



The Human Face of War

by Jim Storr

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Reviewed by

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At a time when debates on a range of issues are taking place within the defense community, the ability to step back from the particulars and look at first principles is particularly important. This book, an important work by a serious student of the profession of arms, does just that. Surveying an array of disciplines including history, psychology, systems theory, complexity theory, and philosophy, Storr (a former British army officer) looks at what a theory of combat should include, and then provides one. He goes on to apply that theory to the design of organizations and staffs, leadership, information management, and the creation of cohesion in units. In doing so, he takes on many currently popular theories such as effects-based operations, the observe-orient-decide-act loop, and the use of postmodern theory and language.

Its title may lead readers to expect *The Human Face of War* to be similar to Richard Holmes' *Acts of War* or John Keegan's *The Face of Battle*, both of which focused on how people behave in combat. Rather, this book is about how that behavior affects

how we think about battle or, more precisely, how we develop our theories of warfare. It is a serious and profound look at how and why human nature should guide the theories of combat and their implications for doctrine, organizations, training, and leader development.

The first three chapters discuss theories of conflict: what they should do, how they should be developed, and why many recent attempts at theories are really shallow approaches based on a single governing idea, ignoring many of the contradictory or more complex aspects of warfare. Storr discusses rationalism, determinism, and empiricism, dissecting why each is or is not a valid approach to a working theory of combat. He clearly establishes why rationalism fails us in our quest for a theory, and why empiricism is an appropriate approach. It boils down to a simple test: does our theory work in the current circumstances, and do we think it will work in the future? Even if a theory appears to be working, we must recognize that it is never more than a best guess that must be continually revised based on the results of actual operations. Nothing we propose is ever an immutable law, but rather a hypothesis to be tested and, if found wanting, discarded in favor of one that does work, at least for now. Combining a healthy pragmatism with empiricism should produce something that works for a given set of circumstances. Storr's position is best summed up with this passage: "[C]ritically, military theory should not be a case of 'this is the right course of action,' but rather 'doing this will probably have beneficial outcome'" (p. 29).

The third chapter, "The Nature of Combat," is a detailed look at why combat is not, and cannot be, deterministic. This discussion alone is worth the

price of the book. Anyone who believes that we can predict with any degree of certainty how a specific action will turn out should read this chapter. What results from Storr's effort is a superb guide for how to approach the conduct of operations. Much of it focuses on the need to act in order to provide concrete evidence of how things will evolve, all the time maintaining an open mind instead of following a predetermined script. While much of this approach is not new, Storr's explanation of why it is necessary is compelling. The chapter further looks at some advanced research done by the British Defence Operational Analysis Centre on the factors that do have a significant impact on the outcome of battles. Four factors tended to dominate, regardless of force ratios: surprise, air superiority, aggressive ground reconnaissance, and shock. Storr closes the chapter with a discussion of the much-denigrated and misunderstood idea of attrition. His defense of attrition runs counter to much of what is being bandied about today but, when put in context, is quite convincing. All these factors are linked to the fundamental idea that combat is about how humans behave in battle, not some mechanistic approach based on a thorough systems analysis.

After developing his precepts in the first three chapters, Storr uses the rest of the book to deal with specifics about how to apply those precepts to "Tools and Models," "Shock and Surprise," "Tactics and Organizations," "Commanding the Battle," "The Soul of an Army" (a fascinating discussion of leadership styles), and "Regulators and Ratcatchers" (a discussion of personality types based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator and how they relate to military leadership). The discussion in

these chapters presents a superb treatise on the use of examples and counterexamples to support points of view. A single counterexample is not sufficient to falsify an argument, for there are no absolutes. Rather, we are looking for patterns that appear better than others, the fact that they sometimes fail notwithstanding.

The Human Face of War is a densely packed book that takes on much of the conventional wisdom about theories of combat. Whether one agrees or not, the ideas are all amply documented and well reasoned. One would ignore them at the peril of overlooking insights provided by superb research. While Storr's stated focus is the tactical level of war, the discussions of what makes for good theory are applicable at any level of war. The book is also clearly focused on classic combat operations. While there are some who feel that the days of major combat operations are over, much evidence exists that small unit combined arms operations encompass the skills needed for any kind of combat. The idea that we will not have to fight a "conventional" fight again because we are so good at it only holds as long as we are good at it. This book can go a long way toward helping to build a force that is formidable in the conduct of combined arms combat.

If there is a downside to this book, it is the absurd price of \$120. One can only hope that some American publisher will produce it in paperback at a reasonable price. It deserves to be widely read by those who think seriously about the profession of arms. **JFQ**

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