

## METHODS OF WARFARE

# Interview with General Sir Rupert Smith\*

*General Sir Rupert Smith served in the British Army in East and South Africa, Arabia, the Caribbean, Europe and Malaysia before commanding, as a major-general, the British 1st Armoured Division during the Gulf War. As the first Assistant Chief of Defence Operations and Security at the United Kingdom Ministry of Defence in 1992, he was intimately involved in the United Kingdom's development of the strategy in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In 1995 he was Commander UNPROFOR in Sarajevo and in 1996–8 was the Officer Commanding in Northern Ireland. His final assignment was as Deputy Supreme Commander Allied Powers Europe in 1998–2001, covering the NATO operation “Allied Force” during the Kosovo conflict and the development of the European Security and Defence Identity. He retired from the army in 2002. Since 2006 he has been international advisor to the ICRC. His experience is shared to some extent through the words of his treatise on modern warfare, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (Penguin, London, 2005).*

⋮⋮⋮⋮⋮

### ***Is there a change in the paradigm of war?***

Yes, I believe that in recent decades we have lived through a shift in the paradigm of war. What has happened is that in the past, in what I call “industrial war”, you sought to win a trial of strength and thereby break the will of your opponent, to finally dictate the result, the political outcome you wished to achieve.

In our new paradigm, which I call “war amongst the people”, you seek to change the intentions or capture the will of your opponent and the people amongst which you operate, to win the clash of wills and thereby win the trial of strength. The essential difference is that military force is no longer used to decide the political dispute, but rather to create a condition in which a strategic result is achieved. We are now in a world of continual confrontation and conflicts in which

\* The interview was conducted on 7 January 2007 in London by Toni Pfanner (Editor-in-Chief of the International Review of the Red Cross).

the military endeavour to support the achievement of the desired outcome by other means.

***So you imply that the war/peace dichotomy is not relevant any more?***

Instead of a world in which peace is understood to be an absence of war and where we move in a linear process of peace–crisis–war–resolution–peace, we are in a world of continuous confrontation. The opponents in confrontation seek to influence each, including with military acts. To be effective, these acts must be coherent with and allied to the other measures that affect intentions so as to gain advantage in the confrontation.

***You said that the period of “industrial war” is shifting towards a “war amongst people”. Is there still a potential that industrial wars will nevertheless occur?***

I am not saying that you won’t get big fights. The Yom Kippur War was an example of war amongst the people in that the Egyptian President Sadat was trying to alter the basis of the confrontation over the Sinai. It was still a big conflict with a lot of casualties. However, you’ve got to remember that there are weapons that can kill large quantities of people – WMD. The point about weapons of mass destruction is that mass destruction and “industrial war” largely ended when one could destroy faster than one could build. These weapons have been used since the end of the Second World War, not to impose one’s will by force but to change the will of the opponent. We talk of the deterrent effect; we’re aiming at changing minds.

The new wars take place amongst the people as opposed to “between blocs of people”, as occurred for instance in the Second World War. I am not saying that people were not killed in that war; they were, in their millions. But there was a clear division as to which side everybody belonged to and whether they were in uniform or not. This is not the case in “wars amongst the people”. The people are part of the terrain of your battlefield.

***But don’t traditional wars still happen in many parts of the world?***

Armed forces, of both states and non-state entities, undoubtedly abound all around the world, as do military confrontations and armed conflicts. However, the event known as “war” is nowadays especially directed against non-combatants; war as a battle in a field between men and machinery, war as a massive deciding event in a dispute in international affairs, such wars no longer exist. Take the example of the United States, a state with the largest and best-equipped military forces in the world, which is unable to dictate the desired outcome as it did in the two world wars. In the present conflicts, military forces with great potential to exert power are unable to do so to advantage when challenged by forces that are by the same standards ill-equipped and disorganized.

***Military victory is not the desired outcome?***

The ends to which wars are conducted have changed from the hard, simple, destructive objectives of “industrial war” to the softer and more malleable

objectives of changing intentions, to deter, or to establish a safe and secure environment. In “industrial war” the opponents seek to resolve the political confrontation that was its cause directly, by military force. In “war amongst the people”, military force does not resolve the confrontation in this way. The forceful acts only contribute – positively or negatively – to the efforts of one or the other side to win the clash of wills and thus decide the confrontation.

***You distinguish between confrontation and conflict.***

I use the words confrontation and conflict at risk, as these two expressions tend to be used in journalistic circumstances as synonyms. They aren't. Confrontations occur all day. In everyday life they are the basis of all politics. They occur when two or more groups of people have a different outcome in mind. There may be a confrontation between two parties over an issue; one or other party may be persuaded by argument or have other reasons to adopt the other party's position or desired outcome. However, if one or other party will not agree and will not follow a set of rules or abide by the law, then they may adopt conflict as a course of action. In “industrial war” the conflict was intended to win the trial of strength so as to impose one's will. In “war amongst the people” the object of the conflict is to create a condition, to change intentions, so that the opponent adopts the desired outcome to the confrontation.

