

CONVERSATIONS ON STRATEGY

PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

Dr. John A. Nagl and COL Katie Crombe *A Call to Action: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force*

This episode's topic is *A Call to Action: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force*, with Dr. John A. Nagl and Colonel Katie Crombe. They discuss the project's origins and its goal to extract key lessons from the Russia-Ukraine War for US military strategy. Nagl outlines the collaborative research behind the publication, while Crombe highlights strategic lessons related to US military preparedness. The conversation covers the impact of technology and the necessity of multidomain operations, emphasizing the importance of strong alliances and the need for adaptive training in anticipation of future conflicts. The authors' insights underscore the critical need for the military to learn from current events to enhance its readiness for tomorrow's challenges.

E-mail usarmy.carlisle.awc.mbx.parameters@army.mil to give feedback on this podcast

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Episode Transcript

Stephanie Crider (Host)

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I'm talking with Dr. John Nagl and Colonel Katie Crombe today. Nagl's the project director for [A Call to Action: Lessons from the War in Ukraine for the Future Force](#), and a professor of war-fighting studies at the US Army War College.

Crombe is the chief of staff for the project and the Chief of the Joint Operational War Plans Division Joint Staff. An Army strategist, Crombe is a distinguished graduate of the US Army War College Class of 2023.

Our listeners really want to know about your project, *A Call to Action*. John, why don't you get us started?

John Nagl

This project began two years ago when the US Army's Training and Doctrine Command commander asked the US Army War College to examine the ongoing war in Ukraine to derive lessons for the United States' future force. Wars of this scale, scope, [and] intensity don't happen very often. It's the biggest war of the twenty-first century and the biggest war in Europe in four generations.

So, I was really pleased and proud to gather together a team of terrific [US] Army War College students like Katie [and] international fellows from around the globe but, particularly, from Ukraine and from the NATO countries and partner countries in the region, and a team of really dedicated faculty who, together now for the last two years, have tried to examine the ongoing war in Ukraine to derive lessons for the US military, particularly the US Army. And, I'm super proud we have just published our first book covering the first year of the war, edited by Katie and myself. That book, *A Call to Action: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force*, was published by the [Army War College Press](#). It's available for free download, and we're already hearing that it's having an impact on the force.



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Host

Katie, the IRP [integrated research project] suggests that the United States is at a strategic inflection point due to changes in warfare. Could you elaborate on what this inflection point entails and its implications for the US military strategy?

Colonel Katie Crombe

Absolutely. So, Dr. Nagl and I wrote this in 2023, and we saw the parallel from 50 years earlier when the Yom Kippur War happened and initiated a series of changes across the United States Army and the Joint Force writ large. That change really came as a result of lessons that we learned of the US helping the Israelis during the war and the Russians helping the Egyptians. And, we just saw quite a disparity on both the command and control, the weapons used, and the character of war that they were fighting at the time. Fifty-one years ago now, Creighton Abrams appointed four-star General William DePuy to stand up an organization called TRADOC—Training and Doctrine Command—that still exists today. He was a brilliant thinker at the time and, more importantly, a combat veteran that saw 100 percent of his soldiers and 150 percent of his officers turn over by casualties during World War II. So, he was intimately connected to making the Army better so that we cannot lose another war.

So, we saw similarities between Yom Kippur and what was happening in Ukraine in 2022 and 2023, and we thought, wow, the US military—if we face the same type of enemy that Ukraine's facing today—we need to change. We are not quite as prepared as we hoped. That was last year. And, I have to say that, a year later—you know, I'm working in the Pentagon now—the change that has occurred across the Army and the Joint Force overall is absolutely remarkable. We called it *A Call to Action* at the time. I think people definitely saw it the same way. There has been significant change in the way that we're looking at the war and looking at how the US military prepares itself at the tactical level, the operational level, and the strategic level about how we face these adaptive enemies.

Host

Let's talk about technological advancements. How have advancements in drone technology, cyber warfare, and electromagnetic warfare changed the landscape of modern conflict as evidenced by the Russia-Ukraine War?

Nagl

So, I think that's one of the biggest changes we're seeing from this war.

