Max Brooks, **John Amble**, **Matthew L. Cavanaugh & Jaym Gates** (eds.),
Winning Westeros: How Game of Thrones *Explains Modern Conflict*,
Lincoln, NE, University of Nebraska Press, 2019, 304 pp.

Reviewed by Jessica Dawson

It's difficult to write a review about strategists' love of using science fiction and fantasy analogies for real-world situations – a topic that is taken both seriously enough to warrant an entire book and yet mocked with incredible ease. Recently, the *Duffel Blog* facetiously argued that military strategists were better at writing "*essays, books, and blog articles* (…) *about the strategic implications of* The Last Starfighter *or whatever* (...). *You've had 18 years to defeat an insurgency in the poorest and most sparsely-populated area on the planet and we've actually gone backwards!*".[1] Laughing at ourselves is a time-honoured and necessary military tradition that the *Duffel Blog* continues, but also, as M.L. Cavanaugh points out, using art to search for a deeper truth in the real world stands as an important inflection point for the military to look hard at itself.

Winning in Westeros: How Game of Thrones Explains Modern Military Conflict is an edited volume compiling some of the many voices in the national security online space – author bios are included in the volume. Using *Game of Thrones*, an HBO series that ran from 2008 to 2019 based on the novels by George R.R. Martin, the various authors exploit something familiar to millions of viewers worldwide to introduce more people to something unfamiliar – military strategy. It's a classic teaching technique: build new knowledge off existing frameworks. That said, given that the book is published by an academic press suggests it is not merely tongue in cheek but seeking to inform a broader audience by tapping into the *Game of Thrones* fandom.

Winning in Westeros opens with a foreword by retired US Navy Admiral James Stavridis on how fiction can teach us much about the "what ifs" in war. In many ways, however counter-intuitive it may seem, it is easier to tell the truth of the human experience in fiction than in facts. Humans are a storytelling species and stories tell us not only who we are but how we came to be.[2] Admiral Stavridis is correct – modern military and political leaders can learn from *Game of Thrones*, but as *Winning in Westeros* demonstrates, it teaches us more about our blind spots in considering modern military conflict than about the things it illuminates.

Winning in Westeros does not clarify if it is based off the novels or the HBO television series. But it becomes clear that the focus of most of the writers is on the television show. The show follows the journey of multiple point of view characters over several years as they seek various goals in relation to the seat of power in Westeros – the Iron Throne. Daenerys Targaryen is the exiled daughter of the Mad King, a king who was killed before he could burn his subjects. The Lannisters – Jamie, Cersei, and Tyrion – were instrumental in removing the Mad King and

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[1] "Army Strategists Much Better at Planning Fantasy Wars Instead of War in Afghanistan", *Duffel Blog*, May 4, 2019, Available online at https://www.duffelblog.com/2019/05/army-strategists-much-better-at-planning-fantasy-wars-instead-of-war-in-afghanistan/. The Duffel Blog is a website focused on military satire similar to *The Onion*.
[2] See Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identities, and Political Change*, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002.

tied to the new king through Cersei's wedding to Robert Baratheon. Finally, the northern Stark family, headed by Ned Stark, has seen his sister kidnapped by the Mad King's brother. If all of this seems confusing, it's because it is. Yet it is also the source of all the central intrigue, political manoeuvrings and open warfare that inform *Winning in Westeros*. The television series, however, went "off book" from Martin's source material, proceeding into the final two seasons with only input from Martin about where the series was headed. This has implications for *Winning in Westeros* – by moving to press before the final season, critical insights and dramatically altered character arcs change the impact of several of the book's chapters. This is where waiting until the final season could have made the book more impactful by investigating some of the key leader decisions, such as Daenerys's decision to burn King's Landing to the ground. That said, I will do my best to engage with the book as written, trying to bracket the inflections brought by Season 8 (the final season that is not covered in the book).

Winning in Westeros is organized under four sections : "People and War", "Technology and War", "Combat and War", and finally, "Strategy and War". I find it an interesting choice to organize the book in this manner rather than focusing on Clausewitz's trinity of people, military, and the government.[3] Clausewitz wrote during the rise of the nation-state and nationalism, assuming that people were rights bearing individuals ; he is a dominant theorist in American military strategy. In *Westeros*, the people are still subjected to the will of their kings and their gods[4] – their society has no concept of human rights and the armies gather where their kings tell them to. This is the first place that *Game of Thrones* falls short in explaining modern military conflict and thus applications central to challenges in modern combat should keep that limitation in mind.