***And the conflict involves violence ...***

The conflict is always violent and the intention is always lethal or destructive, but it is important to understand that the objective of the military act is to support the achievement of the confrontational objective of getting the opponent to change his mind. Threats of the use of force as a demonstration, as deterrence, are contributory to sending the message to get you to change your mind.

Let us take the situation, for example, on the Lebanon/Israel border in July/August 2006. There was a confrontation between Hezbollah and Israel, a political, cultural and religious confrontation. Up until that point when the open fighting broke out, the level of conflict was very low, sporadic and mostly centred on the border. After the abduction of the Israeli soldiers, the conflict started and it became regional, or certainly threatened to be regional. However, in the end, the armed conflict was not to be decisive. It re-established the terms of the confrontation.

***The use of force remains a means to influence that confrontation?***

At the start of the conflict, the Israelis declared that the purpose of their military operations was the destruction of Hezbollah and the defeat of the rocket attacks. Now these are hard industrial objectives, and within two or three days they stopped pursuing them because they realized that, first, it wasn't achievable, and second, it wasn't actually what they were trying to do with their armed forces. They were trying to re-establish a confrontational position to their own advantage. And their rhetoric started to shift over the next three or four weeks to things like re-establishing the deterrent effect of the Israeli Defence Force, establishing a

negotiating position to get their soldiers back, making the Lebanese government responsible for policing its own borders, etc. Now, those are all conditional mind/intention-changing objectives: confrontational objectives, not conflictual objectives.

In the conduct of hostilities, whether you are on the confrontational or the conflict side, you have to understand where confrontation and conflict fit together. The more you can assure that the logic between them flows and connects, the more successful your military acts will be for the purpose of achieving your objective in the confrontation. This objective determines how the hostilities are conducted.

***You were Divisional Commander during the Gulf War and lived through the different stages of confrontations and conflicts, including an “industrial war” in the initial hostilities.***

We can start the story in 1990, when Kuwait was occupied by Iraq and a coalition was formed under US leadership to conduct a theatre-level confrontation, which we called “Desert Shield”. And that was to change the intention of the Iraqis and deter further possible ventures to the south.

Then followed “Desert Sword”, another confrontation, trying with this threat and about two months of heavy diplomacy to get Saddam Hussein to retire voluntarily from Kuwait. It failed and became a conflict, a campaign with the objective to destroy the Republican Guard and liberate Kuwait. These were hard objectives. In that sense, it was a conflict that looked like an industrial war.

But there was no way of translating it into a strategic success of winning the confrontation. We subsequently remained in confrontation with sanctions and no-fly zones, and every now and then Saddam Hussein initiated a battle by locking a tracking radar onto a bomber. In 2002 we started to ramp up another confrontation and the deployment of forces with operation “Iraqi Freedom”. Once again this became a conflict when he failed to bow to our demands. The operation quickly achieved its military objectives, but again we failed to translate the military campaign’s success into a strategic confrontational success. We sank down to a whole series of tactical events which we are incapable of linking to the achievement of our confrontational goal of winning the will of the Iraqi people. Here is an example of a complete dislocation between the military activity and the political activity.

***In the “war amongst the people” scenario the opponents want to influence the people.***

The objective *is* the will of the people. Tactically, the opponent often operates according to the tenets of the guerrilla, and the terrorist depends on the people for concealment, for support, both moral and physical, and for information. One seeks to provoke an over-reaction so as to paint the opponent in the colours of the tyrant and oppressor and thereby gain sympathy, support and credibility for one’s cause. Moreover, besides provocation there is the propaganda of the deed, which establishes one’s importance to be taken seriously and be treated on equal terms.

These conflicts take place amongst the people in another sense, through the media: we fight in every living room in the world as well as on the streets and fields of a conflict zone. And, finally, the opponent seeks to erode the will of the people by the never-ending conflict.

***The time factor is therefore important.***

“Wars among people” tend to be timeless. In “industrial wars” we fought to win as quickly as possible because we had turned the whole society over to fighting those wars and the whole industry to running the war effort. You do not do that in “wars amongst the people”. These are a continuous effort, and it is particularly in the non-state groupings’ interest not to fight to a timetable. They will wait and have another go at a time that suits them. Another of the reasons they are timeless is that the military objectives are not strategically decisive, with the result that you have to hold your position by military means, whether it is a demilitarized zone, a blue line or whatever, until such time as you might find the political solution. Incidentally, the international community is still in Korea, still in Cyprus, still in Lebanon, and the story of Israel is a continuous story of conflict.