Unmanned technology and, in some cases, remotely piloted technology, on the sea, in the air, and on land is having an impact on combat operations that we had hypothesized before this war but that we're really seeing in action on the battlefield. We have a much more transparent battlefield on ground than we've ever seen before. It's very hard for forces to mass, which is necessary to overcome prepared defenses—because anything that moves on the battlefield, anything that gathers together on the battlefield, is going to come under surveillance from drones and is likely going to be under attack from drones and from other more traditional weapon systems. And, one of the conclusions of the second year study that we just completed that's not in this book is the extraordinary effect that unmanned sea-borne vehicles are having, as Ukraine, a nation with no navy, has essentially driven Russia's Black Sea fleet out of the war [and] rendered it combat ineffective.

This impact, the technology has always had a huge role in war. Technology is moving faster, perhaps, than it ever has before. And, we're seeing extraordinary innovation play out in real time on both the Russian and the Ukrainian side but, in particular, I think, on the Ukrainian side, which is fighting outnumbered and has fought the Russians to a draw, largely because of the technological innovations they've made. We're learning from that. We just did the biggest counter-drone experiment we've ever done as a US military. And Katie may be able to talk about that.

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Crombe

Yeah, I mean, John was making a ton of really good points. And, I think that, yes, technology has always driven revolution across the military worldwide, but what is particularly different lately is the democratization and proliferation of these technologies across non-state and state actors. People can get their hands on advanced technology that just couldn't before. Not only that, but our enemies and our adversaries are really learning and adapting from each other.

When you're under pressure and when you're under certain stresses, you start to adapt. [It] builds resilience [and] you become better. You optimize your performance. The enemies are doing this now. Not only are they put under just enough stress to start to innovate, they're sharing this technology with each other. These people are talking, they're learning from each other, they're adapting, [and] they're innovating. It's hard to keep up with them. And, we're doing a great job now just starting to share information, learn these lessons, document these lessons, [and] start to experiment with new technologies. But, I really think that the democratization and proliferation across the board is what continues to scare us.

Host

I'd like to talk a little bit more about multidomain operations and the importance of multidomain operations in the Russia-Ukraine conflict and how the US should integrate its approach into its future strategies.

Crombe

Yeah, I'll take that to start with. So, there's a couple of factors here. We were talking about multidomain operations last year in the book. The Army was standing up a number of multidomain task forces, and we're starting to learn what that really means, what a multidomain task force has—there's a series of different kinds of weapons platforms and different technologies that they have, but a lot of [them] are rooted in space capabilities, cyber capabilities, things that everyone does not have deep or significant expertise in.

You have certain experts that can zero in and understand what we can do on a cyber basis, what we can do when it comes to space, [and] all the high-end kind of tech, but if the soldiers on the battlefield, the soldiers that are good at the basics—like we used to talk about last year—if they don't understand what space capabilities and what cyber capabilities these experts have at hand, they don't know how to connect the dots. A big effort right now that the Army is making is trying to ensure that the education across the Joint Force when it comes to space, cyber, [and] even thinking longer term just about nuclear education, you know, that's kind of gone by the wayside. Making sure that there's a proliferation of this education and [that] people really understand what others can do, that's what we're focused on right now with multidomain operations. It's one thing to be able to do these things, and they sound really cool. It's another thing if the people on the ground don't understand how to access that. So, that's how we're trying to connect the dots. And, I think you'll probably get into, later, just about command posts and things like that. And, we can kind of dig into how that inhibits multidomain operations, as well.

Nagl

Katie, you'll be glad to hear I was having a conversation with a former Air Force, now Space Force, space operator, and a Navy electronic warfare expert, and I and another Army officer—an Army intelligence officer—about just exactly how the United States can use space to achieve the metaphysical high ground in future conflict. [We discussed] these questions of how we use these new domains [and] how they influence the domains—land, sea, and air—we're used to fighting in [and] how cyber plays in the challenge of integrating all of them, as you suggested, [will happen] with command posts that increasingly aren't going to be able to consist of people sitting in the same room looking at each other because of the threat of persistent unmanned surveillance and the risk of being attacked if you bring staffs together as being attacked, if you bring combat maneuver forces together. This is very much a conversation that we started and we talk about in this book and that is continuing to happen in the halls of the Pentagon and here in the halls of the [US] Army War College.

