



**SOFT WAR = SMART WAR?
THINK AGAIN**

By Anna Simons

*Anna Simons is a Professor of Defense Analysis at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School (NPS). At NPS, she teaches courses on the anthropology of conflict, military advising, low intensity conflict in Africa, and political anthropology. Dr. Simons is the author of *Networks of Dissolution: Somalia Undone* and *The Company They Keep: Life Inside the U.S. Army Special Forces* as well as numerous articles and essays. Most recently, she is co-author (with Joe McGraw and Duane Lauchengco) of *The Sovereignty Solution: A Commonsense Approach to Global Security* (Naval Institute Press, 2011)*

We Americans do not yet live in a post-American world. We have not yet become the Greeks to someone else's Rome. We retain unprecedented hard power. We have more lethal conventional force at our disposal than any country in history. One of the things that should thus increasingly puzzle taxpayers is why Washington would want to retool our military to minimize these capabilities, and instead build capabilities that won't advantage us at all.

What this article describes are several asymmetries and a handful of truisms that defense intellectuals ignore at our peril.¹ By advocating more soft power and smarter counterinsurgency—by, essentially, pushing to outfit us for soft war—those who would re-orient our military are making two sets of errors. First, they misread 21st century realities. Second, they misread human nature.

Numerous terms have been used to describe the likely contours of future war. According to most who write about the subject, adversaries know they will never be able to best us using conventional force, so the presumption is they will continue to resort to terrorism, and other unconventional, asymmetric means. In addition to more urban warfare, the future will be characterized by war among the people, or fourth generation war, hybrid war, irregular war, and insurgency. Adversaries will try to trip us up in ways that favor them, baiting us directly when they can, ensnaring us indirectly when they can't. Washington had thus better worry both about non-state actors—the scourge of our times—as well as near-peer competitors who, if they are smart, will seek to do us harm by using non-state proxies (much as Iran has done to Israel via Hezbollah), by taking us on in realms we can't yet and may never be able to effectively control—like cyberspace—and/or by outflanking us economically, maybe even ideologically, and certainly politically in the court of global public opinion.

This last has become ever more important, no doubt thanks to the state of 21st century technology, which makes image management *seem* easier and more controllable than ever before. How else explain why President Obama works so hard to retain his iconic stature abroad, or why George W. Bush remains so excoriated? Granted, many would (and did) consider President Bush's policies too unilateral—an assessment which, while he was President, did Bush irreparable domestic damage. But the fact that his international image could then so profoundly affect his domestic political standing only further reinforces the broader point: perceptions aren't just iterative, but the iterations have all sorts of effects, too.

Something else the castigation of George W. Bush reveals is the extent to which our attitudes have shifted. Arguably, we Americans have always wanted others to think well of us—it has become standard for American politicians to invoke the U.S. as the shining city on the hill. But in the past this amounted to little more than rhetorical posturing. In contrast, today we don't just *need* others' good opinion of us to feel better about ourselves, but link this directly to our security. Ergo our renewed concern about public diplomacy, though one irony with the attention we now pay to what we call 'strategic

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the October 2011 Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces, and draws on arguments also made in "Asymmetries, Anthropology, and War," *Pointer* (Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces) 37 (2), 2011.

communication' and information operations is that those who believe in the Evil Eye (and practice witchcraft and sorcery in other parts of the world) do so for very similar reasons; they, too, believe misfortune comes from people thinking ill of them. One difference between them and us, however, is that they believe the less they do to incite others' resentment the less likely it is others will wish them harm.

The idea that perceptions shape reality is hardly new. According to some linguists, whatever language we grow up learning literally prefigures the world we see. Or, as anthropologists might put it, our patterns of thought are never wholly our own—not when each of us is subject to socialization from the moment we are conceived. One logical conclusion that could be drawn from this is that we're all so deeply imprinted that not even years' worth of psychoanalysis can purge us of who we are. However, this turns out to be an insufficiently enlightened point of view as far as most Americans are concerned. Our American assumption tends to be that whatever has been learned can, over time and with the right techniques, be un-learned. This, after all, is what education aims to do. If parents won't, don't, or can't teach their children the sky is blue, it becomes society's responsibility to do so.

