Western Way of War:
EPISODE 34: IS THE WEST DEVELOPING INNOVATION FATIGUE?

Moderator: Professor Peter Roberts (questions in Bold)
Respondent: Laura Schousboe (responses in Regular text).

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Unedited Transcript

Moderator: Let me introduce you to Laura Schousboe, a PhD Fellow at the Institute for Military Operations at the Royal Danish Defence College in collaboration with the Centre for War Studies, University of Southern Denmark. What does the Western way of war mean to you?

Laura Schousboe: First of all, Peter, thank you for having me on the show. It's a surely humbling experience to be part of a podcast series that has hosted so many prominent guests before me some of which you just named. And, to me, when I think about the Western way of war, I instantly think of the American way of war and preparing for this podcast, I was distressed about that because I am just simply damaged by my own research interests. But, I do take great comfort in the fact that a lot of your previous guests seem to suffer from the same syndrome. So, I hope you will allow me to talk from a more US-centred perspective. And, with that said, I won't really give you a definition of the American way of war. That has been done many times on your show. But, I think when I lay awake at night, I think about the American way of war which I assume everybody else also does, I can't escape 3 observations.

And, the first 1 is that there seems to be a difference between what we think is the American way of war or what is a preferred way of war and then what the way of war actually looks like in practice throughout history. And, there are several good books on these issues if your listeners want to pursue this further. But, the observation of course refers to the fact that our perception of the Western or American way of war is often tied to notions like the use of overwhelming force to achieve decisive results, relying heavily on technology, obtaining swift victories, air dominance, commencing combat operations at the time and place of US choice and so forth. I think you get the picture. But, historically speaking, this has not been the case when we look at the wars the US has actually fought. So, what we see is a superior number of what we could put under the terms of small wars or irregular conflicts or whatever is your preferred choice of words, where basically, none of these characteristics have been present and perhaps quite the contrary. So, this is the first observation that there's a difference between our self-imagined way of war and then what is or has been practised.

And the second observation is that the American way of war is not static. Shifts can and they do occur. For instance, with the introduction of precision-guided munitions. That's often regarded as one of those events that changed the American way of warfare. And also, when you follow the defence debate, you would sometimes hear people calling for a changed American way of war where you then actively go in and change the American way of war in order to meet some changed strategic environment or whatever the reason is. So, the way of war can and does change, it's not static.

And, the third observation is that to me as a researcher, that's my vantage point, the concept of a Western way of war, the American way of war, is simply a very beneficial, analytical concept that can be applied in almost any sense and on any defences. So, for instance, you could choose to study the American way of war...
in irregular conflicts or the relationship between the American way of war and technology or operational effectiveness or whatever you want. And, the point is that it's a term that we can use and actively employ to further our understanding of why and how we fight in many different ways. And so, I haven't done this specifically and you may have given me an idea to a new research project. But, if we then apply the American way of war to the concept of military innovation, my guess is that we could find some pretty interesting notions about the role and meaning of innovation in shaping the American way of war or perhaps the other way around. But, I think first it would make us realise that within the current defence community, in the US, there's this almost seller's belief that innovation is the answer to everything. So, you could then go on to ask why this is the case and how we got here?

Moderator: The Western and the US way of war are basically the same thing in that the US way of war is based on an amalgamation of other ways of war we had previously, the idea of a General Staff organisation is Prussian, the idea of Levée en Masse from Napoleonic way of war and the idea of manoeuvre as the predominant sense came from Basil Liddell Hart and J.F.C Fuller. Nowadays, manoeuvre is the only thing that Western militaries talk about. What's interesting is that innovation and this association with the technological idea of the future is one of the predominant facets that defines that Western way of war. Is this technological approach US-based or has it come from somewhere else such as society's approach to the change surrounding technology?

Laura Schousboe: I definitely think that it is very much US-driven if we regard it from an alliance perspective. In Denmark, we adopt almost everything that comes from the US. So, of course, now, (TC 00:10:00) we also talk a lot about innovation. But, I think the important thing to note is that the process or the activity of innovating, it's not new, it's not innovative to innovate. Militaries have always innovated because, to me, I understand innovation as simply organisational change. Innovation is changing. And so, militaries have always innovated or adapted or whatever you would like to call it. So, in that sense, of course, it's not a specific US thing to innovate. But, I think what the US or the American footprint on it is, is that it's been strategised. It's been lifted up to a point where it transcends everything the military does because it has become one of those defence buzzwords or buzz concepts which is in fashion right now. And, of course, we have talked a lot about innovation before and when you read old military strategies and documents or whatever, you always say that innovation is important but we've never done it to such a large extent as we see now where everything is just embedded in this innovation branding.

