Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- The Changing Face of War Discussion Guide –

This guide is intended to help the readers synthesize the purpose, perspective, wisdom – “goodness” – of the book The Changing Face of War with their own perspectives on warfighting, and come out of this session or sessions of small group PME with a better sense of history, identity, and purpose.

**Prep Work:** Read the book and be prepared to discuss the following selected readings:

- Introduction (pp. ix-xi)
- Chapter 1 (Prelude, 1900-1914), pp. 1-17, 37-40
- Chapter 2 (World War I, 1914-18), pp. 41-46, 72-79
- Chapter 3 (The Twenty Years’ Truce), pp. 114-118
- Chapter 4 (World War II, 1939-45), pp. 133-154
- Chapter 5 (In the Shadow of the Bomb), pp. 169-180, 193-195, 200-211
- Chapter 6 (The New World Disorder, 1991 to the Present), pp. 219-229, 235-245, 246-259
- Chapter 7 (The First and the Last), pp. 261-270
- Epilogue, pp. 271-278

**Discussion Questions:** All answers/ responses during discussion should be embraced as relevant, and open for further discussion.

1. **Overarching Historical Analysis:** (These questions refer directly to the text.)
   
   a. Many historians argue that the balance of power and the international alliance system before 1914 made war virtually inevitable. In van Creveld’s account, to what degree did military leaders before the First World War enjoy certainty as to their future enemy? What was their understanding of future war?
   
   b. How did the meaning and nature of “battle” change in the 20th century, and how did the Battle of the Marne reflect the onset of the change?
   
   c. How did the globalization and industrialization of war reach their culmination in the Second World War? What did “Total War” entail, and what role did the factor of time play in it?
   
   d. What effect did Westerners’ disdain for “uncivilized” warfare have on their ability to prepare for the evolution of war in the 20th century and beyond?
   
   e. What two main trends does van Creveld see as dominating the pattern of military affairs since the 17th century? When did they cease to be determinants of the success of armed forces, and why?
   
   f. Van Creveld engages in a scholarly debate with the late military historian John Keegan. Why does he reject Keegan’s emphasis on the media in explaining the defeat of strong forces by weak ones? What argument does he offer in place of Keegan’s, and what role does time play in it?
   
   g. Why does van Creveld endorse the work of the American scholar Bernard Brodie as a correct understanding of Cold War strategic reality? Do you agree that Brodie is relevant today?
   
   h. Why does the author dismiss the “Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)?” Do you agree?

**Key Take-Aways:**

- Advent of nuclear weapons as a major turning point in military history
- Shifting location and increasing success of “uncivilized” warfare over the 20th century
- Changing role of numerical strength and technological advantage, 1600’s to today
- Significance of duration of time and choice of timing in war
2. Case studies: (These questions refer directly to Chapter 6 but invite reflection on personal experience.)

a. Van Creveld refers to Machiavelli’s famous work, *The Prince*, and he quotes the Hebrew proverb, “He who shows mercy to the cruel will end up being cruel to those who deserve mercy.” What does he mean by these references, and how are they reflected in his assessment of Syrian and British success in counterinsurgency?
b. What might the West today learn from the author’s Syrian case study? Does it help inform your understanding of current developments in Syria, Iraq, and “the Levant” (Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian territories)? If so, how? If not, why not?
c. Can Westerners reared in peace and schooled in a pervasive Western liberal tradition embrace the methods van Creveld advocates? Or do they demand prior experience with political, societal, or religious or cultural conflict, such as in the case of Britain’s Irish “Troubles”?
d. Leaving aside doctrine for the moment, does van Creveld, having written *The Changing Face of War* in 2005, have an accurate understanding of the Iraq case? Does his account of troop morale, for example, ring true? What do you think of his Vietnam analogy? What events transpired since he wrote the main text, and what impact might they have on his argument?
e. In a global international system, can one dismiss state-based conflicts elsewhere – say, Eastern Europe or Southeast Asia – simply because one is fighting Islamic terrorists in the Middle East? How can a Western state and society prepare for both forms of war, at a time of rising costs and shifting political priorities?

