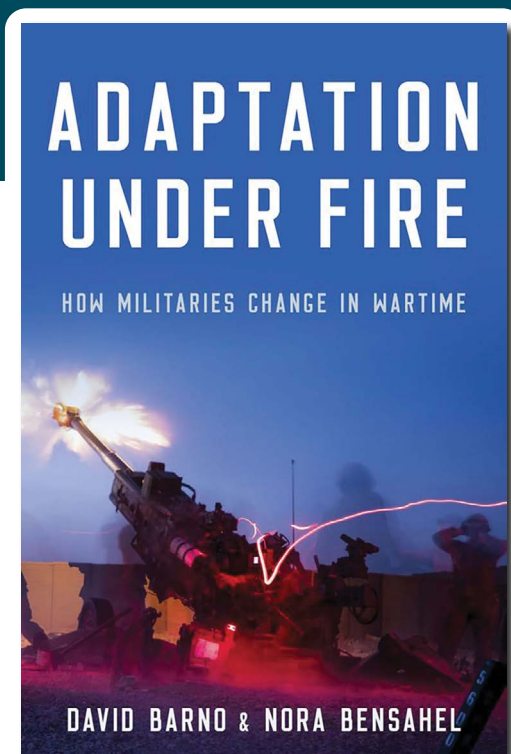


# REVIEW ESSAY

## Adaptation under Fire How Militaries Change in Wartime

David Barno and Nora Bensahele,  
Oxford University Press, New York, 2020, 440 pages



Col. James Kennedy, U.S. Army, Retired

David Barno, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant general, and Dr. Nora Bensahele brilliantly explain one of the most difficult aspects of the military for people to understand—the complexity and importance of change in the military, especially while in conflict. The authors open *Adaptation under Fire: How Militaries Change in Wartime* with definitions of their terms of reference, and they explain what they will and will not cover in the book. The book centers mainly on Army change because the authors argue that wars are won by armies on the ground. The ideas presented in this book apply to all services and partner countries, allies, and U.S. adversaries. While militaries change in many areas, the authors concentrate on doctrine, technology, and leadership changes across three time periods: part I, World War II through Grenada; part II, recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; and part III, the future.

Part I examines adaptation from previous operations. The authors identify and explain ten key requirements of doctrine, technology, and leadership for militaries to be successful in conflicts. They provide examples of strategic and tactical successes and failures to support their focused key requirements such as the role of both rigid and adaptable doctrine in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, successful leadership adaptation by Capt. John Abizaid in Grenada, and failed U.S. Army tank development in World War II.

Part II studies the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan in the same format as part I, using examples of successful and failed doctrine, technology, and leadership adaptation. The authors analyze how the provincial reconstruction teams developed; counterinsurgency doctrine from the initial interim version in 2003 to the famous Petraeus counterinsurgency

doctrine of 2006; institutional failure of Distributed Common Ground System-A; tactical leadership adaptation successes in Iraq and Afghanistan; and the failure of strategic leadership adaptation by Gen. George Casey and Gen. William McKiernan. The history of each example is extremely well written and thorough but not detailed enough to be technical or confusing.

Part III is forward-looking. The authors begin with three challenges to the future: strategic uncertainty of who, when, where the next war will occur; the new domains of space and cyber; and the rapid growth of technology. They examine the current state of adaptability in U.S. Army processes and draw attention to systematic issues at the strategic level that hinder adaptability in updating doctrine, acquisition, and leadership.

The authors' description of the issues hampering adaptability in doctrine and acquisition do not provide a complete picture of the processes. The authors discuss the holistic review-and-update process for doctrine and argue that operational-level command training is not structured to train for a complex adaptive environment. However, they omit the purpose for the extended deliberate doctrine system, which is to gain better integrated and coordinated doctrine in a peacetime environment when there is no conflict. They also omit legal reviews and formats for the publication process.

With respect to acquisition, the authors argue in favor of the Defense Acquisition System's improvement, but their arguments are incomplete. They leave out three key factors in determining materiel capability timelines: senior leader decisions when the requirement is needed, manufacturing physics, and technology maturation. These are critical areas that should be included as critical reasons for either real or perceived delays to make their discussions more complete for the reader. The description of acquisition system issues highlights how the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 created "structural tension" between the services and the combatant commander's needs and how requirements changes impact the delivery schedule. However, this description omits noting that America's large, deliberate acquisition programs are generally military-use-only products—for example, missiles, tanks, tactical communications. Generally, industry manufacturing is not established to mass-produce a new item, say a hypersonic missile, until there is a contract in place.