Not uncoincidentally, the idea that people can be remade also motivates missionaries. But not just missionaries. Advertisers, too. No one has outperformed American marketers. Thus, the elision is easy: if marketers without PhDs can successfully manipulate today's sophisticated global consumers, then surely smart diplomats and defense intellectuals (along with members of the military) can do the same when it comes to influencing foreign populations and countering our adversaries' narratives.

However, such thinking ignores at least three realities. First, in a true cross-cultural contest, no one is interested in buying what the other side is selling. Not only do both sides operate by different rules and use different methods, but when people see themselves as irreconcilably different the fuel tends to be renewable—and continues to be so, so long as neither side manages to inflict a permanently game-changing defeat on the other.

One implication is that no matter how important it then may be to compare across technical capabilities—e.g., *they've* got suicide terrorists and IEDs, *we've* got air superiority and Predators—focusing on what's *not* comparable can be even more critical. Take, for instance, finesse vs. force. Although we in the West appear to have reached the point where we finally favor influence, soft power, and finesse over the threat of game-changing force as *the* means by which to shape the international environment to our advantage, we have arrived at this ultra-civilized point just as finesse is decreasingly likely to achieve the results we seek.

This is due to Reality #2: namely, it is not just we who have grown increasingly sophisticated about others' sensibilities, but other people have grown increasingly sophisticated and sensible about us. More to the point, they have also grown more suspicious, particularly when they think we might be manipulating them. At the same time, people elsewhere *have* become increasingly good at manipulating us, especially when we're on their turf.

This is hugely significant. It means that, without any fanfare—or acknowledgment, actually—we have reached an inflection point, which may also turn out to be a break point in history. Not only are we Westerners no longer likely to fight people who aren't already aware of what shoes and automatic weapons are—which undermines one asymmetry that almost always did advantage us in the not-so-distant past—but among those running circles around Washington and the West today are not other Westerners. Instead, they are leaders like Kim Jong-un and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, or Omar al-Bashir and Hamid Karzai. Or, consider who has been said to be one of the greatest maneuver warfare strategists of the 20th century (a century that included Patton and Rommel): Paul Kagame, the current and potentially lifelong President of Rwanda, a likelihood which itself speaks volumes about his political and not just military acumen.²

The breadth and depth of political skill, and the longevity of rule across what many in defense policy circles mistakenly refer to as the 'arc of instability,' underscores yet another irony: not only will *they* always be better at *their* politics than we are, but lots of non-Westerners, both heads of state and local warlords, will continue to be able to out-finesse us by being extremely good at hoisting us on our own buzz terms like 'governance,' 'stakeholders,' and 'sovereignty' to shrewd effect. But also, they—unlike us—remain willing to apply force.

If, meanwhile, we were to ask why so many leaders are still so willing to use force against their own populations, the cheap answer would be they must do so because they think violence works. The more discomfiting response is that it often does.

This brings us to Reality #3. For those who believe it can secure them an edge, decisive armed force will always trump finesse, and will always tempt those who don't expect to be deterred by greater counter-force.

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² Romeo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil* (Random House Canada, 2003), p. 188.

Although some might claim there are hundreds of human universals, there are really only a handful of things all individuals need to consciously do to survive (so long as they don't have to worry about their immediate physical safety): eat, drink, sleep, and excrete. The variety with which we humans perform all four of these functions is astounding. One other universal is that we share the same life cycle. All humans, if we live long enough, begin as infants, pass through childhood, enter adolescence, and become adults. What different societies do with or at each of these stages varies considerably and helps account for our cultural differences. But, to cut to the chase: there is an immutable biological foundation on which societies construct all sorts of institutions, around which they devise all sorts of rules, and from which they then extract meaning and purpose. We tend to fixate on these differences and the patterns they yield. Unfortunately, in trying to figure out why those people 'over there' do 'those' things, we too often ignore the constants we should likewise be able to count on. Among those constants is the potential efficacy of overwhelming force.