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Crombe

It's quite a dichotomy, I think, to be so reliant on high-end tech and the advancement that we're making with multidomain operations, but also be absolutely grounded in these basic kind of radio frequencies that we relied on back in the day, right? It's one thing to teach soldiers, hey, you don't want to emit an electronic signature no matter where you are. You can't have a cell phone, you can't have Bluetooth, you can't have headphones, you can't have a Wi-Fi signal—you know, nothing that emits a signal that a sensor could pick up—while at the same time saying, hey, you have to educate yourself on the cyber and space tools that are at your disposal or, you at least have to understand how they're going to be employed from a more strategic headquarters while you're doing these tactical actions.”

It's truly a dichotomy that I don't think we've seen before.

Nagl

And, soldiers are implementing all of that from trenches that in Ukraine, right now, look like the First World War.

Crombe

Yeah, absolutely.

Nagl

We're seeing a full century's worth of warfare happening all at the same time. Soldiers in World War I-inspired trenches are using twenty-first century space technology to pinpoint their enemy and target them with drones that they bought commercial off the shelf and modified in workshops and garages across Ukraine. It's an extraordinary confluence of learning, of innovation, and of war fighting.

I read a great article this morning. They were talking about the National Training Center and then the Joint Readiness Center down in Fort Polk—or Fort Johnson, as it's called now—and, they were interviewing a soldier that essentially said, “I dug this freaking trench. I hope they come looking for me. This took a lot of work.”

Host

Let's pivot to relationships. You discussed the critical role of allies and deterrence in training. How should the US strengthen its alliances to prepare for future conflicts?

Nagl

This is one of the great strengths of the US Army War College. It's something I get to see literally every day. We have roughly 75 allies, partner nations, who send some of their very best officers here to the Army War College to learn with us, to share lessons with us. And, I'm enormously proud that for each of the last two years, the Ukrainian officer assigned to the Army War College has been a part of our project and has provided sort of a direct link to the battlefield to test our conclusions, to inform our conversations, and to remind us that the lessons we're learning are being paid for with the blood of our friends, our allies, [and] our partners. The work we're doing with our friends and partners around the globe to improve the readiness of their militaries [and] to share lessons back and forth. We had a team from the National Defense University of Ukraine [that] came here to the Army War College to provide lessons direct from the battlefield to our students back in May. This is all a shared learning [experience].

Katie talked correctly about the sharing of knowledge between North Korea, Iran, China, and Russia. But, when you pair that against the 75 partner nations we have learning here together at the Army War College, it just reminds you that the world is a dangerous place, and the more friends you have in this street-fighting world, the better off you're going to be.

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Host

The IRP talks about the fact that leadership styles, particularly mission command, were very decisive in the conflict. How can the US military improve its implementation of mission command?

Crombe

When we originally wrote this last year, we were talking about the change in having things that we used to call stadium-style JOCs—the joint operations center—of which you had a ton of TV screens on the wall. You had perfect information because you had these sensors out there. You had radios, you had phones that were gathering information, [and] all kinds of computer systems that were feeding this perfect stream of information from the top level of command all the way to the tacticians on the ground. One thing now that we found with the sensors that are prolific across our adversaries is, A) we can't develop these kind of stadium-level JOCs because the amount of signals that we're going to emit from here. Secondly, the soldiers are so reliant on the next level of command to help them make a decision that they've stopped thinking in the complex and complicated fashion that they need to to make decisions on the ground. So how do you kind of square all those things?

This generation is used to perfect information. And, every time they have a question or you're sitting at the dinner table and you guys can't come to a resolution on the birthday of your favorite singer, people go immediately to Google. You get perfect information at your fingertips all the time. So, if you're relying on that for a dinner-table conversation, imagine the stress that you're under in time of war. You want access to perfect information. And going forward, we just might not have that. Not only are you not going to be in the stadium-level JOC at the strategic or operational level. At the tactical level, you're not going to have access to this information. What that is going to require is mission command. And, mission command is really founded on the tenet of trust. A commander issues his intent ahead of a battle, and the soldiers interpret that [and] back brief them [the commanders] to say they understand the intent. And from there, they have to shift, lift fire, and make decisions on their own going forward.

