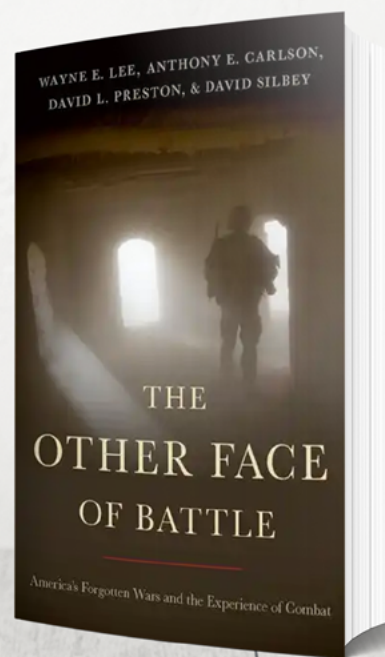


# The Other Face of Battle

## America's Forgotten Wars and the Experience of Combat



Wayne E. Lee, David L. Preston, Anthony E. Carlson, and David Silbey, Oxford University Press, New York, 2021, 272 pages

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**O**n rare occasions, a book arrives at exactly the right moment. As the U.S.-led Coalition departed Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, Oxford University Press published *The Other Face of Battle: America's Forgotten Wars and the Experience of Combat*. Neither the publisher nor the four historians who authored this volume could have foreseen the disastrous end to the Coalition presence. And few—participants or observers—would have imagined the scenes at Hamid Karzai International Airport as the last Coalition units and a relatively small number of their Afghan partners left Afghanistan. *The Other Face of Battle* does not offer an explicit explanation of how the Coalition's campaign went awry, but it does provide some urgently needed insights into how two decades of military operations in Afghanistan seemed to have achieved so little and ended so chaotically.

As the title suggests, this book follows in the footsteps of *The Face of Battle*, the work by the eminent military historian John Keegan originally published in 1976 and

still in print. Keegan's book has become a classic and continues to fascinate readers forty-five years after its publication. In *The Face of Battle*, Keegan offers systematic analyses of three battles in which English/British armies fought: Agincourt (1415), Waterloo (1815), and the Somme (1916). In each of these accounts, the author examines in detail how the different arms (infantry, cavalry, artillery) fared when matched against the arms of European peer adversaries with very similar military cultures. He also describes aspects of battle such as morale, fatigue, the taking of prisoners, care for the wounded, and the role of disorder on the battlefield that previous generations of military historians tended to overlook in their attempts to create orderly and exciting combat narratives. These were the details that would provide a more complete picture of combat, or as Keegan put it, "a glimpse of the face of battle."

While inspired by Keegan's book, the authors of *The Other Face of Battle*—Wayne E. Lee, Anthony E. Carlson, David L. Preston, and David Silbey—have

broader ambitions. To be sure, they follow Keegan's work by devoting chapters to three battles from the American military experience, all of which include sections similar to those found in *The Face of Battle*. Each begins with descriptions of the larger campaigns of which these battles were part. Moving onto the battles themselves, the chapters capture and hold the attention of the reader as they vividly recount combat

engagements from largely forgotten conflicts. The authors chose to open the book with the Battle of the Monongahela (1755), an early action in the French and Indian War that took place at the point where the Ohio and Monongahela Rivers join. Today, the site is in downtown Pittsburgh but at the time was a small trading outpost in the wilds of the upper Ohio Valley, an area contested by both the French and the British.

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actions while carefully assessing terrain, morale, care of casualties, and how U.S. arms and technologies fared against those of their adversaries.

Where the authors of *The Other Face of Battle* diverge from Keegan's work is in their selection of battles. As noted earlier, Keegan's choice of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme featured adversaries that were from different nations but the same broad European culture in which norms and methods of warfare were generally shared. Because of these similarities, the battles in Keegan's book are characterized by *symmetric* combat, in today's terminology. *The Other Face of Battle* instead examines combat between two adversaries that do not share the same military culture and as a result approach combat with different norms, methods, and goals. The authors identify these types of battles as intercultural and consider them *asymmetric*. They further characterize intercultural conflict as “a clash of mindsets as much as weapons.” As this book points out, intercultural combat has dominated U.S. military history, meaning that American soldiers often came into conflict with enemies they did not expect to fight and whose culture was alien to them. In many cases, their lack of preparation for this type of combat led to defeat at the tactical level and had detrimental effects at the operational and strategic levels of war as well.

