



By Joe Byerly

One of my favorite books this year is Sean McFate's [*The New Rules of War: Victory in the Age of Durable Disorder*](#). Sean challenges everything I've learned over the last 15 years, and I can't help but wonder if he's right. I had a chance to catch up with him and ask about his new book, the future of war, and professional development.

Joe: How would you characterize war today and where do you think it's going?

Sean: There's a saying that generals always fight the last successful war. For the US, what that means is World War II. And when you ask experts what the future of war looks like, they will often tell you it's like World War II with better technology. What they are talking about is conventional warfare with better technology. But that is not where warfare is

going.

War is getting sneakier. And the weapons that work today are not the traditional weapons of the past. Weapons that give you good, plausible deniability are the ones that work today. This includes the use of special operations and paramilitary forces because we live in a global information age. Often, plausible deniability is more important than firepower.

For an example of the future of war, let's look at how Russia took Crimea. They had a big military. They could have launched a blitzkrieg through eastern Ukraine and seized Crimea. But they didn't. They used covert means to take it. They used Spetznatz (Russian Special Forces), they used little green men, mercenaries like the Wagner group, separatist battalions (that actually worked for the GRU), and a lot of propaganda that they call active measures. They created a ghost occupation. While the US and the West scratched their head about the event, wondering if Russia was actually there, Russia had already seized Crimea. That is the future of war.

Joe: In the late 1700s and early 1800s, the Prussian generals continued to train and prepare for Frederick the Great's War while Napoleon was changing the rules of the game. And as we know, the French crushed army after army. Are we the Prussians right now?

Sean: I think we are. It's very hard for victorious nations to change the ways we fight wars. We have the best military, the best troops, the best training, the best technology, and the most money. Yet, we struggle all over the world. We need to ask ourselves why.

This question animated my book, the [New Rules of War](#). I found that warfare has moved on and we have not. Our adversaries have grasped how warfare has moved on and they are exploiting it.

We're still using a bureaucracy, purchasing weapons, and doing certain types of training according to rules that no longer apply, and then we're frustrated by the result. We don't adapt. Everybody else has adapted but us. We don't adapt because we're stuck in the past admiring our former successes.

Usually, for a country to change the way it fights wars requires a lot of bloodshed. And sometimes that's not enough. Think about WWI and how little some of those countries learned from that experience. Because we were so successful in WWII, we stopped innovating in many ways. While we continue to innovate on the technology side, we stopped when it comes to strategic thinking. We have strategic atrophy.

Joe: In the book you talk about how our adversaries dominate us in the information space. At one point you mention that our laws restricting our use of information warfare are based off 1940s technology. If we were to compete in this space, what do we need to do?

Sean: Because war is becoming sneakier, figuring out truths from the lies determines the winners now. War is no longer won on the battlefield like Waterloo or Stalingrad. The way wars are won now is through manipulation.

Look at our elections. We know that Russia is trying to manipulate them. We know that they successfully did it. The question now is to what degree they were successful. We also know Russia may have manipulated the BREXIT vote.

We need to look at war from Russia's point of view. Who cares about the sword when you can manipulate the hand that wields it? That's how victory is achieved today in a global information age. Also, look at the division today in our country between conservatives and liberals or Democrats and Republicans. Typically these divisions are okay, but what if their divisive flames were being fanned by a global super power such as China or Russia? That would not be okay. That would be an act of war.

You could make the argument that we are already at war with Russia and China, and we don't know it. And that's part of their strategy. We need to get wise on what war looks like outside of tanks, planes, and submarines. We have to think about how we combat it.

We've fought this fight before. We did it during the cold war. War is going underground, into the shadows, and into the information space. We have to go there with it. We have to punch back. We can't be squeamish about using the dark arts of disinformation. The way Russia succeeds today is through manufacturing the fog of war and then they step through it for victory. We have to do more than reveal the fakeness of it all, we have to compete as well.

Joe: You graduated from ROTC and found yourself as a platoon leader in the 82nd Airborne Division. What advice would you give a young lieutenant today that would help them be successful in the current environment?

Sean: The first piece of advice I would give them is to learn from your NCOs. Let them school you about leadership.

The next piece of advice I would give them is to realize that warfare changes before warriors do. We have senior leaders who are still backwards thinking about the character of warfare. Warfare has moved on and we have not. It's incumbent upon that young lieutenant to be aware of that and look for it even if their battalion commander has not.

When I went to OBC in 1992, we were still talking about how the Soviets were going to invade Europe with echelons of tanks and memorize their formations. This was after the Berlin Wall had fell 3 years before. I asked why we were learning this, and was told to do pushups. So, I share this because I want junior officers to be critical thinkers when it comes to thinking about the future of warfare because war and strategy is no longer the purview of 4-star generals. It could be something a captain affects in a district in the middle of Afghanistan.

Joe: Last question: You've written a couple of fiction books. How important is fiction in the self-development of leaders?

I started writing a memoir about the stuff I was doing overseas as a mercenary, and then my editor told me that I would be sued if I published it. So I turned it into fiction and wrote the [Tom Locke Series](#). Fiction can be a magnificent truth teller and way to digest new ideas. Fiction can also be alluring, but it can also be wrong. Fiction is a double-edged sword. It can spark new ideas and new ways of thinking. But, it can also reinforce ideas that are outdated. So it still requires us to be critical thinkers when we read it.

There's a lot of fiction out there about conventional war. And there's nothing more unconventional about war today than conventional war. So I would avoid reading books that feed into this idea that our next war will be a conventional fight. I've tried to be as realistic as possible in my Tom Locke Series and capture the world as it is.

"Stunning. Sean McFate is a new Sun Tzu."

-Admiral James Stavridis (retired), former Supreme Allied Commander at NATO

Some of the principles of warfare are ancient, others are new, but all described in [The New Rules of War](#) will permanently shape war now and in the future. By following them Sean McFate argues, we can prevail. But if we do not, terrorists, rogue states, and others who do not fight conventionally will succeed—and rule the world.

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