

How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon

Rosa Brooks

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On October 7, 2001, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom, the opening act of America's war in Afghanistan. Fifteen years later, in addition to the unresolved war in Afghanistan, the U.S. military is bombing Islamic State militants in Iraq and Syria, firing cruise missiles against Houthi rebels in Yemen, and using drones to kill terrorists in Somalia. The smorgasbord of threats to the United States has also expanded in the last 15 years. Cyber weapons, the proliferation of unmanned weapons systems, and advancements in North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities are just a

few of the issues causing handwringing among the foreign policy establishment in Washington. So, what is to be done?

In *How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything: Tales from the Pentagon*, Rosa Brooks reflects on the novel characteristics of modern warfare and makes a case for new laws and institutions to manage its complex realities. Brooks mixes insightful stories about her experiences working in the Pentagon—from April 2009 to July 2011 she was a counselor to former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy—with hard-hitting academic discussions on international law and history. This combination works very well. But not all of Brooks's arguments about the state of war and what should be done about it hit their mark. Brooks does an excellent job of describing the current state of affairs, but her recommendations for managing future wars are not entirely convincing.

The key premise of *How Everything Became War* is that, in an age of nonstate actors, new technology, and general interconnectedness, the distinction between war and peace has broken down. Instead of there being clear states of war and peace, the world is now faced with a continuum where most activities fall somewhere in between. Russia's intervention in Ukraine, characterized by disinformation operations, "little green men" in Crimea, and proxy forces, is an example of such "gray zone" conflicts. Brooks argues that such conflicts are not a temporary aberration but a new paradigm that is already affecting the international legal system and the U.S. military.

The international laws, norms, and institutions that are supposed to govern state behavior in war are ill-suited to the continuum model because they are products of a time when war and peace were distinguishable and the enemy wore a uniform of a state. Brooks cites a January 2002 memo by White House counsel Alberto Gonzales which reads, "In my judgement, this new paradigm renders obsolete [the Geneva Conventions'] strict limitations on questioning of enemy prisoners and renders quaint some of its provisions." According to Brooks, those laws, norms, and institutions are outdated, and she argues that this warrants the creation of new tools for managing modern conflict.

The most visible impacts of conflict's new paradigm are apparent in the evolution that the U.S. military has undergone since 2001. The most captivating part of *How Everything Became War* is when Brooks

compares the U.S. military to a Walmart that offers “one-stop shopping convenience” for solving the nation’s problems. America’s civilian leaders can call on the Department of Defense (DoD) to solve practically any challenge. From killing specific terrorist leaders with drones, to providing humanitarian aid in poor countries ravaged by natural disasters, to engaging in cultural outreach as part of nation building in Afghanistan, the DoD can do it all!

Turning the U.S. military into a Walmart has a number of damaging effects, but two in particular stand out. First, a concentration of resources in the U.S. military means there are fewer resources available for civilian agencies that may be better suited to doing certain tasks. Civilian agencies with experts that specialize in humanitarian assistance or international development, such as the State Department or U.S. Agency for International Development, are persistently understaffed and underfunded. Meanwhile, the DoD gets considerable funding and has a large pool of manpower, but not the right expertise for the new missions it is taking on. This problem builds on itself. As more resources are shifted from civilian agencies to the military, it becomes easier for the military to do its tasks and harder for the civilian agencies. The next time funds are being distributed, it’s easier to give more to the military since they have more capacity, which further starves civilian agencies for funding.

Second, the relationship between the military and the civilian side of government has deteriorated as civilian leaders overestimate what the military can do. The military faces operational constraints that civilian leaders have difficulty believing given the resources at the military’s disposal. Civilian officials get frustrated when military leaders say that they can’t easily accomplish a given task, and military leaders see their civilian counterparts as naïve for asking the impossible. Acrimony between civilian and military leadership makes strategic planning harder and can lead to poorly informed decisions if the two sides don’t trust one another.

Brooks does an excellent job capturing just how much is asked of the U.S. military in today’s world and explaining how the changing characteristics of warfare create legal and political problems that test existing institutions. The best way to solve these new problems, Brooks contends, is to first recognize “that war and peace are not binary opposites, but lie along a continuum,” and to use the continuum model as a foundation to develop new norms and institutions “that support human rights and the rule of law, but are not premised

on the existence of sharp lines between war and peace.” The transformation of warfare brought about by new technology has removed the clear distinctions of war and peace and requires such a drastic policy prescription.

This is a straightforward and compelling argument, but it places a large burden of proof on the transformation of warfare. Brooks makes a good effort to show how much warfare has changed, but ultimately the changes she describes are evolutionary and therefore may not require her revolutionary policy prescriptions. The diffusion of new technology like cyber capabilities and autonomous weapons systems has increased the power of nonstate actors, but states also possess these capabilities, often in greater quantity and higher quality. Nonstate actors do have a wider set of tools for confronting states, and this has changed the face of warfare to a degree, but states can also use new technology when combating nonstate threats. Technology has made “gray zone” operations easier to conduct, but such operations have been used by states for centuries. War has certainly evolved with the introduction of new technologies, but this does not amount to revolutionary change.

Brooks’s arguments about the shortcomings of existing norms and institutions to deal with the continuum of conflict model ring true, but establishing a new system is another revolutionary change to an evolutionary problem. The decision to frame the fight against terrorism as a military conflict was politically expedient in the aftermath of 9/11. If, on the other hand, intelligence and law enforcement agencies had primary responsibility for combating terrorism, then many of the institutional problems raised by the global war on terror may not have emerged. Brooks flatly rejects the idea of “try[ing] to jam war back into its old box,” arguing that doing so would be a waste of time and effort given all that has transpired since 9/11. If the changes in armed conflict are revolutionary, as Brooks argues, then going back to a pre-9/11 understanding of war is indeed not viable, but if the changes are evolutionary, then going back to the “traditional” understanding of war is possible. Putting war back in its old box may sound like a pipe dream, but Brooks’s recommendation of creating new norms and institutions that powerful states would willingly buy into is also highly unlikely.

How Everything Became War is an outstanding resource for understanding the current state of the U.S. military and the evolution of international conflict. Even though I don’t agree with the

policy recommendations that Rosa Brooks makes in the book, they do have a straightforward logic and are argued well. This book serves as an excellent starting point for much-needed debates about the shifting face of war, the stability of the international legal system, and the present and future state of the U.S. military.

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