Key Take-Aways:
- Relative unimportance (in van Creveld’s view) of morality in counterinsurgency
- Significance of duration of time and choice of timing in counterinsurgency
- Impact on the argument of van Creveld’s having perceived the Iraq war at its nadir
- Need for awareness of biases in an author’s text and in one’s own response to it

3. Cultural and Societal Context: (These questions draw on ideas in the “Why This Book” essay.)

a. What do you think of van Creveld’s argument concerning women in the military? Why do you think he emphasizes it in a critique of Western methods of fighting terrorist insurgents?
b. Do you share van Creveld’s view of professional military education (PME)? How do you think civilians can best contribute to military education, training, and experience?
c. Elsewhere, van Creveld has proclaimed that Clausewitzian theory developed for the era of “Trinitarian” warfare, no longer holds true in an era of “Non-Trinitarian” wars. Do you agree that Clausewitz’s understanding of the fundamental nature of war, the importance of a center of gravity, the relative effectiveness of offense and defense, the central role of physical combat and the quest for “decisive battle” (among other key features of *On War*) has been rendered irrelevant or obsolete by the rise of non-state actors such as Al Qaeda or ISIS?

Key Take-Aways:
- Need for awareness of biases in an author’s text and in one’s own response to it
- Importance of changing societal and cultural context in military affairs
- Usefulness of placing an author’s text in the wider context of his other work

4. Relationship to FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*:

a. How would you answer the question van Creveld poses on p. 229: “Can a counterinsurgent use time in such a way as to make it work for, instead of against, him?”
b. Do you agree with his assessment of US methods in Iraq? Why or why not?
c. How might a later account of the war in Iraq have affected his interpretation, if at all?
d. Can sharp, quick, brutal methods achieve better results than the current US COIN doctrine?
e. Compare van Creveld’s discussion of the US war in Iraq to his analysis (in the “Epilogue”) of the 2006 Israeli war in Lebanon.
f. What does van Creveld regard as the most effective weapon in counterinsurgency, as opposed to 20th century conventional war, and why? Do you agree, and if so why? If not, why not?
g. How does van Creveld think counterinsurgency should be waged? What are his key principles? Do you agree with him, and if so, why? If not, why not?
h. To what extent can van Creveld’s approach be reconciled with Clausewitz’s dictum that war is the continuation of “politics” by other means, and that military action must always be guided by political considerations?

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Changing Face of War Discussion Key Take-Aways:
1. Van Creveld’s argument about the growing insignificance of numbers and technology in military history, and therefore his rejection of the “RMA,” must be evaluated within a bigger picture, both in the past and in the present.
2. Western morality and effectiveness in counterinsurgency may be difficult to reconcile.
3. Time once favored the state that had extensive resources but could only mobilize them gradually; in counterinsurgency, this may no longer hold true, as the passage of time now favors the insurgents, who can hold out longer at greater cost than the counterinsurgents.
4. The Iraq war in 2005 looked quite different from the post-“Surge” Iraq of 2008-2009, yet that situation, too, has changed. One’s view of van Creveld’s argument may depend in part on one’s understanding of what led to the 2014 collapse of Iraq and the rise of ISIS.
5. In reading and critiquing a deliberately provocative and controversial work, one must constantly be aware of biases in both the author’s approach, one’s response to those biases as well as one’s own biases.

To the Discussion Leader:

This guide is intended to help Marines think about and synthesize ideas from the book, The Changing Face of War. All answers or responses during discussion should be embraced as relevant, and open for further discussion. There is no single right answer.

Encourage the Marine to read from this book and other books. Encourage them to think and challenge and debate, and arrive at a common understanding. Encourage them to consider the ideas of others (authors and peers) and to push themselves intellectually.

Avoid leading the discussion group to a particular interpretation. Support continuous conversation. This guide does NOT support a lecture with mile-deep detail on every possible issue and scenario in the book, The Changing Face of War.