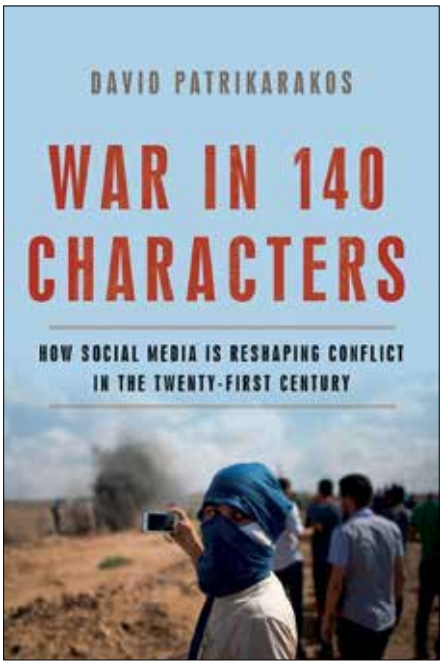

War in 140 Characters: How Social Media Is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century
By David Patrikarakos
Basic Books, 2017
$30.00 320 pp.
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Reviewed by Brett Swaney

How has social media reshaped war and the way it is fought? That is the question at the heart of David Patrikarakos's *War in 140 Characters*, in which he asserts that social media has reshaped not only the battlefield but also, more importantly, the discourse surrounding it. It is a new paradigm that many are only just beginning to explore.

Central to Patrikarakos's thesis is the shifting balance of power between the individual and state. This is the axis around which the narrative unfolds. Patrikarakos argues principally that the decentralization of information through social media networks has eroded institutional and state control over information flows, and thus the narratives in conflict and the discourse around war. All wars, he argues, are essentially a clash of narratives, echoing a point stressed by General James Mattis during his time in Iraq and by Sir Lawrence Freedman, Emeritus Professor of War Studies at King's College London.

As a journalist navigating modern conflicts in Ukraine and Israel-Palestine, Patrikarakos draws on his personal observations to illustrate the ways in which war has been reshaped by social media. The reader is introduced to *homo digitalis*, the hyper-empowered, social media networked individual. Homo digitalis includes individuals such as Farah Baker, a Palestinian teenager with a global audience; Anna Sandalova, a Facebook warrior with an agile volunteer network in Ukraine; and Vitaly Bespalov, a Russian youth caught up in the Kremlin's information war in Ukraine as a digital troll. These are just some of the portraits Patrikarakos sketches to illuminate individuals, frequently noncombatants, with the power to influence the course of conflict on and off the battlefield.

Patrikarakos suggests that in the information domain, influencers like Baker are able to bypass traditional gatekeepers (old television and print news media and the state) to reach a global audience that can impact the political calculus of an adversary. During the 2014 Israel-Hamas conflict, Farah (and many like her) helped strengthen international outrage against Israel and highlight Palestinian suffering. While it did not influence the movement of tanks or targets of rockets, it appeared to affect the perceived legitimacy of Israel's use of force globally, something the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) took seriously.

While Patrikarakos argues that social media has diluted the power of the state and empowers the individual, on balance, he is careful to address how some states are working hard to adapt and control the narrative in conflict. Russia is singled out for morbid praise as a state that has boldly embraced the new paradigm, bending the power of social media to construct narratives that convince and reassure supporters while sowing confusion among adversaries. Patrikarakos leaves the reader with a warning: "The world has not yet caught up with Russia; it still believes that words, propaganda, and partisan narratives are less dangerous than tanks."

Patrikarakos concludes that the IDF cannot stop Farah, the National Security Agency cannot stop WikiLeaks, and the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications cannot stop the virtual so-called Islamic State. This is a key insight: the principal actors shaping the discourse around war and the legitimacy of conflict have evolved. They are no longer just states and sprawling media institutions; they must now compete with innumerable, empowered individuals.

For Clausewitzian-minded readers, Patrikarakos argues, provocatively, that as the line between war and politics becomes blurred, the Clausewitzian paradigm becomes less relevant. In a world in which the state does not have a monopoly on information flows, one side can win militarily, but lose politically. The practice of war, he claims, has not changed, but the *context* in which it takes place has.

Patrikarakos returns to the Gaza conflict in 2014 as an example of a clear military victory but a political defeat due to the altered context. Israel successfully bombed and invaded Gaza, the tunnel threat was reduced, and the rocket attacks nearly halted. However, the backlash to the conflict by a global audience, especially in Europe and the United States, turned military achievements into a political crisis of legitimacy in conflict.

Strategists and historians will undoubtedly find much to chew on here, and likely take issue with the author's characterization of the Clausewitizan paradigm as a "classic" way of war with clear "political settlements" when the dust settles. Indeed, many will find Clausewitz highly relevant to the evolving context in which war takes place. A careful reading of Clausewitz will reveal that war's political purpose is the "supreme consideration" that must "permeate all military operations" and have "a continuous influence on them." In that sense, the real issue may not be the narrative around conflict, but rather the failure of Israel to accurately understand and adapt its political aims relative to the larger context and impact of military action.

For national security professionals of all stripes, *War in 140 Characters* offers a compelling depiction of contemporary conflict increasingly shaped by homo digitalis. Indeed, Patrikarakos convincingly argues that the state's power over information flows and the discourse around conflict has eroded, resulting in a wave of new actors in war. This book is an important deep dive for any national security professional who seeks a better understanding of the power and peril of social media.

Ultimately, the hypothesis about whether the nature of conflict has fundamentally changed remains unproved, but David Patrikarakos does a wonderful job demonstrating how social media has empowered new actors during war, peace, and the gray zone in between. Arguably, he succeeds in his core task of demonstrating that homo digitalis is a powerful new phenomenon shaping war and politics in the 21st century. **JFQ**

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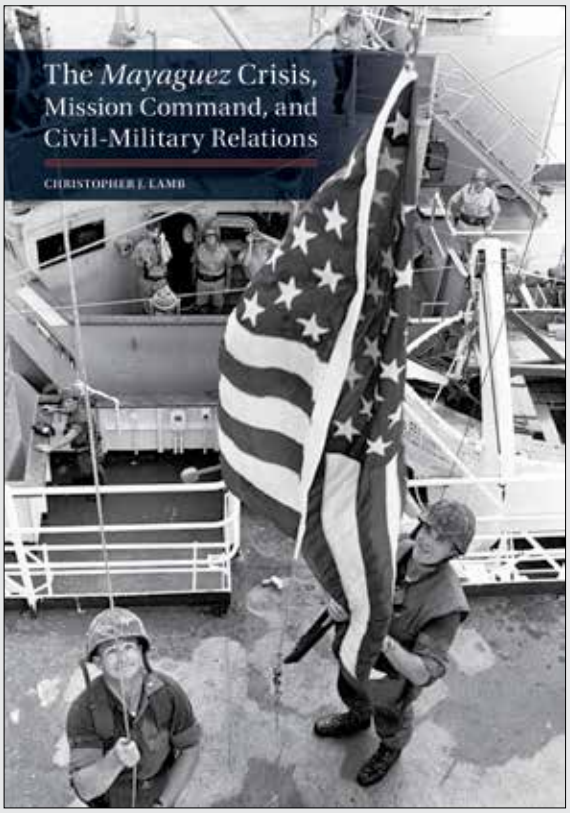

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By Christopher J. Lamb
2018 • xxiv + 284 pp.

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