One of the key underlying assumptions in *Winning in Westeros* is that *Game of Thrones* hinges on the idea of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, which is frequently mentioned in several of the early chapters. The central idea from Hobbes is that life is "*nasty, brutish, and short*" and that society is nothing more than everyone against everyone. This is another of the major shortcomings of using *Game of Thrones* to understand military conflict because it rests on a primarily transactional view of human nature. If we always assume we will be betrayed by others, how is any society or ruling consensus possible ? In the real world, the post WWII international order is based in international alliances that aren't purely transactional but are bound by norms and institutions (Chapter 26). Chapter 1 illuminates this point with a stark differentiation between the real world and *Game of Thrones*. The opening salvo – "*Westeros doesn't have any of the institutions that protect the weak from the strong*"[5] – is one of the most thought-provoking "what ifs" in the book : what does the current world look like with the erosion of institutions or worse, if these institutions cease to exist ? This is a question worth far more investigation.

Part One, "People and War", focuses primarily on the different characters' ability to influence the situations they find themselves in. Where this section struggles is moving beyond

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[3] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War,* indexed edition, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, 1976, reprint edition : Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989.
[4] Oscar Salemink, "The Purification, Sacralisation, and Instrumentalisation of Development," in P. Fountain, R. Bush & R.M. Feener (eds.), *Religion and the Politics of Development*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp.35-60, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137438577_3.
[5] *Winning Westeros,* page 3.

personalities to the broader context. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on Tyrion Lannister, an unlikely hero who has one of the most interesting character arcs in the series. Chapter 3 focuses on his ability to be a Machiavellian hand (a key advisor) of King Joffrey, his nephew. However, after the king is murdered and he is suspected of playing a role in it, he flees the country and aligns with Daenerys. Once he begins supporting her campaign for the Iron Throne, he becomes more principled and in some ways less tactically, operationally, or strategically effective. He claims his sister Cersei will join their fight against the Night King if convinced of the threat, resulting in a move that ultimately resulted in the Night King's acquisition of a zombie dragon. If he'd truly been Machiavellian, he would have known his sister planned to work towards her own ends and not uphold any part of the alliance.

In Chapter 4, the author makes a great point about Tyrion's mental agility, but his discussion of networks misses the critical shift in Tyrion's after he kills his father and leaves Westeros for Essos. The network ties that enabled Tyrion as Joffrey's hand were primarily weak ties.[6] His links to the Martells, to the Starks through Sansa (one of the Stark siblings), to the network of spies, to the bordellos and ruffians made him a better hand for Joffrey than he was for Daenerys. When he becomes Daenerys' hand, his network ties become stronger and fewer and thus his information is more siloed, making him a less effective advisor to the throne.

The chapters that focus on Daenerys are a struggle given how the series ended. Few readers familiar with the show will be able to read these and not consider the significant shift in how she'd executed her campaign until the end of Season 8. These chapters tend to focus more on her cult of personality, promising freedom rather than emplacing systems/ institutions that ensure freedom, as evidenced by her inability to control Meereen after she departs. The military force that she builds to fight the White Walkers (a zombie army led by the mysterious Night King) is completely inadequate for fighting the actual White Walkers. This demonstrates a complete lack of creativity, strategy, or understanding of resource mobilization required to actually defeat an army of the undead. The idea that she's a great leader, on a par with Napoleon, neglects the actual circumstances of the fight against the undead even before the final season opens. The rules of the game are completely different for fighting an army of finite resources – a topic addressed in Chapter 25 and discussed below.

Chapter 7 offers one of the few discussions of women in *Game of Thrones* beyond the character of Daenerys and it stands out in that it focuses on Brienne of Tarth and Lyanna Mormont. Both are successful tactical level leaders in a society and type of combat where women historically are at the greatest disadvantage. I would have appreciated more discussion about why they were able to be successful to help build more links between the fictional world and the real.

