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WAR'S SECOND GRAMMAR

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With the publication of FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency*, the U.S. military officially embraced a second grammar of war. As an official statement of counterinsurgency doctrine, these manuals have received their share of criticism and praise, neither of which will be repeated here. Instead, the purpose of this opinion piece is to suggest that, no matter how different war's second grammar is from its first, it is still a grammar. To be sure, holding true to good grammar contributes immensely to favorable outcomes in war. However, even an exquisite grammar cannot save a dubious logic; nor can it encompass all factors that contribute to military success.

As Clausewitz aptly declared, war has its own grammar but not its own logic. This short and familiar phrase conveys more than the casual reader might appreciate. The prevailing assumption is that there is only one grammar worth worrying about because there is only one kind of war that matters. For his part, Clausewitz did not use the plural form of the noun "grammar," though he clearly recognized, albeit somewhat later in life, that there was more than one kind of war, and that all of them mattered in some way. Indeed, the rising human, economic, and political costs of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan validate this perspective. If small wars are this expensive, who can afford big ones?

A common definition of grammar is "The system of rules implicit in a language." It also has a broader meaning, which is "The basic principles of an area of knowledge: *the grammar of music*." By extension, then, Clausewitz was telling us that war has its particular rules and its basic principles, the violation of which should not be taken lightly.

More importantly, he was also saying that war itself is driven by something higher than its grammar, which is always the case. Indeed, he was unable to find a war that was not driven by some sort of logic, even if at first glance that logic appears obscure or nonexistent. At some level, perhaps buried deeply, the logic driving a particular conflict is (at the risk of sounding tautological) unremarkably logical. That does not necessarily mean the logic is wise or without blemish.

It is often said that the grammarian's rules and principles cannot offer a substitute for an explicit logic. This is demonstrably false. In the absence of overt logic, rules and principles work fine as long as the grammarian and the logician are heading in the same direction. In fact, military commanders have been substituting rules and principles

literally for centuries whenever they found the twists and turns of logic too difficult to follow.

So it is helpful that U.S. commanders now have a second grammar of war to reference. The key difference in the grammars, according to the pundits, appears to be that destruction of the enemy is the chief principle of the first, while limiting violence and providing security are the governing principles of the second.

It would be a shame, however, if after 8 years of war, we came only to that realization. The U.S. military is now rich in seasoned officers and noncommissioned officers. We would do well to continue asking them to what extent they found war's grammar, whether the first or second type, truly helpful. We may find that the things that mattered most were those that grammar does not normally encompass, such as the difference between policy and politics; the first is the sausage, the second is everything that goes into making it. Put differently, grammar cannot cover how to strike deals and make bargains, as these require finesse unique to specific cultures; but it can underscore the importance of doing so.

To know a grammar, we need to know how far its rules extend, and when it does not apply. Our choices are not just either/or: the first or second grammar. In the face of imperceptible logic, we will make a choice.

In other words, war's second grammar gives those responsible for educating military professionals an opportunity to go where doctrine cannot, that is, it affords them a chance to discuss, in as much depth as possible, the gray areas that often characterize war. It is these that often make the logic so difficult to perceive. That knowledge can only enhance the American way of war, which is rapidly maturing.

Perhaps in war, as in language, learning the grammar is not enough; but that has never been an acceptable excuse for not learning it.

The views expressed in this op-ed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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