What we talked about in the original IRP was the difficulty in the culture change that's required to make that successful. If you're used to perfect information, and you're used to having your boss tell you the answer to everything, you haven't really developed the skill set that you need to make decisions on the fly.

Now, in the training centers, both here and overseas, they are getting away from this perfect communication. And, at the squad level, at the platoon level, at the company level, they are starting to make these hard calls. When we originally wrote about this, we talked about [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley] at the time, and he talked about discipline disobedience. If your commander issued you an order that no longer made sense later on, it was up to you to make the good call to not disobey but stray from the original intent. And, that's what we're really trying to inculcate in this generation of soldiers—trust your instinct. You had your commander's intent. You're not going to have perfect information—but we know you're brilliant at the basics because we've trained you to the highest levels of war—and you need to go off do good things [like] dig your trenches. And, we'll circle back when we have the time and the sensors have not found you.

Nagl

What Katie's talking about is really a result of the fact that for 20 years, we adapted to fight a particular enemy in Iraq and Afghanistan in the broader global war on [terrorism]. And, that enemy was devious and very capable in a lot of ways. It presented a number of challenges to a force that was not prepared to fight it, but it also had a bunch of holes in its swing. It did not present a very effective indirect fire threat. It wasn't very good at electronic warfare. It allowed us to operate with relative impunity from fixed bases and sally forth to the fight. That enemy is very, very different from the enemy that Ukraine is fighting right now in Russia from the prospect of an unholy alliance of Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea fighting

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a global war, possibly, against the United States and our friends and allies around the globe. And so, the adaptations we correctly made to fight the wars we've been tasked to fight for the last two decades are in some ways standing in the way of the capabilities we need to develop for that broader war. And, one of the questions I really struggle with and spend a lot of time thinking about here at the War College is how do we preserve the ability to fight at the low end of the spectrum of conflict, as we have for the last 20 years while increasing our ability to fight at the high end? Because the hope, of course, is that we present such a formidable deterrent force at the high end of conflict that we drive our enemies to decide not to fight us in direct frontal warfare.

They will still find ways to fight us, I believe, to try to achieve their objectives through the use of military force. But, if we can present the ability to fight them across the entire spectrum of conflict, leaving no gaps in our armor, that, I think, is the overriding problem the Department of Defense faces in an extraordinarily challenging threat environment right now.

Crombe

And, just on a bigger scale, to foot stomp what John is saying, is the dichotomy that we talked about from perfect information down to brilliant at the basics. If you take that up three or four levels, what you're really talking about is being able to modernize the force to ensure that we create this deterrent for our enemies because they know that we are the best and brightest and have the best equipment and we can come after them if we need to, with also having to answer the mail on the everyday operations that we're asked to fulfill. And, that's quite a tightrope that our senior leadership has to walk all the time.

We're in an era of competing resources across the whole government, and to be able to modernize and keep this high-end fight going while also enabling our partners and allies like Ukraine and Israel and Taiwan, that's hard to do all these things. You've got to walk and chew gum at the same time to have the services—the Army, the Air Force, Navy, the Marines, and Space Force—to be able to modernize and really go after this higher-end equipment and understand things like replicator, like Deputy Defense Secretary Hicks talks about all the time [to] really pursue these high-end initiatives while also ensuring that our enemy knows we are absolutely ready today to come after you at any level. It's hard right now.

Host

We were talking a few minutes ago about technology and all the gains and changes that it's brought to warfare. But [in] modern conflict, you still need people. So, tell me about the changes we need to make in military personnel policies and training programs.

Nagl

This is one of the most disturbing results of the work we did. It really opened my eyes. Steve Trynosky, a terrific Army officer, looked at our personnel depth. He found that the Individual Ready Reserve, which consisted of some 750,000 personnel in the Army alone when we initiated the All-Volunteer Force 50 years ago, back in 1973. The Individual Ready Reserve has fallen to about 75,000 soldiers today. And, the large-scale combat operations, like what is happening right now between Russia and Ukraine, if the United States were to engage in that kind of fighting, we could see 50,000 casualties in two weeks. We took 50,000 casualties in 20 years in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a nation, we don't think we're prepared for that level of casualties.