For readers unfamiliar with the series, Jon Snow is allegedly the bastard son of Ned Stark and an unnamed woman but in reality, he is the son of the Mad King's brother and Ned Stark's sister – the rightful heir to the Iron Throne. Chapter 8 focuses on Snow's personality and likeability and in doing so, it hits on one of Jon Snow's great strengths: the ability to influence diverse groups. This is a quality of great political leaders, but not necessarily of strategic leaders – the chapter touches on Jon Snow's supposed strategic leadership but overlooks the fact that he actually has no strategy beyond building alliances. He does bring the mental flexibility needed

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[6] Mark Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties", *American Journal of Sociology*, vol.78, n°6, 1973, pp.1360-80.

to realize that the fight is not what everyone had thought : that instead of fighting armies of men, they would be fighting an army of the undead. This drives his need to develop new alliances and new weapons, but he actually fails to utilize them effectively or to identify the enemy's key terrain or centre of gravity. Snow's lack of strategic thinking is evident in believing that Cersei would be convinced to join their alliance with proper evidence. In his attempt to capture the zombie soldier to convince her that the army of the undead is real, his mission ends up getting one of Daenerys' dragons killed and enabling the Night King to actually launch his attack south of the Wall.

Part Two, "Technology and War", is a critical look at failures of actors within *Game of Thrones* as well as the limitations of resources and situations beyond individual influence. One of the key limitations of this section is the taken-for-granted assumptions in Westeros *vs*. the real world. Dragons offer analogy for weapons of mass destruction, technological advancement, and air superiority. For example, use of weapons of mass destruction in Westeros does not have the same implications primarily because ordinary people don't matter to most of the rulers in *Game of Thrones*, whereas we would hope human life has more value in the real world. Using dragons to wipe out portions of the enemy's armies is effective. It denies the enemy resources that enable them to fight. In the real world, weapons of mass destruction are used to influence leaders' willingness to fight.

The dragons also serve as a good analogy for technological advantage. Chapter 9, "The Lesson of Visereon", is an excellent discussion of technological advantage and what losing it looks like. It also raises a critical question of the point of tactical victories. What is the strategic goal that the tactical victory enables ? It also highlights the limits and dangers of taking the analogy of fictional to real war to its logical ends. Dragon fire is not the same as nuclear war and total war remains a very real threat should the instruments of national power fail.

Winning in Westeros offers superb analogies for the less flashy aspects of strategy. Chapter 10, "Game of Pawns", deals with the uses of information in a network of actors representing states (major Westeros families) and non-state actors (Littlefinger and Varys). By using Littlefinger and Varys to illustrate non-state actors, the author demonstrates how they can have massive influence in breaking down trust within communities, much as the Russians are doing as of this writing to the American centre of gravity – all without firing a single shot.

Part Three, "Combat and War", focuses on tactical and operational level conflict and again, the chapters are at their best when they point out the limitations of the analogy of *Game of Thrones* with the real world. For example, Chapter 15 lays out the importance of sieges as symbols and portrayal of power and resilience. The parallels between historical sieges and fictional ones work well to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the different battles, but critically they point at the inadequacy, in *Game of Thrones*, of siege portrayal, deemed "*too* [simplistic] *for the modern era*".[7]

Chapter 18 is where fiction can be most helpful in asking "what if ?". By drawing on real-world historical defeats of so-called super soldiers by armies comprised of average joes, the author helps to illuminate the fallacy of seeking the super soldier *versus* the soldier who has

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[7] *Winning Westeros*, p.126.

something or someone to fight for. It could mistakenly be seen as setting the *Übermensch* archetypes of the Unsullied as something desirable ; however, closer reading highlights that in the real world, the armies of Sparta and the Nazi *Übermensch* were defeated by armies made up of "*nonprofessional soldiers pulled from the ranks of the common worker*".**[8]** This chapter asks a fundamentally important question: when does loyalty develop and how does it shift ?

"Becoming No One : Human Intelligence in the Seven Kingdoms" illuminates one of the best ways that *Game of Thrones* can help strategic thinkers see their socially constructed blind spots. It highlights how the smartest players in *Game of Thrones* leverage those who are invisible to those with power by investigating the influence of trust in social relations and how gender and power shape those perceptions of trust. By moving the discussion to how gender "*affects who has power and how they wield it and who is rendered invisible*",**[9]** Goldstein pushes readers to do the impossible : to ask whom they are not seeing and how can these unseen actors have real impact on our operations. Varys leverages street children by giving them kindness and thus builds a loyal network of informants. "*The street children who comprised Varys's spy network had very simple motivation that Varys (…) exploited : to be seen, to be cared for, and to earn an incentive that could not be earned otherwise*".**[10]** Littlefinger uses men's tendency to dismiss women as anything other than a means to an end for sexual gratification in order to gather intelligence on kings, priests, and generals. This is entirely relevant for the social media environment where the United States and its allies find themselves "[w]*earing the disguise of someone else's face*" [which] "*gives one the ability to become someone who might be considered invisible or unthreatening in any given context*".**[11]** This chapter illustrates one of the biggest questions that should be asked on the modern battlefield, but is frequently ignored – who is invisible to those in power, what information can they gather, and how can they influence the fight ?

