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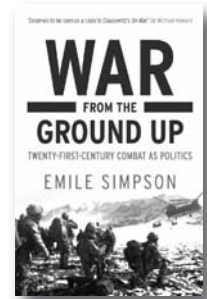


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War from the ground up: twenty-first-century combat as politics

by **Emile Simpson**

*Scribe Publications: Brunswick, Victoria; 2013; 304 pp.; ISBN 9781922070760 (paperback);
RRP \$29.95*



At first glance, the main title and cover of this book indicate that it might be another personal account of the United Kingdom's recent military operations in Helmand Province, Afghanistan; but it is not.

After reading history at Oxford, Emile Simpson served in the British Army from 2006 to 2012 as an infantry officer in the Royal Gurkha Rifles. He completed three tours in southern Afghanistan and also served in Brunei, Nepal, and the Falkland Islands.

Drawing on that experience Simpson wrestles with the nature of modern wars and offers a new and distinctive perspective on contemporary armed conflict. While most accounts of war look down at the battlefield from an academic perspective or across it as a personal narrative, Simpson looks up from the battleground to consider the concepts and circumstances that put him there, and how they played out on the ground.

Simpson argues that in the Afghan conflict, and in contemporary conflicts more generally, liberal powers and their armed forces have blurred the line between military and political activity. More broadly, they have challenged the distinction between war and peace. He contends that this loss of clarity is more a response to the conditions of combat in the early 21st century, particularly that of globalisation, than a deliberate choice.

Simpson wrote this book while a visiting defence fellow in the Changing Character of War Programme at the University of Oxford in 2011. As a consequence, the book is dense and has a distinctly academic and conceptual flavour to it. Some sentences demand being read several times over.

Simpson follows Clausewitz in seeing war as “a continuation of politics with an admixture of other means”, but argues that contemporary wars should be viewed in two categories: those fought “to establish military conditions for a political solution”; and those that “directly seek political, as opposed to military, outcomes”. The first are the traditional ‘bipolar’ conflicts in which all military operations are directed to defeating the enemy armed forces and compelling his government to accept our political terms. The second are those where military operations are intended to create the necessary

political conditions, usually through what are known as stabilisation or counterinsurgency techniques.

In the former, strategy, though still directed to an ultimate political objective, is largely driven by the operational needs of bipolar warfare which anyhow come naturally to those engaged in battle. But in the latter, operations are themselves political tools, used to undermine the adversary, deprive him of political support and if possible to convert him.

Confusingly, however, Simpson advises that these two categories can exist simultaneously and in the same theatre of operations at different levels; so the benefit of the distinction is largely lost. On balance, I am not convinced this subtle distinction has much utility to practitioners, or even to conceptualisers. Looking back over history, it seems to me that it has always been thus – particularly in the use of force to maintain an empire – something to which Simpson should be attuned.

More practically, but less surprisingly, Simpson explores how globalisation has significantly influenced the conduct of wars and the employment of organised violence in dynamic and inter-connected environments with a plethora of strategic audiences.

Sir Michael Howard in *The Times Literary Supplement* has written that *War From The Ground Up* is a “... work of such importance that it should be compulsory reading at every level in the military ... deserves to be seen as a coda to Clausewitz's *On War*”. But to me it offers no clear deductions or conclusions of any practical utility. Clausewitz aficionados may enjoy the detailed interpretation, analysis and comparison between competing theses, but for the layman *War From The Ground Up* is heavy going without any real dividends. There is no doubt that the nature of war is continuously evolving, but I am unconvinced that Simpson has ‘somehow cracked the conceptual code’ of contemporary war in this book.

But to Simpson's credit, at least he is thinking deeply about his profession and wrestling with the contradictions that inevitably arise in the minds of those who participate in contemporary military operations. More should follow his lead.

Marcus Fielding