Given this focus, it should not be surprising that the battles recounted in this work are little known

The choice of this battle makes one of the authors' critical points: even before the founding of an independent United States, intercultural combat was part of the American military experience. The battle itself pitted two British infantry regiments, reinforced by several companies from Virginia and other colonies, against a slightly smaller French force that included Canadian militiamen and approximately six hundred warriors from the Ojibwa, Wyandot, Potawatomi, and other Indian nations. These two forces met near Fort Duquesne, the strongpoint constructed by the French to consolidate control over the Ohio Valley.

To expel the French from this area, the British force had conducted an exhausting three-month march from the Virginia coast across the Appalachians and deep into the American wilderness, a movement for which few of the British Regulars were prepared. Less important than their physical state, however, were the shared assumptions about the upcoming action. The British commander, Maj. Gen. Edward Braddock, had expected to lay siege to Fort Duquesne and ultimately force the French to surrender. Instead, as Braddock's forces crossed the Monongahela to approach the fort, his advanced party entered a heavily wooded forest where the French and their Native allies waited in ambush.

As this chapter shows, it was the asymmetry between the British and Indian cultures of warfare in the battle that followed that proved decisive. In the first phase

of the action, French troops attacked the British force using European-style tactics, troops in close formation, and firing in unison. Braddock's infantry regiments had trained to meet precisely this type of attack and did so successfully, killing the French commander and forcing French forces to flee. The second phase of the battle was entirely different. In a section titled "Native Light Infantry versus British Heavy Infantry," the authors describe in harrowing detail how the irregular tactics of the Indian warriors first unnerved and then broke apart the disciplined ranks of the redcoat infantry. Small groups of native warriors used stealth to surround Braddock's column, and in the dim forest filled with smoke from the battle, let out traditional war cries as they began firing from behind trees into British lines or attacked in close quarters with war clubs and tomahawks. Unprepared for combat against an unseen enemy that prized hand-to-hand combat, the redcoat ranks largely dissolved and fled back to the Monongahela in a panic, hoping to cross the river to safety.

Many did not make it to the other bank. By late afternoon on the day of battle, most of the officers in Braddock's command had been killed or wounded. Overall, 66 percent of the British force became casualties while the killed and wounded among the French

and their Indian allies numbered well under one hundred. These statistics underscore the degree to which cultural asymmetry can shape a battle and affect its outcome. Importantly, in a discussion on discipline and panic, the authors note that a few of the colonial companies with Braddock at the Monongahela adapted better under fire than the redcoat regulars. Some of these Americans had fought the French and Indians during the previous year and were quick to disperse among the trees

and emulate other native light infantry tactics. Still, Braddock's force had suffered a terrible defeat, a debacle so great that it challenged assumptions among British commanders about the superiority of their military culture. This led to the expansion of ranger companies and other light infantry formations, innovations specifically designed to reduce the asymmetric advantages enjoyed by their foes at the Monongahela.

For the next 150 years, with short interruptions caused by symmetric wars against the British, Mexicans, and secessionist forces of the Confederacy, U.S. soldiers found themselves mired in a continuum of asymmetric conflict with the Indian nations of North America. By the 1890s, with Native communities either pacified or destroyed, these conflicts ended. Almost immediately, however, the U.S. Army found itself unexpectedly in a war in Asia with a wholly unknown enemy on terrain that was equally alien. Once again, the unanticipated enemy proved difficult to defeat.