Part Four, "Strategy & War", centres on what *Game of Thrones* fundamentally misses. Chapter 23, "Why the Westerosi Can't Win Wars", highlights the central problem of tactics divorced from strategy. It offers an excellent discussion of tying tactical fights to strategic goals, and why Season 7 ended with Daenerys's alliances in a weaker position than when they landed on Westeros. Modern military leaders at all levels would be wise to study this lesson and question why tactically proficient leaders such as Robert E. Lee or Erwin Rommel are held up as tactical exemplars while ignoring their lack of strategic thinking.

Chapter 25, "Resources, War, and the Night King's Deadly Arithmetic", highlights the most important and unaddressed central problem in *Game of Thrones* – namely, that the White Walkers have the cheapest, most sustainable army available, yet no one addresses this critical aspect of fighting a war against the Night King. Everyone that dies fighting the Night King rises from the dead and joins his army. That the discussion of the enemy's resources comes near the end of the book represents, sadly, the neglect of logistics as a critical strategic aspect of war in modern conflict. Other chapters in the book deal with logistics against human armies but no character appears to have thought about how to deny the Night King his critical resource : dead bodies that could be resurrected for his army.

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[8] *Ibid*., p.129.
[9] *Ibid*., p.166.
[10] *Ibid*., p.165.
[11] *Ibid*., p.167.

Chapter 26, "The Red Wedding and the Power of Norms", is the most relevant for the discussion of *Game of Thrones* with modern conflict in mind, and the current challenges facing the post WWII international order. The norm violation that occurred at the Red Wedding represented a complete jettison of the norms of hospitality and ultimately led to the downfall of the Lannister house. The Red Wedding draws out the real conflict between short-term gains (ridding the Lannisters of the Starks) through norm violations, and the long-term strategic impact – the distrust thus created that reverberated through the rest of the series. This chapter undercuts the idea that *Game of Thrones* is primarily a Hobbesian society and highlights that no, life is not everyone against everyone. Norms are the glue that holds societies together at the macro- and micro-levels, and norm violation should be carefully considered for its second- and third-order effects.

The book ends with a powerful discussion of Ned Stark and why we as a species need stories. Ned was not a successful peacetime leader – he was beheaded for standing by his principles, but the values and loyalty he bestowed on his children enabled the Stark family to survive and eventually to be (mostly) reunited. Heroes do not have to be perfect to have a lasting impact. Ned was rumoured to have broken his vows to his wife, sullying his otherwise honourable reputation. While Ned himself did not survive, his family did. This chapter's message about sacrifice of self for the group and maintaining values in conflict will resonate with those seeking to understand unquantifiable intangibles in modern military conflict.

Winning in Westeros is strongest when it critiques the fictional *Game of Thrones* based on military lessons from the real world. Where it struggles is when it falls into cult of personality analysis rather than critically evaluating a leader's performance. Instead of lauding Daenerys as a great leader, the writers are at their best when she is skewered for her lack of tying tactical engagements to strategic goals in her fight against the Lannisters. This highlights the lessons that can be learned from *Game of Thrones*. The omission of Season 8 from the book leaves a gap that is quite relevant to the overarching thrust of the book and as a result, unintentionally undermines the central arguments in several chapters. Perhaps an online supplement to allow authors to revisit those chapters most impacted by Season 8 might be in order.

Fans of *Game of Thrones* interested in the insights of modern strategic thinkers will enjoy this book. It could be a great tool for teaching introductory strategy to upper level undergraduates by providing instructors with something familiar upon which to build new learning. Those unfamiliar with *Game of Thrones* will likely be lost as understanding the show's characters and how they interact is what enables the book to offer strategic insights. Where the book could truly be of value is to readers looking to develop a more creative way of looking at strategic problems. Illuminating readers' blind spots is where fiction can truly help strategic thinkers get outside the box, and this is where *Winning in Westeros* has the biggest impact.

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