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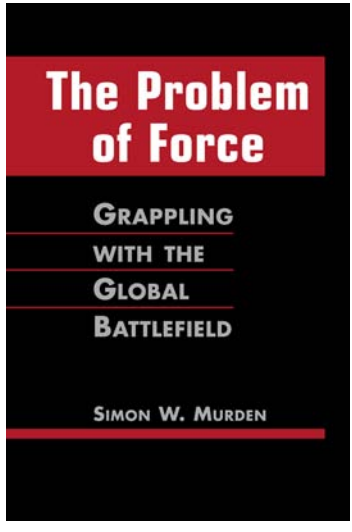
The Problem of Force: Grappling with the Global Battlefield

Simon W. Murden



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Introduction

Looking back at the US war on terror since its inception in 2001, it is difficult not to think about what went wrong. When then–President George W. Bush initiated the use of US military power in Afghanistan, it was an understandable response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But his subsequent decision to expand the conflict into Iraq sent its objectives and effects sprawling. The decision to conquer Iraq was a truly historic one, made all the more extraordinary because it was so poorly thought out beforehand. After a promising start, the operation in Afghanistan undertaken by the United States in association with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ran into a resurgent Taliban and had to face a renewed struggle for the future of that country. Meanwhile, Al-Qaida's mission continued to seep across the world, sporadically manifesting itself in the sort of murderous terrorism seen in Madrid, London, and Algiers. Few can have expected the war on terror to have been such a fraught experience. Indeed, by February 2006 one of the doyens of British journalism, Simon Jenkins, writing in *The Sunday Times,* even had some cause to wonder: "Is OBL [Osama bin Laden] winning after all? Until recently, I would have derided such a thought. How could a tin-pot fanatic who is either dead or shut in some mountain hideout hold the world to ransom for five years? It would stretch the imagination of Ian Fleming. . . . Bin Laden is not going to win and never was. But Bush and Blair are giving him an astonishing run for his money."[1]

Bush's war on terror did not seem to be working very well. Beyond the confines of the initial war on terror, the Iraq War demonstrated the limits of US military power and the pitfalls that came with unleashing it.

So why was the greatest power in the world unable to subdue countries the size of Afghanistan and Iraq or engineer anything approaching a desirable end-state in either? Why were the United States and its allies unable to decisively turn the tide on Al-Qaida and its ilk? This book will explore these questions and

seek to explain the general and particular reasons as to why the use of force has been so problematic in the war on terror. Clearly, the particular circumstances of the Iraq War especially negated the accomplishment of US objectives. Iraq was always dogged by insufficient legal backing, a dysfunctional planning process, and sheer ineptitude. Beyond the particular shortcomings, it could also be argued that the utility of force was undercut by more general factors in the contemporary context. The advent of the world of liberalized globalization had led to a new generation of warfare—if not of war itself—in which novel kinds of diffuse actors were capable of sustaining what can be termed a *glocal* insurgency (a global-level mission and movement, locally networked and conducted) against great states. Indeed, the failure of US forces in Iraq after 2003 represented a failure to understand the changing nature of warfare almost as marked as the failure of most European militaries in 1914 and 1940.

The conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq were the two great laboratories of warfare in the early twenty-first century, and studying them is the first place to go in order to gain insights into contemporary practice as well as into more theoretical questions about the nature of war. Of course, whether it is actually possible to disentangle the general from the particular when making assessments about the difficulty in making force work during the war on terror is likely to remain debatable, but setting out the factors will provide a basis upon which better judgments can be made about some of the big questions of the day: To what extent have war and warfare changed? How can highly diffuse globalized actors such as Al-Qaida be contained or defeated? Was the faltering of the Iraq project the result of particular mistakes, or was it inevitable? To what extent have developments in tactical and operational practice during the war on terror conquered the problems of contemporary warfare? And does war have a future?

An enormous amount has been written about 9/11 and the war on terror, especially the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Many of the accounts are very well sourced, and it would be difficult to add much to the narratives already produced by the likes of Bob Woodward, Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, L. Paul Bremer, Thomas E. Ricks, Ahmed S. Hashim, and Rajiv Chandrasekaran.[2] Although this book will provide a succinct account of relevant events, its principal purpose is not to add new facts to the history—that would be difficult to do in any substantial way now—but rather to offer some new insight into the mass of information and argument that is already out there. The analytical offerings come from two directions: first, to put the war on terror in the context of the broader practice of war in the early twenty-first century; and second, to model the particular battles of the war on terror by referring to social network theory as well as to present a new triangular map of waging warfare in complex social settings. With such analytical elements, I hope to explain why it was so difficult to make force work in the war on terror.

