



**AUTHOR: Dr Keith Suter**  
Global Thought Leader  
Real Insights & Authority



## HISTORY OF WARFARE



### First Wave Warfare: Guerrilla

The oldest form of fighting is guerrilla warfare, which requires the least amount of training. People (men, women and children) fought as guerrillas, usually in a part-time capacity, in small bands, with each person knowing the rest of the group (and so formal uniforms were unnecessary). The weapons were unsophisticated and based on everyday implements (usually farming tools).

The Roman army was the exception in the era of guerrilla warfare. It had large, organized fighting formations, professional soldiers, and distinctive uniforms. In retrospect, it was a pioneer of modern warfare. As an ill omen of modern warfare: it was not always successful in its campaigns against guerrilla forces.

For about the thousand years of the European Middle Ages, there was little attention given to the Roman military model. The wars of that era consisted of small battles (by modern standards) and sieges of fortified positions (especially castles). There were few full-time soldiers. Knights, for example, ran feudal estates as their main source of income and recruited their own workers as troops when required.



### Second Wave Warfare: Conventional

Warfare changed around the 17th century. There is no one single explanation for the change. It was more a matter of different events influencing each other. The nation-state system (which international lawyers date from 1648) meant that the basic unit of governance shifted from a small tribal area to the nation-state, which gave rulers more people from whom taxation and conscripts could be drawn. The Industrial Revolution meant that industry could develop more destructive weapons. Also, fighting formations could be transported over longer distances: Europeans could now fight each other over colonies in the Americas, Africa and Asia.

The new form of warfare became so common that it acquired the title of "conventional" warfare. Fighting formations became larger (and almost exclusively male) and it was necessary for all troops to have distinctive uniforms to distinguish them from the enemy.

They carried their arms openly, wore insignias and fought in organized formations. Armies also became more specialized in their work: they were to defend national security. This meant they were taken off the maintenance of law and order and that task was given to a separate force (the police).

Armies and navies became more professional. Defence personnel were set apart from the rest of the community; they lived in separate buildings and were controlled by legal codes usually more extensive than that of the civilian legal system. Restrictions were placed on civilian access to weapons - warfare became the exclusive right of the government. For the first time, there were professional soldiers who spent large chunks of time without fighting. Previous personnel were recruited for specific campaigns and then demobilized as soon as the fighting stopped. Now personnel were in permanent employment but fighting only consumed part of their time.

The 1805 Battle of Trafalgar was one of the world's military turning points. Nelson's 27 ships were outnumbered by the combined fleet of 33 French and Spanish ships. The battle went according to Nelson's plan and the British sank or captured 19 enemy ships, with only the loss of one British ship. It was one of the most decisive naval confrontations of all time. From onwards, the British ruled the world's oceans until World War in 1914. They used their monopoly of power to maintain law and order on the high seas, and to stop the slave trade across the Atlantic. Their power also assisted the new United States. British naval power provided an Atlantic wall behind which the new government could gradually expand its control across the continental US, without any fear of other European invaders trying to claim parts of North America.

Nelson's victory and the Royal Navy's supremacy were not an overnight wonder. The process of developing the Royal Navy's power had evolved over the centuries. The Royal Navy was the largest and most complex of all the British government's activities. No other government devoted as much attention to its navy as Britain did. Apart from its ships and sailors, the Royal Navy maintained a national set of ports and administrative offices, with overseas posts across the expanding empire.

In the 18th century, it was seen as the foundation of national security, independence and prosperity. There was a constant threat of French invasion. Compared with France, Britain was a poor, under-populated country of eight million people. The navy was the key to remaining free.

The British Industrial Revolution was just getting underway. Within a few decades, Britain would emerge as the world's industrial super power. Britain had the world's largest mercantile marine in the world. In 1760 Britain's exports far exceeded the government's national budget. Britain was becoming the workshop of the world and the world's largest naval trader. Its trading global reach was extending to all corners of the globe.

Meanwhile, the Royal Navy, with 130 ships of the line and 85,000 men, was a larger force than the enemy fleets of Spain and France combined. Britain had developed a maritime strategy of subsidising heavyweight allies to fight on the European mainland, while using the Royal Navy to destroy Spanish and French sea power, shipping and colonies.

British naval power was consolidated at home by a network of laws that obliged all British traders to only trade with British suppliers. These laws also bound the mother country and the colonies. Trade rivals from overseas were shut out of the system. The laws stipulated what each colony might manufacture and export, and from where it might import other necessities.

