, the concept of *defeat* historically involved a political concession communicated to and accepted by the losing side. In cyberspace, a consensus of defeat may be unattainable, given the sheer number of actors involved.

Beyond influencing a conflict's narrative, social media actions can influence physical military operations. Patrikarakos's

example includes a grassroots logistics effort that supported a national army by coordinating donations of money and supplies from across the globe. It proved so effective that Ukrainian military commanders sent in supply orders; in true e-commerce fashion, civilians fulfilled the requests and even delivered items—including uniforms and flak jackets—to units in the field. Contrast this effort to the U.S. Liberty Bond and war bond drives of the two world wars as an indirect mechanism for noncombatant support. The Ukrainian Facebook-driven campaign, although conducted outside sanctioned government control, had more impact on the individual donor, because the donors could see the direct effects of their efforts. The nature of much civilian support for a belligerent on one side of a conflict has not changed—consider care packages and letters in the mail in wars past. Yet the characteristics have transformed through individual empowerment, displaying a magnitude and immediacy unseen in military history. It exemplifies a transfer of real impact on combat effectiveness from traditional institutions and hierarchies to networks of individuals.

For centuries the United States enjoyed a geopolitical position that protected our shores from direct interventions. Arguably, cyberspace, with its instant accessibility from afar, could counterbalance that advantage. As we begin to understand cyberborne capabilities enabling conflicts, works such as *War in 140 Characters* should shape the way we think about our vulnerabilities. The book constitutes an author's plea to understand better twenty-first-century war, and it leaves the reader compelled to ponder the strategic implications of the way ahead. Do information revolutions

of the past, such as the advents of the printing press, radio, and television, illuminate a path forward for society to follow? It is clear from Patrikarakos's work that increasingly effective individuals promulgating disparate realities on social media will mandate entirely new approaches from traditional Western institutions if they are going to survive.

MARC D. BEAUDREAU

Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics, by Austin Carson. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2018. 344 pages. $35.

Professor Carson takes up two intriguing and related questions: Why do nations often choose to intervene covertly rather than overtly in military conflicts, and why do their adversaries, after detecting the intervention, often choose to stay silent about it (or, as he calls it, "collude")? Using four case studies (the Spanish Civil War, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Soviet war in Afghanistan), he develops his own theory of why nations act these ways.

His theory applies to "limited wars"— conflicts in which some of the adversaries (the outside great-power intervenors) are not employing the full range of their capabilities. Carson argues that maintaining a war's limited character provides the motivation for this collusion of covertness. Demonstrating how this works is the core of his argument, and the case studies provide persuasive examples.

First, by intervening covertly—or by not publicizing an adversary's covert intervention—a party avoids stirring up hawkish public opinion, both domestically and on the part of the adversary. By avoiding public demands