The book begins by assessing the nature of contemporary war and warfare, especially the way in which the purpose and practice of war have become increasingly diffuse. Chapter 1 examines some of the causes of this diffusion. Some causes, notably the advent of nuclear weapons, have existed for many years. Other diffusing factors stemmed from the expansion of the world of liberalizing globalization following the end of the Cold War. The military superiority of the United States and its Western allies also meant that it was scarcely rational for adversaries to challenge them on the conventional battlefield. The outcomes of these developments have been examined by the advocates of Fourth Generation Warfare (4GW); and even though the concept is not without its problems, the chapter argues that it does describe a new kind of diffuse war-practicing actor, requiring a new operational art to engage it. Chapter 2 goes on to analyze the phenomenon of the glocal insurgency, and drawing on organizational theory from the business and sociological studies provides a new conceptual map of the narratives and networks of Al-Qaida. Chapter 3 examines contemporary Western intervention, especially through a series of post–Cold War conflicts, and proposes another conceptual model to help understand the dynamics of waging warfare in a complex social setting.

In moving toward the case studies of Afghanistan and Iraq, Chapter 4 describes the particular strategic context for the outbreak of the war on terror, arguing that it can only really be understood in terms of the rise and fall of a US-constructed security architecture in the Middle East in the 1990s; this security architecture was based on a number of pillars, including the Arab-Israel peace process, the "dual containment" of Iran and Iraq, and the garrisoning of the Persian Gulf. Although this security architecture had great potential for bringing peace and order to the region, it was flawed, and its decay in the second half of the 1990s primed renewed conflict not only between the United States and Iraq but also between the United States and the Islamic militants led by Osama bin Laden. America's decaying security architecture in the Middle East finally went critical on 11 September 2001, and the subsequent war on terror would be synonymous with the attempt of the Bush administration to undertake an extreme makeover of it.

Chapter 5 examines the opening shots of the war on terror. In Afghanistan, the United States was initially able to deploy a startlingly efficient model of warfare and a follow-on political process that also appeared to work well. The Taliban regime was unseated more easily than anticipated, and a major defeat was inflicted upon the Al-Qaida organization. The apparent efficiency of force was impressive—but it was a false dawn. As the United States and its allies turned toward Iraq, they left unfinished business in Afghanistan. A disgruntled local population and political tendency was not reconciled to what the war of 2001–2002 had done, and this allowed militant jihadists to seep back into the game.

The decision of the Bush administration to invade, conquer, and transform Iraq was a historic moment for the Middle East, but it would also highlight the

fact that in contemporary circumstances insurgency was the dominant idiom of warfare, and the US armed forces were not particularly well equipped, organized, or attuned to deal with it. Chapters 6 and 7 examine why the world's most powerful state found its Iraq project so difficult to execute. Although the political and legal context was never an auspicious one, the tactical and operational approach of US forces was found wanting. After bitter experience, US policymakers and commanders would put their minds to the problem and come up with powerful new approaches. Chapter 8 examines the concept and execution of the so-called surge in Iraq in 2007–2008 and assesses to what extent it provided a route to "victory" as well as a cutting-edge model for future military operations. Had the surge restored the utility of force?

The defeat of the Taliban and Al-Qaida in Afghanistan and regime change in Iraq may have offered most Afghans and Iraqis the chance for a better life, but what was done in both cases was not unambiguously good in either a moral or practical sense. US prestige in the world was grievously damaged. The international systems in the Middle East and South Asia were destabilized. The ongoing wars in both countries were a tremendous boon to militant Islamists across the world. Chapter 9 assesses the state of the war on terror by 2007–2008 and, deploying the conceptual map of the war proposed in Chapter 2, outlines what kind of "effects" could be seen as tactical, operational, and strategic in the war. In this way, it may be possible to glean how, one day, Al-Qaida might be disempowered and deactivated and the war on terror brought to a conclusion. The chapter concludes with some comments about the likely future of warfare.

Notes

1. Simon Jenkins, "Comment: Bush and Blair Have Brilliantly Done bin Laden's Work for Him," *The Sunday Times,* 19 February 2006, 18.

2. Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002), and Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (London: Simon and Schuster UK, 2004); Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor (Lieutenant General, USMC), *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (London: Atlantic Books, 2006); L. Paul Bremer with Malcolm McConnell, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006); Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (London: Penguin Books, 2006); Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (London: C. Hurst, 2006), xxviii; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Baghdad's Green Zone* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).