That war began in 1898 with the United States initiating hostilities against Spain, expecting the main theater of conflict to be the Caribbean. That the war spread to the Spanish colony of the Philippines should not have been a complete surprise given Spanish possessions in Asia and U.S. ambitions in the Pacific region. Still, for the U.S. military, the campaign for the Philippines was entirely improvised, its initial political objectives in Asia remaining unclear for months after hostilities began. The military objectives, on the other hand, were relatively straightforward: take control of Manila Harbor and then seize Manila itself. The U.S. Navy's Asiatic Squadron defeated the small Spanish fleet and took the harbor in May 1898. The first elements of the U.S. Army's Eighth Corps, an amalgam of regular army regiments and state volunteer units, arrived in June and laid siege to the city. Joining the Eighth Corps were the soldiers of the newly proclaimed Philippine Republican Army, a mix of small Filipino forces that for several years had waged an insurgency against the Spanish. Neither the American nor the Filipino soldiers were experienced in conventional warfare. Despite this, the Spanish commander, understanding that reinforcements were unlikely, surrendered the city in August 1898 after brief resistance.

The Battle of Manila that is the focus of this chapter would not begin until six months later, after it became clear to leaders of the Philippine Army that the United

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States did not intend to grant independence to the Philippine archipelago. The authors provide a very detailed account of this often-overlooked engagement, emphasizing the point that the battle was symmetric in the size, weaponry, and inexperience of the two forces. The fact that the U.S. Army mounted a surprise attack and won the battle decisively in less than forty-eight hours hinged on the shock of the action against static Philippine defensive positions, poor Philippine leadership at decisive moments in the engagement, and basic shortcomings such as the lack of ammunition and basic marksmanship skills within the Philippine Army.

The authors view the American victory at Manila through the lens of intercultural battle, arguing that the offensive zeal displayed by the inexperienced U.S. soldiers originated partly in their general assumptions about Filipinos. It is dismaying—if not surprising—to read that within the U.S. Eighth Corps, a force that was almost entirely white, there were a significant number of soldiers that equated Filipinos with Native Americans and African Americans, peoples they deemed as racially inferior. After the Battle of Manila, the Philippine Army gradually transformed itself into an insurgent force that denied much of the archipelago to the United States for almost two years, during which American soldiers gradually adapted to the new conflict. Filipino success demonstrated that the U.S. advantages in conventional warfare did not directly translate to success in unconventional warfare and belied the false assumptions of racial superiority on and off the battlefield.



Soldiers from 1st Battalion, 12th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, rush down the side of a mountain to board a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter after conducting a deliberate operation in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan, 23 August 2009. The 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade facilitated the deliberate operation by inserting and extracting the infantry soldiers into harsh terrain to assist in the disruption of insurgent communication. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Aubree Rundle, U.S. Army)

For the authors of *The Other Face of Battle*, the Philippine-American War was a milestone for the U.S. military but also revealing to non-Western powers





considering doing battle with the U.S. and European powers. For the U.S. Army, the critical lesson was to prepare for and seek conventional battle, shunning unconventional conflict in the process. Non-Western powers tacitly chose to accept the opposite lesson in the century that followed: avoid symmetrical battle with U.S. forces at all costs while choosing methods that produced asymmetric advantages that lead to military victory in the long term. For the better part of the twentieth century, the United States avoided large-scale asymmetric conflicts, and the U.S. Army held fast to its identity as a force that fights and wins conventional wars. Vietnam, a war that had both conventional and unconventional aspects, remains the major exception and the failure in that conflict remains a troubled chapter in U.S. military history. Instead, the U.S. Army has since 1945 tended to view its contribution in the Second World War as emblematic of its institutional role and place in national life.

The third battle chosen by the authors examines the American experience with intercultural conflict in the twenty-first century. That fight occurred in 2010 at the village of Makuan in southern Afghanistan, close to the city of Kandahar. Part of Dragon Strike, a joint U.S.-Afghan operation designed to clear the Taliban from

U.S. forces conduct a patrol of a green zone in the Kandahar province of Afghanistan on 21 November 2009. (Photo by Spc. Christopher Hubert, 55th Signal Company)

districts around Kandahar, the battle at Makuan pitted Bravo Company, 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry, and its Afghan National Army partners, against Taliban insurgents defending the village. Makuan sheltered a Taliban IED factory and served as a staging area for insurgent attacks on Coalition forces. While a relatively small settlement, the village was located deep inside the “Green Zone,” a thick maze of agricultural fields, irrigation canals, and walled compounds. When attacked directly, the Taliban in this region rarely chose to stand and fight. Instead, they sniped at Coalition forces and then retreated, luring their adversary more deeply into the complex terrain that was studded with IEDs, their weapon of choice. Some American soldiers considered the Taliban cowards for their style of fighting, and most grew very frustrated with this asymmetric form of combat in which their advantages in technology and firepower eroded almost to irrelevancy.

