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Stephen Biddle | Reviewed by Andrew Maher

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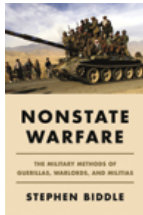


# Nonstate warfare: the military methods of guerrillas, warlords, and militias

*Stephen Biddle*

Princeton University Press, 2021.

Reviewed by Andrew Maher



As we have marked the twentieth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, it is pertinent to reflect upon the lessons of these contemporary conflicts. This period did not neatly fit our characterisations of ‘peace’ and ‘war’, and thus it has inspired a re-discovered interest in the spectrum of conflict. It was an era characterised by shades of grey where states, such as Russia, pursued foreign policy goals in Crimea in ways more akin to the methods of nonstate actors; and nonstate actors, such as Islamic State, pursued foreign policy objectives in ways akin to those of states.

We unhelpfully responded to the challenge of ambiguity with new terminology; the ‘grey zone’ to describe this environment, with little clarity as to how conflict is fought in the grey zone.

It is to the challenge of better understanding this shift in our conception of warfare that Stephen Biddle’s latest book, *Nonstate warfare*, responds. The military practitioner should, of course, be familiar with Biddle’s earlier work, his magisterial quantitative exploration of conventional *Military Power*.<sup>1</sup> A brief re-cap should, however, serve to remind of the authority with which Biddle approaches the topic of war. In *Military Power*, Biddle took issue with the way scholars and practitioners relied on ‘simpler measures of gross preponderance per se: the greater A’s numerical superiority over B, the greater its relative capability’.<sup>2</sup> Instead, he convincingly argued that:

[t]he modern system is a tightly interrelated complex of cover, concealment, dispersion, suppression, small-unit independent manoeuvre, and combined arms at the tactical level, and depth, reserves, and differential concentration at the operational level of war ... Where fully implemented, the modern system damps the effects of technological change and insulates its users from

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1 Stephen Biddle, *Military power: explaining victory and defeat in modern battle*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2004.

2 Biddle, *Military power*, p 15.

the full lethality of their opponents' weapons.<sup>3</sup>

With this statement, Biddle describes the opiate of operational excellence to which every arms-corps army officer aspires. Further, for an Australian Defence Force that will struggle to attain numerical superiority (and into the future, technological superiority), Biddle's analysis should serve as essential reading.

It is from this basis that Biddle expands with *Nonstate warfare* into describing a spectrum of warfare from Fabian to Napoleonic methods. This is an incisive simplification that cuts through the complexity observed over the past 20 years of conflict. He breaks with the dichotomous categorisations of regular and irregular strategy, conventional and unconventional war, and state and nonstate actors. This approach is helpful, as dichotomies tend to fuel either/or debates while masking subtleties and nuance. As Biddle explains:

[T]he characteristics of pure *Fabian* methods include an absolute unwillingness to defend ground via decisive engagement at any point in the theatre; dispersed operations ... insistence on concealment obtained via intermingling with the civilian population; exclusive

reliance on coercion ... and rejection of heavy weapons, even when available, in favour of light arms and equipment more suitable to concealment among the population. By contrast, the characteristics of pure *Napoleonic* methods include an insistence on decisive engagement to defend or seize ground that will not be voluntarily relinquished; local concentration ... exclusive reliance on brute force rather than coercion; and preferential employment of the heaviest weapons available.<sup>4</sup>

At one end of Biddle's spectrum, Napoleonic warfare offers decision; the Austerlitz to which Clausewitzian adherents aspire. Seeking decision might also prove unfavourable – we must remember that Napoleonic warfare risks a Waterloo. At the other end of the spectrum, Fabian warfare argues the strategic purpose of an 'army in being' – much like the 'fleet in being' – that threatens by simply existing. Through, or in concert with guerrillas, it offers attrition, exhaustion, and cost imposition, an Iberian 'bleeding ulcer' that frustrates the policymaker.<sup>5</sup> It risks an absence of decision, erosion of political will and local popular support, much like the failed Neapolitan resistance against Joseph Bonaparte. As these examples demonstrate, these forms of war

3 Biddle, *Military power*, p 3.

4 Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate warfare: the military methods of guerrillas, warlords, and militias*, Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford 2021, pp 12–13. <https://press.princeton.edu/books/hardcover/9780691207513/nonstate-warfare>.

5 This terminology alludes to the Iberian campaign bleeding Napoleonic France of its resources over a long period of attrition. David Gates, *The Spanish ulcer: a history of the peninsular war*, Birlinn Limited, 2002.

carry costs and benefits, and might be adopted by state or nonstate actors alike. Further, these examples demonstrate that such dilemmas have also faced military leaders throughout history; they are hardly novel challenges.