## ✓ The Decline of Conventional Warfare

During the first half of the 20th century, the nature of conventional warfare changed. It used to be about humans killing humans. Beginning in World War I, land warfare became far more mechanized. Warfare became a matter of machines killing machines. The last Allied cavalry charge was on November 8 1917, when units of the Canadian army defeated a German cavalry regiment. There were few horses used at all in World War II. In 1941, the UK had 100,000 vehicles in the Middle East. By the time of D Day in June 1944, there was one vehicle for every 4.77 Allied soldiers. 130,000 aircraft were produced in the UK in 1939-45, 119,000 German aircraft, and 303,000 aircraft. Warfare had become an activity of quartermasters general and production planners.

The "tail" became bigger than the "teeth". In order to keep one soldier at the front (the "teeth"), there were six persons drawn such civilian occupations as catering, engineering, medicine, building, transportation and law. Each arm of service became a society within a society. World War II will remain the world's largest conventional war. Other wars have been longer (notably the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s). But none will be as extensive, intensive and expensive.

The prime factor in the decline of conventional warfare is the cost of the mechanization of warfare. Governments cannot afford the same stock of equipment as they used to acquire. Humans were comparatively cheap - they often came via conscription. But machines are expensive both to purchase and to maintain. The new B2 bomber, at \$2.2 billion each, is said to cost three times its weight in gold.

The machines are also much more destructive: they travel further with more firepower than previous weapons. But this also means that machines can be destroyed at a faster rate, with less chance of ever being repaired. All major conventional wars since the early 1960s, which have resulted in a clear victory, have been won in less than six weeks. If one side cannot defeat the other in that time, then the war will just drag on, such as the inconclusive Iran-Iraq war, which ran for eight years. The crucial six-week period is derived from the limitations of equipment and supply: governments can no longer afford large reserves of equipment.

## ✓ **Third Wave Warfare: Nuclear Weapons**

Nuclear warfare was a direct outgrowth from conventional air warfare. Leaders in World War II wanted to avoid a repeat of World War I's trench warfare and so they looked for methods of moving firepower quickly over long distances.

Bomber aircraft were the favourite method throughout Europe. The technology of that period seems quaint by the standards of half a century later. One of the RAF's most famous raids was in May 1943, with the 617 Squadron's attack on some German dams. The scientist Barnes Wallis devised a bomb which would bounce along the length of the lake behind the dam and then hit the dam itself. The bomb had to be dropped from precisely 18 metres, flying at 370km/h. The bomb-aiming system was based on a coat hanger, so that when the two nails on the hand-held sight lined up with the towers on the dam, the bomb had to be dropped. The raid was largely successful in destroying the dams and it was a good boost for British morale, but only 11 of the 19 aircraft returned home.

The quest continued for much more powerful bombs. This work culminated in the creation of atomic bombs. Atomic weapons brought the war against Japan to an abrupt end and so politicians reasoned that atomic weapons would be crucial in any future conflict. Later research shifted the emphasis on bombing from aircraft to missiles.

On a rate based on the number of potential deaths, nuclear missiles are cheaper than most other forms of killing. Their limitation arises, ironically, from their extensive capacity to kill. They are too destructive to use in the usual military campaigns. Nuclear weapons would destroy that which the attacker would like eventually to control.

Additionally, for the first time in history, a powerful nation cannot defend its people from an attack. Nuclear missiles cannot be shot down. Even if the proposed Strategic Defence Initiative ("Star Wars") had gone ahead and it could have shot down some missiles, only about two per cent of Soviet missiles were needed to destroy the US's main cities. The revised version from the current President Bush will be no more successful. The September 11 terrorists were in the US legally, boarded four passenger aircraft legally and used aircraft with heavy supplies of aviation fuel as the weapon.

The 1987 US-USSR agreement on intermediate nuclear forces and the 1993 US-Russia agreement on strategic nuclear weapons showed that both countries realized the limitations of these weapons for political purposes. But US remains vulnerable to nuclear attack because of the number of Russian strategic missiles still in existence. The US was much safer from attack in 1945 than it is in 2003.

Meanwhile, all societies will remain vulnerable to guerrilla groups using nuclear explosive devices. For the nuclear weapon cannot be uninvented. That knowledge is here to stay.

## ✓ Fourth Wave Warfare: The Return of Guerrilla Warfare

Guerrilla warfare has grown rapidly since World War II. Almost every conflict underway today involves guerrillas in at least one party to the conflict. These are people fighting in small bands, often not in uniform, with weapons varying from very sophisticated ones (either donated by one of the great powers or stolen from the conventional forces on the other side) to old weapons and even homemade ones.

