

STAR WARS

By: ML Cavanaugh

Whether I was with cadets or Koreans, I had a problem.

As a military officer assigned to teach military strategy at West Point, and then on a staff alongside officers from the Republic of Korea, I kept bumping into the same challenge. Whenever I wanted to talk strategy, I could never get my point across.

We were just never on the same page. You see, for two people to talk strategy, both must be familiar with the case in question, whether it's in business, politics, or war. To discuss even something as studied as strategy in the American Civil War requires both parties to be deeply knowledgeable about the conflict. This necessary baseline quickly creates communication problems, particularly across national divides.

To bridge those generational and cultural divides, I had to find a shared frame of reference. A conflict we all knew a lot about. This common terrain also had to be fascinating.

Fate intervened on a dark winter's morning. While running near Camp Red Cloud, north of

Seoul, I listened through headphones to cartoonist and teacher Randall Munroe, of *XKCD* fame, talk about electrifying his physics students by asking them to solve [how much force](#) (lowercase “f”) Yoda would have required to lift Luke Skywalker’s Dagobah-bound fighter off the ground. Munroe described how genuinely excited his kids were to work the problem, then, and how much more motivated they were to learn physics, afterward—all because *Star Wars* provided common ground they truly cared about and could actually visualize.

Light appeared in the blackness of my predawn run in Korea, when I realized that discussions on strategy demand widespread, relatable scenarios that cross lingual, cultural, and generational divides.

Star Wars is perfect. Blockades. Coups. Armies. Elite forces. Ultimate weapons. Battles. Rebels. An Empire. *Star Wars* is global culture’s most recognized conflict, which makes it the ideal common canvas on which to study the art of strategy. It’s everywhere, not just on screens and in stores, but also on dog tags, license plates, and it has even [influenced](#) religion and language.

In a real sense, *Star Wars* is the modern version of Thucydides’ *Peloponnesian War*. Both illuminate multiple aspects of epic struggles, and epic they were—while the Greeks fought for 27 years, the Senate and Rebels have battled the Empire and First Order for [roughly 65](#). By exploring the lessons of such a widely-known long war, we can avoid lecture and instead lure cadets and citizens alike to greater understanding of strategic competition and societal conflict, which matters because both groups will directly contribute to national (and allied) performance at war.

Star Wars has much to teach us about conflict. “Reel” war can help us understand real war.

And while we may never harness the Force like the Jedi, if we study hard and train well, then strategy—the real Force—can be with all of us.

(No matter how old you are or where you come from!)

Major ML Cavanaugh is a non-resident fellow with the Modern War Institute at West Point, and co-edited the forthcoming book, with author Max Brooks, [Strategy Strikes Back: How Star Wars Explains Modern Military Conflict](#).

This essay is an unofficial expression of opinion; the views expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of West Point, the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or any agency of the US government.

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