

Review - War Beyond the Battlefield

Written by Sheldon G. Levy

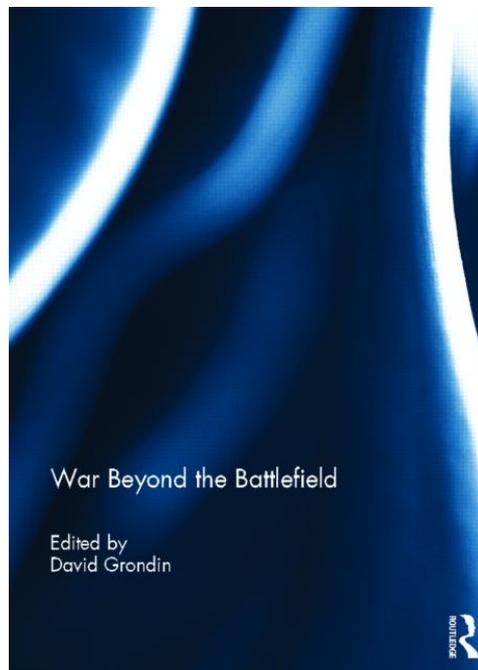
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SHELDON G. LEVY, SEP 30 2012

War Beyond the Battlefield
Edited By: David Grondin
Routledge, 2012.



David Grondin's edited collection is a duplicate of the original special issue of *Geopolitics* (V.16, No. 2, 2011). The goal of the special issue was to demonstrate that the locus of battle is not on the traditional battlefield in the War on Terror. The collection represents a variety of perspectives related to this theme. The range includes, among others, the legal structure advocated (imposed) by the United States to advance its goals, a description of the Los Alamos facility in New Mexico, the effect of contemporary video games and an analysis of the impact of the Cindy Sheehan protest of the Iraq war during August 2005. The articles benefit from the contributors' independence from much of the bias represented in United States governmental rationales, particularly during the Bush administration, and mirrored in the major US media.

There are, however, a number of limitations in the text, some stylistic and others methodological or interpretive. The major problem is that theoretical discussions are frequently unnecessarily abstract and ambiguous and often inadequately related to valuable information that may occupy the remainder of the article.

For example, while the Bussolini article on Los Alamos provides insight into the organization of the facility and its security arrangements and their changes over time, it does not seem to be well-placed in this collection. Other articles might benefit from greater historical development of the phenomenon. A case in point is Salter's presentation

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of video games and their impact on military recruitment. This presentation might have been strengthened by some additional attempt to place current video games within the history of technically primitive antecedents such as cowboys and Indians, and toy soldiers. The well-known Milgram (1969) research provided insights into the effects of increasing distance between attacker and victim. The psychological impact of the earlier forms of “playing war” contains many similarities to the present variation, but, as with the evolution from hand to hand combat to drones, there is a dramatic accentuation of some facets of the psychology of engagement. The Olsen article identifies that some segments of society provide a disproportionate share of those that serve. It would have been strengthened by a discussion of the historically common selection of soldiers (in contrast to officers) from the ranks of the less privileged. Olsen did collect information from newspapers in an organized procedure. Had the methodology been incorporated, at least partially, into the presentation, rather than relegated to the Notes, the basis for some of the conclusions could have been more readily assessed.

There are other difficulties of varying importance. The editor’s introductory chapter presents an overview of the collection but some stylistic idiosyncrasies detract from the positive contributions. Beyond the battlefield is not a newly invented phrase (for example, David W. Blight’s (2002) *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, & the American Civil War*, and Levy (2011)). Although all those who have employed this phrase may have reached their insight independently, the phrase is repeated three dozen times in the short chapter. It is also rather surprising that a reference to historian Howard Zinn was prefaced with the adjective “leftist” (End note 72.). Zinn was a historian of distinction. Disagreements should be explicated, not addressed through *ad hominem* labels.

Throughout the book the term “War on Terror” is employed. Poetry aside, one does not engage in war on unhappiness or anxiety or terror. (A war on drugs may be a mislabel but drugs represent an objective entity; war on hunger and poverty may be more problematic, but hunger may be defined objectively as the lack of an adequate diet and poverty as a measurable deficit in economic resources). There may be a war on terrorism, the attempt to eliminate an observable phenomenon, or a war on terrorists, those who are responsible, but not on the psychological state. Unfortunately, the term is employed in a limited manner throughout the set of articles, but it is repeated in the editor’s contribution almost three times per page. The point is not trivial. A war on a phenomenon as subjective as terror provides an opportunity for governments to seize overwhelming control in the name of defending its citizens (or the State). Terror does not require public observation. Scholarly acceptance of the concept lends credibility to its exercise despite the predispositions of the authors of these reports to be opposed to that governmental power.

The book also frequently lacks precision in methodology. Too often, examples are cited as if they represent a wider view but evidence is not presented for the generalization. For example, Managhan, in her article on Cindy Sheehan, states “...that those who protested against the Vietnam war often extended their criticism to encompass the values and way of life associated with the World War II era and the postwar years” (p. 206). This, on a factual basis, is incorrect. She qualifies the statement with imprecision by referring to “era”, “post-war years” and “values and ways of life”, but the impact of the statement is clearly inconsistent with the philosophy of the vast majority of Vietnam protesters, many of whom were culturally identified with the scope and purpose of World War II and the nature of the enemy that was engaged. Even academic tolerance would at least require some substantial evidence for a statement that appears so severely inconsistent with the attributes of the dominant segment of Vietnam War protestors.

In spite of the criticisms, the work represents some serious scholarship. The various selections provide both information and insight. After a short foray into theory, Morrissey’s analysis of the legal framework that the US employs as justification for many of its actions may lead many readers to new insights. The United States again provides evidence of Empire. The value of the manuscripts would have been improved if there had been fewer attempts to embed some of the material in vague theory. The complaint is not about theory, but the abstract analysis that some articles begin with which bears insufficient relationships to the specifics of the subsequent discussion. Very few testable hypotheses emerge.

Finally, many sections in almost every article are germane primarily to the scholars directly in the field. Consequently, reproducing information, that was available in the special issue publication of *Geopolitics*, in a more expensive format (\$120 (Amazon US) or higher (Buy.com and Amazon, UK)) might be argued to be an inefficient means of advancing scholarship.

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References

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Milgram, S. (1969). *Obedience to Authority*. Harper, Collins: New York

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