

THE SLING AND THE STONE: ON WAR IN THE 21ST CENTURY

by Colonel Thomas X. Hammes, USMC

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Reviewed by Colonel Mike Capstick

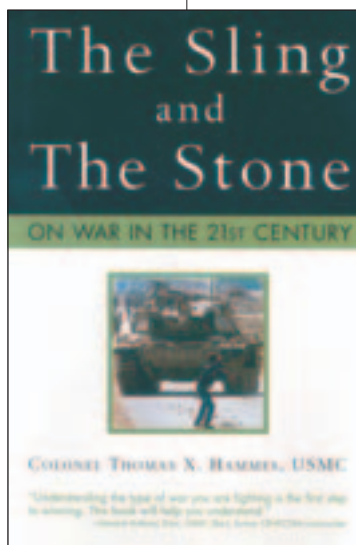
Colonel Thomas X. Hammes, a serving US Marine Corps officer, has, in this superb book, provided anyone interested in the major issues of military transformation with an invaluable counterpoint to the technology-driven agenda that has dominated Western military debate since the end of the Cold War. Hammes, now an instructor at the US National Defense University, brings his solid academic background and extensive infantry and inter-agency experience to this effort. He is a graduate of the now-defunct Canadian National Defence College, and says good things about it! The result is a succinct, challenging, and highly readable history of the evolution of warfare in the last half of the 20th Century, and its impact upon the ‘Western Way of War’ during the 21st Century. More importantly and specifically, it provides a thorough understanding of the kind of war that is likely to dominate the next few decades. The result is a tough indictment of Western militaries’ fixation on technology and high-technology weapons and information systems. At the same time, Hammes provides strategic-level recommendations that all defence and security professionals would be irresponsible to ignore.

Hammes uses the first four chapters to describe how modern war and conflict have undergone a generational evolution over time. Leaning heavily on the work of William Lind and Gary Wilson, first presented in the October 1989 edition of the *Marine Corps Gazette*, “The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation”, he describes the successive ‘generations’ or modes of warfare that have, in succession, dominated since the emergence of the modern nation-state. Unlike some other authors, Hammes integrates his analysis of the character of war within the broader political, social, and economic context of the times.

For ease of reference, the first ‘three generations of war’ encompass the arc of history, from the Treaty of Westphalia to the end of the Cold War. Throughout this period, organized large armies designed to fight

in the name of their respective nation-state, at least in the West, characterized warfare. The model for the ‘first generation’ (1GW) is the Napoleonic style of large-scale citizen armies, who fought in disciplined bodies and took advantage of the firepower offered by fairly early small arms and cannon. The ‘second generation’ (2GW) reached its apogee during the First World War, when the power of modern weapons, coupled with the inability to generate manoeuvre, resulted in stalemate conditions on the Western Front. This style evolved into the *Blitzkrieg*-inspired ‘third generation’ (3GW), that has become the dominant manoeuvre warfare doctrine aspired to by almost all Western armies. Although this section of the book is an excellent short summary of a few hundred years of history, the idea of categorizing war in this way can lead to over-generalization, and it does not do justice to the complexity of conflict. This generational model of warfare is only really useful at a fairly high level of abstraction. For example, even though the First World War fits firmly into the 2GW category, actions that occurred in the Middle Eastern and Italian theatres often demonstrated 3GW characteristics. Readers should, therefore, be cautious about interpreting the ‘generations’ too literally.

The second part of the book discusses the development of the ‘fourth generation’ of warfare (4GW), the period since the Second World War. It is described by Hammes as “an evolved form of insurgency” that “...does not attempt to win by defeating the enemy’s military forces. Instead, via the networks (*political, economic, social, and military*), it directly attacks the minds of enemy decision makers to destroy the enemy’s political will.” This is, in Hammes’s analysis, the only way for a weaker party to defeat a major military power. He uses a range of historical examples as different as Mao’s Long March and the Palestinian *Intafadahs* to illustrate the evolution of 4GW during this period. Although there is too much material in this section to discuss each case study, Hammes draws some major lessons from his analysis. The first is that insurgencies have usually proven highly adaptive and capable of staying well ahead of the ‘learning curve’ of conventional military forces. This often results in the inability of high-technology forces to maintain the initiative over determined, thinking insurgents. Another theme common to these diverse insurgencies is that strategic success is never purely military. Instead, victory demands a full range of coordinated social, military, political and economic actions, applied with patience.



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The last third of *The Sling and the Stone* begins with the emerging lessons of the Iraq War as the lead-in to a broad discussion of how industrial age Western militaries need to transform to meet the challenges of the 21st Century. Hammes contends that war, since the early 1990s, has demonstrated to almost every potential foe that challenging the conventional military might of the United States by conventional means is a sure path to defeat. As a consequence, the present and future of war for the next few decades will be defined by sophisticated and adaptive insurgencies, designed to nullify the 3GW strength of Western militaries. Hammes's message is clear. 4GW is the present and the foreseeable future – military transformation *must* break out of the 3GW model to prevail.

Highly critical of the technology-driven visions for US military transformation, Hammes advocates radical changes to force structure, training and education, doctrine, equipment, personnel systems, and, most importantly, to military culture. The alternative, according to Hammes, is to continue winning battles by using superior firepower and technology while, at the same time, losing the asymmetric war at the strategic level. He is particularly concerned with the Pentagon's ongoing fixation upon technology as the main focus of concepts, such as Network-Centric Warfare (Network-Enabled Operations in Canada), Effects Based Operations, and Rapid Decisive Operations. As his historical analysis demonstrates – reinforced by ongoing experience in Iraq and Afghanistan – the traditional 'Western way of war' is simply not the appropriate response to contemporary, advanced insurgencies. In short, the kind of overwhelming force that technology brings to battles against conventional forces is simply insufficient. The reality is that the high-tech sensors that allow precision strike in open combat are often useless against insurgents living among the population. And the weapons systems that they direct cannot be used without an unacceptably high risk of creating both martyrs and new recruits for the insurgency.

The Sling and the Stone concludes with a series of recommendations that deal with the entire spectrum of military capability. Canadian readers should pay special attention to his discussion of people, as the Canadian Forces personnel system is, in large part, modelled upon the US pattern. Hammes's critique of the American Industrial Age approach to personnel issues focuses on its effect as the major obstacle to the real cultural shift necessary for true military transformation. He advocates major changes to professional military education, the evaluation and promotion system and the 'one-size-fits-all' career progression that characterizes the US (and Canadian) systems as prerequisites to transformation. This argument is convincing, as most of these elements of the personnel system have a demonstrable influence upon military culture, and, in turn, upon the style of war. This section leans heavily upon the work of leading military reformers, and, despite its US orientation, most of the criticisms and recommendations apply in the Canadian context. In the final chapters, Hammes argues that the current American (and by extension, Western) Industrial Age armed forces are simply not up to the challenge presented by the dominant mode of warfare in the 21st Century. Although many will not agree with all of his conclusions, all of them are worth examining in depth – especially those that warn against simply strapping more and faster technology onto already ponderous structures.

Colonel Hammes's book should be a 'must read' for CF officers and NCOs, as well as all defence civilians engaged in strategic policy development and military transformation. It should also be read by academics, journalists and commentators involved in defence issues – especially those who persist in the belief that military capability is based upon declining concepts of mass and firepower as the measure of military capability.

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