Guerrilla warfare turns conventional warfare's reasoning upside down. Guerrilla warfare is essentially political - it is about winning the hearts and minds of people. It is not so much about taking and holding a set piece of territory. Guerrillas do not need a large amount of firepower to do this since they are only carrying out sporadic raids. Too much firepower, as with the US troops in Vietnam, can alienate the local population since there is a temptation to use it wantonly. The US did not lose in Vietnam because of a shortage of firepower but partly because of the excessive use of it. Guerrillas can lose battle after battle and yet still win the war since guerrilla warfare is a form of attrition, a wearing down of the conventional forces until exhaustion and frustration set in.

Modern transport is of great use to guerrillas. It gives them greater mobility so that a group may attack the offices of its opponents in another nation (notably embassies). It also provides targets (particularly airports and aircraft) where security is difficult to maintain. Thus, a dispute in one country easily spills over into other countries.

The mass media publicize guerrilla attacks. Although comparatively few people are killed in raids, the deaths attract a disproportionate amount of news coverage. Indeed, in terms of the number of deaths involved, guerrilla warfare is by no means the huge problem that the mass media often suggest that it is. For example, more people are killed on the roads of Northern Ireland each year than are killed in the warfare. But wars sell newspapers.

In 1985, the then British prime minister, Mrs Margaret Thatcher, called for the media to show greater restraint in reporting guerrilla activities: "We must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend. In our societies we do not believe in constraining the media, still less in censorship. But ought we not to ask the media to agree among themselves on a voluntary code of conduct, a code under which they would not say or show anything that could assist the terrorists' morale or their cause while the hijack lasted?" Little has come from this suggestion.

Incidentally, Mrs Thatcher's idea of self-restraint was not such an unusual one. The mass media are very restrained in how they report suicides of "ordinary people" - the sort of people who would normally only get coverage if they were victims of murders, road deaths or unusual crimes. (The rich and famous, by contrast, get as much coverage in death as in life). The mass media act in this careful way not only out of respect for the next of kin but also to avoid

"copy-cat" suicides. A movie actor dying of suicide may not set an example for impressionable young people but news of a person much more similar to themselves may do so.

In the meantime, the media continue to report guerrilla warfare extensively and guerrilla groups seem even more adept at using the media to convey their point of view.

The USSR did not learn from the US's experience in Vietnam. Its operation in Afghanistan showed that it, too, did not understand the unusual nature of guerrilla warfare. Much the same could be said about the Israelis in the Occupied Territories, the Burmese forces in Karen-controlled eastern Burma, the Indian and Sri Lankan forces in Tamil-dominated parts of Sri Lanka.

A complicating factor is the availability of nuclear weapons to guerrilla groups. While there is now virtually no risk of a World War III, there is a growing risk that eventually guerrilla groups will get access to nuclear weapons. The weapons need not be very sophisticated and the "delivery system" could be the back of a truck.

## ✓ **The Decline of International War**

Most wars underway today are not only guerrilla ones but they are also not strictly "international". Most wars used to be international - one nation attacking another or groups of nations attacking each other. Conventional forces were the main way of conducting such operations. International warfare is now rare.

The modern trends in warfare are for groups to try to break away from an existing nation to create their own nation, or for a group to try to overthrow its government and so form its own government. Guerrilla warfare is the preferred technique in both cases.

A war may become "internationalized" by the intervention of other nations or through the deployment of an international force (such as a United Nations peacekeeping operation). Once again there are problems for the intervening conventional forces since they are not trained in guerrilla warfare and, in any case, the appropriate response to guerrilla warfare is to examine the underlying causes of the war in the first place. A foreign force is at an even greater disadvantage in this respect than a domestic conventional force.

## ✓ **The Civilianization of Warfare**

A further implication of the growth of guerrilla warfare is that civilians now bear the brunt of the fighting. One of the key factors of conventional warfare was the clear distinction between professional soldiers and the civilians - one protected the other and in return received a special status in society. For example, male members of royal families traditionally serve for a few



years in the defence forces. Senior officers have a senior standing in orders of precedence at official government functions as a part of the reward for being willing to lay down their lives for the protecting the rest of society.

However, from World War II onwards, the percentage of civilians being killed in warfare has increased. This is to be expected given the changed nature of warfare. A tradition of war was that military personnel and buildings were to be the only targets. Nowadays, the targets could be anything - including New York office blocks.

Keith Suter