Here is a thought question: Is there anything humans express similarly the world over, and recognize and agree is the same, even if they speak mutually unintelligible languages and live totally different kinds of lives? I've posed this question for 13 years in classes. Significantly, thus far (still) the only answer that seems to hold across the board is the ability to withstand physical pain. Physical bravery or physical courage seems universally recognizable and universally valued. There is nothing else we humans express—not happiness, sadness, grief, anger, you name it—that can't be misread for something else, which suggests two things. First, there must be something about the infliction of pain that transcends culture. And second, virtually all of the emotions and values we think we share, we might *or* we might not share, the implication being that when we presume we know what others mean, we might be right—or, we might be wrong to our considerable detriment.

In light of this, tying our long-term security to the notion that we can out-manipulate and out-spin others in the realm of cross-cultural persuasion, and thus wage some sort of soft, smart war seems especially imprudent.

For instance, it should be telling that militaries the world over do many of the same things with their young men, many of the same things they have done for centuries, and things that still work—from basic training to drill. When I ask my students, who are all mid-career military officers, who they would have more in common with during working hours: a major in China's People's Liberation Army or a hippie in Santa Cruz, California, their response is almost always another major in any army.

Sociologically this stands to reason since militaries are not only designed to tangle with other militaries, but are built to do so out of the same raw materials; it shouldn't be surprising that they mold members to similar standards and instill similar values. Nor can it be considered coincidental that among the values militaries instill (or stoke) is a keen interest in what members of other militaries are up to. In fact, a good argument can be made that armed forces aren't worth anything if they do not continually canvas each other for best practices and then adopt those that seem most effective, regardless of the source.

Yet, as easy as it is for one military to adopt another's tactics, techniques, and procedures, look at how few deep-seated *structural* changes militaries make to themselves (or allow civilian authorities to make to them). Napoleon could be brought back to life, and while certain weapons platforms might initially stump him, the organizational principles that undergird any of today's militaries would feel eerily familiar. Some defense analysts might point to this and say "exactly—that is *exactly* what is wrong with our current force structure and our antiquated military design."

But surely one reason so little changes rests with why we have armed force in the first place: there is a security dilemma in the international arena; what country could afford to reconfigure its military radically differently from its likeliest foes?³ Another explanation points to bureaucracy. Every military is larded with bureaucracy (often competing bureaucracies) as well as entrenched self-interests. Or, alternatively, there is the nature of hierarchy. By definition, hierarchies tend to be conservative since, when the old are in charge, the young are bound to chafe, and the old then resist.

I don't want to suggest that any of the usual explanations for deep-seated resistance to change are wrong. But, when it comes to the unchanging nature of war, there is something else that rarely surfaces in discussions, and especially not in discussions about future war, and that is the fact that there is a default hierarchy wired into males, one that is particularly pronounced among armed males. You see it in every Service in the U.S military. There are the combat arms and then combat support; fighter pilots and everyone else. You see it even in those who claim to have always been oriented toward counterinsurgency—namely, elements of our Special Operations Forces (SOF).

Counterinsurgency is worth singling out because it is at the vanguard of how soft war proponents want to see us fight: nimbly, with finesse, a small footprint, and population-oriented sensitivity. One chronic problem with counterinsurgency, however, is that its press has always outstripped anyone's ability to make it work as advertised. Or, as historian Douglas Porch so notably points out for the French in North Africa (and the French in North Africa serve as *the* model for those who extol

³ Which doesn't mean militaries don't add new capabilities or components. But, thus far, few of these have led to military-wide restructuring or radically new, never-before-seen organizational designs.

counterinsurgency's virtues today), 'hearts and minds' was a phrase adopted to purposely gull domestic French audiences. It was intended to mask what really needed to be done in Morocco and Algeria, which is far more accurately captured by the phrase 'stomachs and minds.'⁴