And, I might also note that, of course, as innovation is not a specific American thing, it's highly invoked in China and Israel and as I said, even in Danish defence right now. So, I think what the US does is to put it so high on the agenda that it sets the scene for everything else. Everything the US does has to be innovative and that also includes developing new technologies that we tend not to care so much about like legacy systems or technologies that are just better than before but resembles the 1 we had. But, we tend to always look at the truly innovative-, I'm also making a quotation mark, 'revolutionary technologies,' which you have just talked about in a previous show. That's what we care about. We don't want to study and learn so much about the more boring stuff as I call it.

Moderator: Would you say it's true that the big concepts about how European militaries fight, the idea of shock and war and manoeuvre and surprise and deception, tend to hold as constants more in the Western way of war? Would you say that's true?

Laura Schousboe: I don't know if it's true but at least I can observe that important changes do take place in peacetime as well. For instance, the development of the Air Battle (ph 15.25) Doctrine, I would definitely put that as an innovation but it didn't happen in wartime. But, I definitely agree with you that we see a lot of important changes that are driven by our current wartime experience and then we developed the MRAP in order to minimise the problem of IEDs and so on. And so, we have very important developments in wartime but, of course, the equally important developments, such as doctrinal change or what have you, do take place in peacetime where their organisation has the stability to actually pursue either intellectual change.
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and stuff like that. So, I know that there's this general dichotomy between wartime innovation and peacetime innovation and I think that has presented us with good insights about innovation but it's not like I think that we should say that wartime innovation is somehow better than peacetime innovation but it may be a useful distinction depending on what you want to look for and what you want to learn from.

**Moderator:** Is it your experience from studying the Americans that innovation has splintered and disaggregated and is happening everywhere but in many ways we're not exploiting what innovation could be because we can't coalesce that body of knowledge together?

Laura Schousboe: I think in some points that's true. But, I also want to keep with the notion that it's very centrally driven. All of a sudden, you will have a US Army innovation strategy and you will have Air Force strategies where they-, I can't remember the name, is it Shark Tank or something like that, where the officers will come and present their ideas and maybe they will get funding and so on. So, you have all these official innovation initiatives that are institutionalised and of course it's fragmented but it's all driven by the strategy or whatever we would call it to innovate that comes from the top. So, it's fragmented in the sense that we have thousands of initiatives across the DoD and inside the services and you have all the institutional setups in Texas where you have this innovation hub. And, there are just so many things going on in order to pursue innovation or to foster innovation. And so, in that sense, it's fragmented but it's also part of a larger wish for innovation.

**Moderator:** Do you think that we're approaching innovation fatigue and that it has just become a buzzword?

Laura Schousboe: At least you would think so. But, I think that's where people always make fun of me, saying that, (TC 00:20:00) 'I'm this anti-innovation, really conservative person.' But, I'm not. I'm just simply trying to point out that we've reached this point, as you say yourself, where innovation loses its meaning because it's everywhere and everything is innovation and how many times have you not heard that there's this issue and then the answer is to out-innovate. We should innovate ourselves out of this issue. Sure, but how? What are we going to do instead of just innovating ourselves out of a problem? So, yes, obviously I think we've reached a point where it has lost its, not its sense, but it has lost its purpose for being this initiative for change.

**Moderator:** I worry that through both fatigue and overuse of the word innovation, the Western way of war might be weakened and innovation might become a poisonous word. Do you agree?

Laura Schousboe: I think you are absolutely spot on. And, it shouldn't become a poisonous word because, as I said before, of course, innovation is critical for the military profession and for our operational effectiveness and what have you. So, there's a danger that it will become a poisonous word and that's just a pity.

**Moderator:** Could you offer future leaders, people starting their military careers and those of policy makers, a piece of advice so as to avoid making the same mistakes about innovation as the current generation, in our view, have done?

Laura Schousboe: I think my piece of advice would be to engage critically with your profession and it may be a bit of bland advice but that's what we also try to teach to the officers at the Royal Danish Defence College, that you should always be critical about your own profession. And, from my view, it, of course, means that you should engage critically with their concept of innovation and what it means and what it entails and you should be critical about what gains you can have from employing new technologies and all that. So, my advice is to engage critically with your profession.

**Moderator:** Laura, thanks so much. A really wise piece of advice to finish with.