The Taliban defined victory differently than Coalition forces. Surviving a tactical engagement to

fight another day was more important than holding ground. Their predecessors, the mujahideen, had fought the Soviets in the 1980s on this same terrain, and although that struggle had taken ten years, they had prevailed using what was essentially the same approach. In fact, the Soviets—and their Afghan allies—had never gained sustained control over the rural districts surrounding Kandahar. Between 2001 and 2010, the U.S.-led Coalition did introduce counterinsurgency techniques to its campaign but still experienced frustration as it tried to suppress the Taliban insurgency near Kandahar and in other regions of Afghanistan as well. Despite this, the U.S. Army leaders who designed and approved the 2010 operation near Kandahar believed they could use a conventional offensive operation to land a decisive blow against the insurgents, convincing them to abandon their resistance to the Coalition and its project in Afghanistan.

The attack on Makuan began well enough. Reinforced with an Afghan National Army company, augmented with engineer units, and backed up by dedicated artillery and close air support, Bravo Company entered the Green Zone. They moved methodically toward the village, using explosives to clear IEDs while enduring attacks from insurgents who fired and then vanished. The large Coalition force entered Makuan with only minor opposition. What they found was a village filled with IEDs, all of which had to be identified and disarmed. That slow process took two more days and led to multiple casualties from explosive devices cleverly hidden inside buildings and along pathways. After clearing Makuan, Bravo Company withdrew and called in rocket strikes which destroyed the village. Makuan in the short term would no longer be a Taliban safe haven. But the cost of this accomplishment had been significant. The U.S.-Afghan force had lost two U.S. soldiers and several additional Afghan soldiers killed in action with dozens more wounded. Not surprisingly, the authors of *The Other Face of Battle* judge the operation as having an “ambiguous outcome, one in which both sides could claim victory.”

As this chapter smartly points out, the Afghan National Army units partnered with U.S. forces represented a third “side” in this battle. For U.S. soldiers in Makuan, the intercultural dissonance they experienced in fact extended to their relationship with these

Afghan allies. As they cleared Makuan, a succession of IED detonations in the village caused multiple Afghan Army casualties and led some of the Afghan soldiers to quit the battle after blaming U.S. troops for their casualties and, in two instances, entering an armed standoff with their American counterparts. Not only did the U.S. soldiers suffer from a critical misunderstanding of the insurgent enemy, but they were also handicapped by unaddressed cultural differences that separated them from the Afghans fighting alongside them. And these differences could be found at levels far above Bravo Company, where even senior U.S. military officers and diplomats, many of whom had spent multiple years in Afghanistan, made incorrect assumptions about the motivations and goals of their Afghan allies. This dissonance surely contributed to the Taliban’s shockingly quick seizure of power in the summer of 2021, perhaps decisively.

In its conclusion, *The Other Face of Battle* contends that the U.S. Army has historically chosen to overlook its experience with low-intensity conflicts to prepare for high-intensity conventional wars that are less likely but pose a greater threat to vital national interests. This point is not entirely new; for at least the last twenty years, historians teaching in professional military education institutions have made similar arguments. This book, however, makes a critical contribution by sharply clarifying our understanding of what this choice means. Over the last two centuries, the United States repeatedly committed its Army to low-intensity conflicts. In almost every one of these cases, American soldiers suddenly found themselves in asymmetric and intercultural combat. They were rarely prepared for either. The U.S. military’s struggle in these conflicts to achieve success at the operational- and strategic-levels of war reflects this lack of preparation. Given the Army’s current focus on large-scale operations against symmetric threats, this trend is unlikely to change in the near future. Despite the Russian invasion of Ukraine and concerns about Chinese expansion, it is still likely that when U.S. soldiers next face combat, their adversary will have the face of an Iranian militiaman, a Yemeni insurgent, or another combatant with an equally unfamiliar profile. For military professionals seriously interested in readying their soldiers to meet that adversary, *The Other Face of Battle* should be required reading. ■