***The will to fight seems to be quickly eroded in democratic societies.***

A characteristic of these kinds of war is that we fight so as not to lose the force. Nobody wants to bring home more body bags than absolutely necessary. You do not want to be seen wasting lives in this theatre. This is mainly because in these modern operations, the outcome is not meant to be definitive – and therefore the operation has to be sustained, open-ended. You don’t want to reduce your ability to sustain these long-term operations.

***Communication plays a major role in influencing this will.***

We still see war within the inter-state industrial model because the media usually depicts it from the perspective of the conventional military forces sent in by nation-states. Moreover, because the media have little time or space to convey information – a minute or three on screen or on air, a few inches in the daily press – they must work with cognitive images and jargon in order to be appealing to and understood by their audiences. These images and jargon are all of individuals and situations involving conventional armies in industrial war. In itself, this has now created a new loop, since much of the audience and even segments of the media realize that there is a dissonance between what is being shown and experienced and what is being explained – the former clearly being other forms of war, the latter being desperate attempts to use the framework of inter-state war to interpret “war amongst the people”.

Taking an example from our daily TV news flashes from Iraq, we see heavily armed soldiers patrolling in tanks through streets full of women and children; or else we see ragged civilian men and children attacking heavily armed soldiers in tanks. The pictures clash with our cognitive senses, and the interpretation then laid on them by the reporter or studio commentator – attempting to explain the military actions of the soldiers – confuses us further. A

new reality is being restructured into an old paradigm, for the most part unsuccessfully. The effect of the media is that by and large, everything is visible to an audience to a greater or lesser degree and you are now operating literally in a theatre of war. Command has to be understood in that sense, because you are acting out a drama in front of an audience, an audience which in part it is your objective to influence.

***In the present Iraq war, the initial idea propagated was “winning the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people”, which now tends to be heard much less often.***

The origins of the idea in the phrase have long been detached from the original event, so we must make sure we understand what is being meant. In large measure, the strategic objective *is* to win the hearts and minds of the people. In other words this isn't a supporting activity of your tactical battle. It is the purpose of what you are doing. So arriving afterwards to paint a school or deliver toothpaste isn't helping if you've blown the school away in the first place.

***What happens in the case of an occupation? The invading forces were sometimes received as liberators, but the occupying forces alienated at least part of the population.***

I'm assuming that in the examples you have in mind, the troops arrived by force. So let's not talk about being invited in or coming in by multinational or international mandate. The armed forces may win a fight or may occupy, and break and destroy the hostile forces. They have appeared to achieve the strategic and theatre-level objectives. The occupied may well greet you, but it doesn't mean that it is genuine or that everybody believes their greetings. It doesn't mean to say that your welcome will last for very long because, to use an old English idiom, “Guests and fish go off after three days”.

For example, even if the occupation of Lebanon by Syria wasn't wholly resisted (although admittedly the occupation of Lebanon by Syria wasn't done by force); because it actually brought peace it was a better situation than they had before. There has to be a reason for you to stay there, unless you are going to coerce the reason. You then go right back into a confrontation, but if the will of the occupied population is not broken and it refuses to co-operate, the strategic and theatre initiative is handed to the occupied.

Within the idea of confrontation and conflict, the opponent is both a military and a political being, meaning that focusing on and overcoming the resistance of the one without reference to the other will not lead to the desired strategic outcome. With this in mind, the analysis and planning should have started with the understanding of the strategic objectives – to take the example of Iraq, the will of the Iraqi people and their leader, and the necessary measures to win it over, or at least keep it neutral.

This means that the proper process should have been to start to define the successful outcome of the occupation before the occupation actually commenced – before the invasion. The lead agency for this planning should therefore not have

been the military specifically, but rather those responsible for reaching the desired outcome and conducting the occupation.

***Non-state actors are increasingly participating in such conflicts.***

Both confrontations and conflicts are conducted by multinational groupings or non-state groupings. Either because they are done under a multi-national alliance – in which I would include the UN but also NATO and the European Union – or under a coalition such as that led by America in Iraq, or even under some rather less formal coalitions where you have military forces in the theatre co-operating closely with the non-governmental aid agencies and so forth. You also find some rather more dangerous informal alliances where you have external groups of forces operating with one or other of the internal factions in the theatre you are operating in. The Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in 2001–2 with the US Coalition, or the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) in Kosovo in 1999 with NATO, are examples of these rather more dangerous informal alliances.