During World War II, civilian industry required time to ramp up production of ships, aircraft, tanks, and weapons that had nowhere near the sophistication of today's equipment. In the United States' capitalist economy, companies do not have several hundred large, complex, military-only systems in a storage lot hoping the Department of Defense (DOD) will purchase them. It takes time to establish production lines to manufacture the quantity needed. Some of the research referenced by the authors regarding the acquisition process is four to nine years old, yet many changes have occurred since then.

The authors' use of strong adjectives such as "broken," "byzantine," or "sclerotic" may unintentionally manipulate any uninformed reader. As proof of "the broken acquisition process," the authors utilize decisions by senior leaders to repeatedly not support requests by commanders in Iraq and Afghanistan for mine-resistant vehicles and improved intelligence collection and processing software during recent conflicts. While the decisions described are accurate, the decisions are not part of the Defense Acquisition System process but a part of the Army requirements determination process. This is not mere semantics but two different processes that do work together. In addition, the authors omitted the 2016 National Defense Authorization Act Section 804, "Mid-Tier Acquisition," policy to accelerate low-cost, rapid acquisition authorities, as well as the development of four additional Defense Acquisition System models and two hybrid models.

Because of its recent publication, and through no fault of the authors, this book does not discuss the newly approved DOD Instruction 5000.02, *Adaptive*

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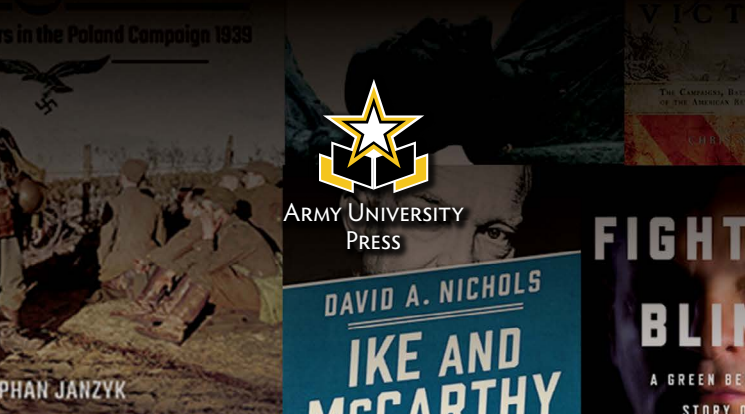


# Military Review

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*Acquisition Framework*, released in January 2020, that provided six pathways that may address the concerns the authors raise. Lastly, the authors stated leadership challenges of risk aversion and mission command, insufficient professional military education, the challenge of homogeneity of common experiences creating groupthink, and the generational legacy of recent conflicts could potentially resemble the Army after Vietnam and create “blind spots” in planning.

In the final chapter, the authors offer twenty innovative recommendations to improve military adaptability for the future. These recommendations include increased “free play” in wargaming and training, an annual technology adaptation competition for industry, adding adaptability as a new principle of war, and creating a DOD adaptive leadership award, to name a few. These recommendations are well reasoned and should be part of the conversation on improving adaptation for the next conflict.

Readers should consider that the authors have the benefit of hindsight in determining what was a success or failure from the past. When the decisions highlighted in the book were made, there were no guarantees these actions would be successful or not, but often, the book leaves the impression that the outcomes were predestined for success or failure. It is unlikely any of the adaptations or lack thereof discussed in the book were planned for failure.

Barno and Bensahel do an amazing job of simplifying these complex topics without getting into the weeds of the “how” to change or make these ideas work. The organization of the book was excellent and set the stage for their recommendations of change for future success. The book is a very quick read with some common and lesser-known examples utilized throughout to support their points.

Despite the less than complete review of our acquisition processes, I highly recommend this book for anyone who specialized in leadership, training, strategy, doctrine, or materiel development. This book should be mandatory reading for Army FA59 strategists, FA50 force management officers, Senior Service College, and Sergeants Major Academy students, as well as leadership and force management instructors at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the Army Management Staff College, the School of Advanced Military Studies, and others. ■