Biddle's spectrum of warfare indicates that our conflict of the past 20 years has demonstrated it is a mistake for us to approach nonstate actors and nation states differently.<sup>6</sup> The term, 'asymmetric warfare' is an example of this mistake; the term often being synonymous with what *they* do, despite the logic that all warfare should be asymmetric, whether by numerical, firepower, decision or technological superiority. Instead, Biddle describes a convergence of factors that are eroding the technological edge nation states once enjoyed. Man-portable lethality, in the form of the anti-armour rocket or the surface-to-air missile, creates an asymmetry that has now diffused to nonstate actors. The outcome of such capabilities manifest in Somalia, Iraq and Southern Lebanon, and was consistent with Frank Hoffman's conception of 'hybrid warfare'.<sup>7</sup> Today, the diffusion of enabling capabilities, such as commercially available satellite imagery, weaponised commercial-of-the-shelf

drones and encrypted messaging applications, are giving nonstate actors capabilities that were recently associated with that of states. This diffusion means that 'all combatants, whether states or not, must respond to a common set of incentives ... [meaning] almost all real actors occupy points somewhere in the middle'.<sup>8</sup>

As the Australian Army adopts a training enemy termed DATE – the Decisive Action Threat Environment – a 'hybrid' adversary is our new benchmark.<sup>9</sup> We thus require sound logic to inform the way we educate our people to engage with such an adversary. By recognising this 'blending' of methods of war as the norm, we might better engage within such training and operational environments. For example, Operation Desert Storm in 1991 appeared to be an application of Napoleonic warfare by both sides of the conflict. In 2003, the American-led coalition was predominantly Napoleonic in orientation, but also employed the more Fabian methods of unconventional warfare. Importantly, Saddam Hussein learnt from the 1991 experience, and conducted extensive preparations for a midpoint conflict characterised by a *Fedayeen* resistance, extremist

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6 Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, p 2.

7 Frank Hoffman, *Conflict in the 21st Century: the rise of hybrid wars*, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Arlington VA, 2007.

8 Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, p xvi.

9 The Cove, 'Implementing the decisive action training environment', *The Cove*, 23 August 2020, <https://cove.army.gov.au/article/DATE>.

terror and conventional mobile warfare.<sup>10</sup> To simply expect a particular type of adversary, who does not adapt lessons from their own experience, alongside those experiences of others, is naïve.

At a strategic level, Australia's security studies discourse is presently filled with a return to major power competition and a state-centric view of future warfighting. This orientation conforms with what Biddle would define as the Napoleonic end of his spectrum. This is a spurious and oversimplified assertion if viewed as the only type of threat Australia will face. The most recent period of major power competition witnessed the superpowers support proxies in Third World nations that fought in a decidedly un-Napoleonic manner. Does this insight suggest a continuity of recent insurgencies as the primary means of conflict? Maybe, but not necessarily. As Biddle notes:

The scale of resources needed to wage state-like mid-spectrum warfare has now shrunk to the point where many nonstate actors can fight effectively in this style – *if* their institutions are up to the job... [Thus], Nonstate combatants *with permissive internal politics* will be able to exploit modern weapons to wage increasingly state-like mid-spectrum warfare.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the barrier to entry for nonstate actors to engage in more sophisticated means of warfare are lower and more readily adopted. If Biddle is correct, this would suggest an increased frequency of conflicts similar to campaigns waged by Hezbollah in 2006, Hamas in 2008, Islamic State between 2012 and 2015, and between Azerbaijan and Armenia in 2020. The implication being that:

[n]umerically preponderant, once-Napoleonic states have an incentive to become more Fabian in the search for cover against increasingly lethal weapons; numerically inferior, once-Fabian nonstate actors have an incentive to become less Fabian as real territorial control becomes more realistically possible for them.<sup>12</sup>

Biddle's model and resultant analysis pose significant implications to Australian policy, strategy and acquisition considerations. The *2020 Defence Strategic Update* articulated a strong investment in what Biddle would term the Napoleonic end of the warfighting spectrum. With such acquisition decisions, we must note:

High-tech, standoff precision forces perform well against massed, exposed, near-Napoleonic foes but perform poorly against better-concealed, mid-spectrum enemies

10 Malcom W Nance, *The terrorists of Iraq: inside the strategy and tactics of the Iraq insurgency, 2003–2014*, 2nd edition, CRC Press, Boca Raton FL, 2015.

11 Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, pp 8–9.

12 Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, p 48.

– and the new theory predicts fewer of the former and more of the latter over time as many nonstate actors join astute state militaries in moving toward the middle of the Fabian-Napoleonic spectrum... Conversely, a force transformed for low-tech, low-firepower population security would lack the lethality needed against mid-spectrum enemies, whether these be states or the nonstate actors who will be increasingly capable of such methods in the future.<sup>13</sup>

Biddle elegantly demonstrates how militaries need to respond up and down the spectrum of conflict with this prescription. He notes that one of the largest armies he examined was Mao's Chinese People's Liberation Army in the Chinese Civil War of 1945 that fielded two million troops.<sup>14</sup> This army operated in a decidedly Napoleonic manner in the Korean War, yet 15 years earlier, was a guerilla army that operated in decidedly Fabian ways. Biddle's resultant prescription is to develop flexibility and adaptability in moving along

the spectrum, as appropriate to the adversary faced. Indeed, if needing a primary azimuth, he advises against a Napoleonic or conventional orientation, prescribing that:

Mid-spectrum war fighting demands much more extensive training than do simpler Napoleonic or Fabian methods... This is because mid-spectrum methods required combatants to combine Napoleonic lethality and Fabian survivability.<sup>15</sup>

Biddle's writing style will appeal to most audiences. His rich quantitative foundation, established with *Military Power*, is complemented by clear language that presents a compelling argument. With his simple model, he affords reflective insight into key lessons of our past 20 years of conflict and prescriptions into the future about what type of threats the West will face. In so doing, he appeals to audiences from the practitioner to the policymaker.

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13 Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, pp 9–10.

14 Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, p 50.

15 Stephen Biddle, *Nonstate warfare*, pp 74–75.