In addition, states operate against groups that are not states, whether they are Hamas, Hezbollah, the Taliban or the Irish Republican Army (IRA). And these non-state actors, together with these rather softer malleable objectives, make it extremely difficult to form strategies, to direct strategy, to define what winning is and so forth. Finally, we still have to find new ways to use the facilities and equipment that we purchased for other purposes a few years before.

Incidentally, the theatre or operational level is more and more important because of these alliances. They are frequently formed in the theatre – the geographical area containing in its military and political totality an objective the achievement of which alters the strategic situation to advantage. These collaborative confrontations run into the conflictual confrontations. They can exist even with the ICRC: the ICRC and the military have common objectives with regard to a number of things. We are having a collaborative confrontation; our objectives, our outcomes can coincide if there is sufficient commonality. We are then working together right on the edge of ICRC principles of neutrality. Both parties have to be very conscious of how far they can go and both can only operate within the tolerance of that collaborative confrontation.

***Non-state actors have advantages because they can circumvent the weaknesses that states have, they can provoke the state in order to repress drastically and alienate parts of the population without winning military battles. How do states have to respond? In the case of Northern Ireland, do they respond at the tactical level? So you have to look at the longer term goals?***

You do not play to their game even if it's to your disadvantage in the short term. You can win every fight and lose the war. The Americans and the British have not lost a single fight in the present conflict in Iraq. Why can't they aggregate those wins into a victory? Answer: these military successes are dislocated from a political purpose.



The objectives are always intentions. You asked about Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland we arrived at a decision very early on that we would only have conflict when initiated by the terrorist, because we, the military, were in support of the police or civil power rather than acting in our own right. Attacks were always initiated by the opponents, sometimes tactically to our disadvantage, but we did not go out to start a conflict.

***How does this change in the paradigm of war influence the conduct of hostilities on the ground? Is there still a possibility of distinguishing between combatants and civilians?***

In this area our interpretations and understandings have to change. First of all, the people amongst which you fight are part of your objective at the confrontational level. The more you can isolate them from the actual combatant, the more you can get them to abstain from assisting the combatant or even gain their tacit approval for what you are doing.

Second, the population is important to the opponent, for concealment, for moral and material support and for political legitimacy; the people are his objective too. At times you may think that they, the people, may be very close to and almost – if not completely – allied to your principal opponent. For example, for all sorts of religious, cultural and ethnic reasons the Shiite population of southern Lebanon is culturally well disposed to Hezbollah when faced by the Israelis. So to suppose that you can do more than achieve their neutrality in this matter would be absurd, but you should nevertheless understand that they are part of your objective.

In Lebanon, the confrontational objective of the Israelis was, in particular, the Shiite population. At the very least you wish them not to support attacks on you. They themselves cannot be the object of an armed attack unless you are supposing that you are going to bomb them into submission, or carry out some “stalinesque” ethnic cleansing or whatever. If you are not going to do that, you need to understand that the military measures you take are to bring them to change their intentions to your advantage. This may well involve the use of military force, but your targets will be those to change intentions.

***This is obviously difficult.***

Yes, as at the same time the population is being used by your true opponent to shield him, to supply him, to give him political legitimacy, to give him information and so forth. They are very much part of his alliance. In this confrontation you are trying to win them from your opponent to a greater or lesser degree in order to isolate the opponent. If you want an example, this is what the West did to the Warsaw Pact to win the Cold War, which was a confrontation; it never became a conflict. It was the revolt of the people of the Warsaw Pact satellite states, and then the revolt of the people of Russia against their government, that marked the end of the cold war, not a military adventure at all. So it can be done.



***So you should try to distinguish between combatants and civilian population during hostilities?***

Your objective is to capture the population's intentions, and the more you treat all the people as your enemy, the more all the people will be your enemy. This is why I talk about this change of logic, because in the purely military logic they're supporting the opponent: they must be part of the enemy, but they are not, they are part of your confrontational objective.

The strategies of provocation and propaganda seek to break or dislocate the political approach from the military approach. Thus if you operate so that your measures during conflict are treating all these people as enemies or even as combatants, you are dislocating your confrontational approach from the military act. You are acting on behalf of your enemy; you are even co-operating with him, because that is what your opponent is aiming at with his strategy.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah and the Shiite population and Hezbollah and the Lebanese government are in a collaborative confrontation, and every time you act in such a way as to dislocate your military acts in conflict from those to win the confrontation, you are strengthening your opponent. When I talk about this dislocation of the military act, the whole point of the strategies of deed, provocation and erosion of will is to get you to act to the advantage of the opponent's confrontation.

***During a conflict, it is difficult to strike the balance between confrontational and conflict objectives.***

Yes, it is difficult to do this because each set of objectives is found in a different logic: the logic of the confrontation and that of the conflict. Nevertheless this has to be done. I think the trick is to seek your opponent's logic junction and attack that.