'Stomachs and minds' summarizes Sherman's march through Georgia. It also explains why Sherman's generals decimated the buffalo in their efforts to bring Plains Indian tribes to heel. It is a phrase OSS founder William Donovan used in passing to describe what the U.S. needed to do if it ever hoped to win in Vietnam.⁵ Indeed, in most descriptive accounts about counterinsurgency campaigns, soldiers who start off wanting to help rather than hurt civilians, wind up willing to destroy crops and burn villages; Vietnam is hardly the first setting in which those tasked with COIN found themselves tempted to use more rather than less violence in order to force peasants, villagers, and other innocents to choose sides.⁶

Not only does COIN's own history reflect the need for a stunning amount of brutality, but the fact that in campaign after campaign commanders have found themselves desperate to be able to apply decisive force reveals what every generation ends up (re)discovering the hard way: soft approaches don't impel enough people to change their ways fast enough.

This then raises a second uncomfortable truism that is missing from today's future war debates. Put most bluntly, men who join combat units—to include Special Operations Forces—do not do so because they dislike the idea of wielding force. Just the opposite. If they didn't want to at least try their hand at violence, they'd choose another profession or another line of military duty. This is clearly not a politically correct thing to admit. So, no one typically does. Worse, because this doesn't square with what soft war proponents would prefer these forces should want to do, it never comes up in any of the discussions about who should be at the pointy end of the spear when it comes to waging population-centric warfare. Nor does anyone point to another uncomfortable set of facts that SOF's own makeup reveals.

Within SOF there are three tiers or types of force. At the bottom of what turns out to be a clear status pyramid sit Military Information Support Operations (nee Psychological Operations) and Civil Affairs units.⁷ These are units directly responsible for shaping the messages and humanitarian activities that everyone hopes will win hearts and minds. In a soft war world, these are the units that *should* represent soft war's cutting edge. Yet, as purveyors of what we might call unarmed finesse, PsyOp and Civil Affairs units routinely receive the least amount of attention and the fewest resources, and have always received less attention and fewer resources than those in the tier directly above them.

Those in this next tier are Green Berets, or Army Special Forces soldiers. They deal in what we might call armed finesse. Their mission has long been to work by, with, and through indigenous forces. By living and fighting side by side with local forces, they both literally and figuratively help (re)build security. Yet, elite as they are, not even Green Berets belong in the very top tier of SOF units. That tier belongs instead to door-kicking direct action units. These are units that deal in decisive, often covert unilateral force. Think: Delta Force or Seal Team Six. Not only do today's versions of those units rate whatever resources they need, which often means they get the best stuff, but they also like to think they attract the best men.

In other words, despite what COIN doctrine itself suggests the status pyramid should look like, which in a population-centric warfare world would mean Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs units have the most prestige and shooter-killer teams the least, the status pyramid remains the same as it has always been. Nor is anyone seriously talking about inverting it. Though even if they did, and even if such a change *could* be successfully legislated, it is not clear it could ever be made to stick. That is because, as the long sweep of human history suggests, being able to inflict visibly decisive pain still beats any and everything else.⁸

⁴ Douglas Porch, *The Conquest of Morocco* (Knopf, 1983); *The Conquest of the Sahara* (Fromm International, 1986).

⁵ Richard Dunlop, *Donovan, America's Master Spy* (Rand McNally, 1982), p. 505.

⁶ For proof, read Brian Linn's *The Philippine War 1899-1902* (University Press of Kansas, 2000) about "the most successful counterinsurgency campaign in U.S. history" (p. 328). For a counterargument one might consider advisory missions undertaken by individuals like Edward Lansdale, who was adept at finesse in the Philippines, but in Vietnam couldn't persuade enough (or the right) others of his vision. What Lansdale couldn't accomplish there speaks volumes about how hard it is for Americans to be able to act with real advisory finesse abroad (or in Washington for that matter). An entirely different article could be written about what real advisory finesse of the Lansdalian type *could* potentially accomplish under the right conditions. One final note: even in current Village Stability Operations in Afghanistan, Special Forces teams have found themselves having to engage in forceful, coercive blackmail to 'get' otherwise recalcitrant locals to side with them (author's observations, January 2011).