We had a terrific Dennis Sarmiento, looked at our medical system and lessons learned for our military medical system to start thinking about how to deal with that level of casualties. But, as a nation, we don't yet have the strategic depth, I don't think, either in [the] industrial capacity or the ability to build some of the high-end weapons that Katie was just talking about at the scale we're going to need to create them if we engage in great-power conflict. And, I'm thinking of everything from submarines to missiles to 155mm artillery rounds.

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A former lieutenant of mine is in charge of mortar and ammunition production for the entire United States Department of Defense, and he's opening four 155 plants just this year to try to meet the need. We as a nation, I think, have to look really hard in the mirror and understand that as taxing and difficult as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been for the United States over the past two decades, the wars that we need to be thinking about now—based on the courage the Ukrainians are showing, but also the absolute bloodthirstiness the Russian military has demonstrated, [and] the challenges China continues to present, North Korea presents, Iran presents—are of a scope and a scale that we haven't seen since Vietnam, Korea, [and] the Second World War.

And, there's a whole bunch of changes that we need to think about as a nation. And so, I've seen places like the Center for New American Security that I used to run [and] the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington are waking up to these challenges and are putting out some really good work that echoes and reinforces and builds on some of the work we did here in this book that we present in *A Call to Action*.

Crombe

Yeah, just to take that up one more level, outside of the military arm, [this concept] goes back to your original question, Stephanie, about allies and partners—and not only that, but about the whole of government, our industry, our interagency, the industrial base, the commercial sector, the technology that proliferates from companies like Palantir and SpaceX—it will be a whole-of-nation fight. And, the more that we in DoD [Department of Defense] really understand the capabilities and capacity that the interagency and the commercial sector offer, and what our allies and partners can offer, that's when we can really bring this to bear.

Our center of gravity is the brilliance that's in the civilian world in America and then the relationships that we maintain with our allies and partners. The department will fight the war, but it's bringing all that to bear that's really going to allow us to succeed.

Nagl

General Sir Roland Walker, the head of the British Army, made news saying that he believes Britain needs to be ready to fight a global war in the next three years. He makes the same point that Katie just made. Britain is not ready right now in terms of personnel strength or defense industrial base to fight that fight against Russia. Russia would be the biggest threat that Britain would face, [and] China arguably the biggest threat that the United States would face. Both countries, I think, have some real challenges, And that's why we call this *A Call to Action*.

I'm afraid we were more right than we knew, Katie.

Crombe

And, the good news story is that over the past year, people are talking about this at the most senior levels. When it comes to big companies in the US, when it comes to our allies and partners, when it comes to meetings in the Pentagon, this is what people are talking about. Everyone knows that we need to get better and everyone is on board with that.

Host

Do you have any concluding thoughts or anything you want to share about what you have coming up next?

Nagl

I'm going to continue this project for the third year of the war. The volume on the second year of the war is already in press—not yet in print—at the Army War College Press. But, I'd like to highlight that the article that Katie and I put out a year ago, also called *A Call to Action*, is the most downloaded *Parameters* article. And, the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Randy George, my West Point classmate, has called on all Army people to read it.

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We do think there are a lot of lessons learned here. I'm just super excited by what Katie has said she's seeing every day—that the lessons we and other people are talking about are being implemented in the Pentagon. And I'm just so proud that Katie, one of the best officers I've known in my many years now, is partially responsible for implementing them.

Crombe

Thanks, John. That's a lot of compliments. What I would say is I absolutely appreciate my time at the Army War College with people like Dr. John Nagl and the rest of the professors that I worked with. The time spent there was worth its weight in gold. I'm applying [what I learned there] every day. The [resources] that the War College provides across the board is untapped in many ways. And, I tell everyone I know that that's the place that they should go to take a year out at the 20-year mark, really dig deep into what matters to you, and come back to the military and the Joint Force with different and creative ways of thinking and implementing the change that we need to fight these wars and win these wars, most importantly.

Host

What a fantastic endorsement. Thank you both. I'll let you get on with your day.

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