⁷ This status pyramid was first described in Anna Simons and David Tucker, "U.S. Special Operations Forces and the War on Terrorism," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 14 (1), 2003.

⁸ Yes, smart *and* strong may well seem to be the ideal combination—which is one reason all recent 'ism's (fascism, communism, Nazism) were fomented by intellectuals *with* thugs. Nonetheless to triumph, every 'ism' required a leader at the helm capable of considerable ruthlessness (e.g. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, etc.).

One sees this otherwise unspeakable truth wherever one looks. Even in today's kinder, gentler society we Americans are hopelessly attracted to lethality. Witness the entertainment industry. Ask women. The appeal of being able to be deadly is both noble and base. War literature—from the Illiad to Sebastian Junger's *War*—both reflects and helps perpetuate this. Boil all the evidence down, and here is what emerges: the value some people will always be able to find in decisive armed force is that it can be decisive. Thus the hierarchy among males. Thus the need for militaries. Meanwhile, modern militaries haven't just evolved to use force decisively, but are effective (or not) as a consequence.

While this is a truth that some Americans might prefer to wish away, it is also a truth that *has* proved easy to brush aside thanks, in part, to the fact that our military has always been under tight civilian control. Ironically, the only time U.S. military units operate somewhat freely is *in extremis* abroad. In many regards, this makes the U.S. exceptionally fortunate; wars occur 'over there,' while here at home we have all sorts of protections in place to not only mitigate conflict, but help keep our military apolitical, our system coup-resistant, and the vast majority of our most physically aggressive members of society either behind bars or otherwise pre-occupied.⁹ But—having the military under such tight civilian authority does result in at least one untoward effect: members of the armed forces rarely publicly voice politically inconvenient truths.

Arguably, this is among the reasons soft war, information operations, strategic communication, and influence campaigns have gained such traction over the past decade.¹⁰ Never mind that, somehow, numerous smart people in Washington and academe appear to believe that those whom we most need to influence abroad will hear that we plan to co-opt them via soft power and will then happily let us do so. Being charitable, those who think this might work have either not spent enough time among non-Westerners and/or have spent too much time among people skilled at telling them the kinds of things they most want to hear.

Of course, too, smart people (to include policy makers) are almost always drawn to clever thinking, even though, when push comes to shove, cleverness rarely suffices. We see this with terrorism. Whenever terrorists apply decisive (shockingly decisive) force, we almost always end up having to respond with yet *more* decisive force. If we were honest, we'd admit we do so for at least two reasons: first, we haven't yet figured out what works better. And second, at a visceral level we must suspect nothing *will* work better. Nor will it—not given the realities of human nature, and the fact we are (to borrow from Lionel Tiger and Robin Fox) imperial animals, wired to want to dominate, some more aggressively and decisively than others.¹¹

So, where does this leave us? Say we were to at least grudgingly acknowledge these realities. What *should* we want policy makers to do? Should we want them to continue to attempt to remake the military, which is what today's soft power approach to warfare essentially requires? Something that, in turn, demands we somehow remake males. Or, should we instead ask policy makers to rethink how to make the most prudent possible use of the givens we've got?¹²

It is certainly clear what any adversaries would prefer we do—they would no more want us to use decisive force than we seem prepared to want to use it. In the grandest irony of all, this should simply underscore who already has an edge in out-finessing whom.

FPRI, 1528 Walnut Street, Suite 610, Philadelphia, PA 19102-3684

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⁹ Via professional or extreme sports, for instance.

¹⁰ Another potential reason: an overly large officer corps for which lots of staff jobs have to be found. It is easy for staffs to come up with all sorts of smart, but not necessarily practicable ideas.

¹¹ *The Imperial Animal* is the name of their now-classic book, first published in 1971.

¹² To be clear, the argument here is not pro-war. It is, instead, anti the chimera of finesse as a salvation *from* war. For a foreign policy that would deploy the U.S. military far less frequently, see *The Sovereignty Solution*.