Moderator: Welcome to the Western Way Of War. This is a weekly podcast that tries to understand the issues around how to fight, and succeed against adversaries in the 2020s. I'm Peter Roberts, director of Military Sciences at the Royal United Service Institute on Whitehall, and every week I talk to a guest about the Western way of war. Has it been successful? Is it fit for task today? How might it need to adapt in the future? The podcast is only possible because of the kind sponsorship of the good people of Raytheon UK, a subsidiary of Raytheon Technology, the British company that creates jobs in England, Wales and Scotland, contributing over £700,000,000 to the UK economy. My guest today is, sort of, emblematic about how my generation learned to think about their preconceptions about war, conflict and interventions.

Between 2003 and well, pretty much today, Emma Sky is one of those names that has been talked about as leading a discussion, not necessarily about counter-insurgency, but about civil military cooperation, about the realities of conflict, about nation building, about success and about failure. How has she got to be one of the most closest and trusted voices advising US Generals, Ray Odierno and David Petraeus, is an interesting journey. After studying at Oxford University, Emma started a period working for non-government organisations in Israel, the West Bank, Gaza Strip and back in the UK. And, despite being opposed to the invasion of 2003, Emma volunteered to join the Coalition Provisional Authority, the CPA to those of us who know, and served in Kirkuk from 2003, 2004.

She worked in Jerusalem after that, and then a stint in Kabul, Afghanistan as development advisor for the Commanding Generals of NATO’s ISAF. By 2007, Emma was serving as the political adviser to US General, Ray Odierno, when he was Commander MNC Iraq, and Commanding General US Forces Iraq, and then advised Dave Petraeus on reconciliation. And, she's written about her experiences, her 2015 book, The Unravelling, High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq, was one of the New York Times' 100 notable books of 2015, it was shortlisted for the 2015 Samuel Johnson Prize for Non-Fiction, the 2016 Orwell Prize and the 2016 Council on Foreign Relations Arthur Ross Book Award. Her latest book, In A Time of Monsters, Travelling in a Middle Eastern Revolt, was published in 2019. Emma is now director of the Yale World Fellows programme and a senior fellow at Yale's Jackson Institute, where she teaches Middle East politics, global affairs and great power competition. Now, there are few people who have such an intimate knowledge of the generational defining war in Iraq, of the conflict in Afghanistan and across the Middle East. The breadth of her experiences and her ability to interpret policy and politics for the military is pretty
much unrivalled. There's lots that we could get into, but I need to start by situating Emma into our broader conversation. So, Emma, can I start by asking, what does the Western way of war mean to you?

Emma Sky: Well, my personal experience of war is limited to the post 9/11 wars, sort of, Iraq and Afghanistan. So, I'll confine my thoughts to the two decades or so following 2001, when the global war on terror was seen as the primary organising framework, until recently replaced by great power competition. And, by the Western way of war during this period, I essentially mean the American way of war. And, I think it had unique characteristics. Perhaps the defining feature was fighting without winning, and this was in large part, because the mission kept morphing, and so our definition of winning kept changing. We didn't set clear, achievable objectives. Instead, we had grandiose goals of nation building, installing democracy, promoting women's rights, defeating terror. So, the wars became thought of as endless, because we never knew when the job was done, nor what success should look like. So, we won every battle, but none of the battles were decisive in terms of the outcome of the war. It became war among the people with no front lines, and the enemy was too often undefined, or ill-defined, and our actions often created more enemies than friends, and how were we to win the hearts and minds of the local people, when they feared the enemy would take revenge so brutally on those who sided with us? Now, ours was an all-volunteer force, we were able to recruit, train and deploy our troops on mass.

Our troops were professional, resilient, courageous and humane, for the most part. They proved adaptive, constantly developing new tactics, techniques and procedures. Junior officers were empowered, creative and constantly innovating. So, we were militarily superior, with overwhelming weaponry, but were up against enemies that used asymmetric tactics such as improvised explosive devices, hidden in roads, houses and dead donkeys. We were technologically sophisticated, able to collect masses of information, but with insufficient knowledge or understanding of the cultural environment to be able to interpret what it all meant. We could sustain troops with sophisticated, logical systems to supply remote bases, our fatalities were relatively low, we had body armour which kept soldiers alive, even after they lost limbs, and we were able to Medevac any wounded soldier to a field hospital, often within the golden hour of injury. We won every battle, but did not win the wars, and Americans like to win, they like clear victories, which is probably why test match cricket isn't played in the US. So, I don't think anyone would have imagined when we embarked on our wars, that the Iraq war would bring about the rise of ISIS, and establishment of a caliphate, and change the regional balance of power in Iran's favour. Nor, that the Afghan war would end with the Taliban poised to come back to power. Sun Tzu wrote, 'Tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.'

So, how did this happen? How could the greatest army in the world be at war for two decades and not win? And these were wars of choice, but we convinced ourselves that they were existential. President Bush asserted that America's liberty depended on the liberty of others, because repressive states produce terrorists. Spreading democracy became a national security imperative, to remove the conditions that foster terrorism, to extend government to ungoverned spaces. But the cornerstone of his freedom agenda was to be the transformation of Iraq into a democracy. The architects of the Iraq war envisaged it would lead to a new regional democratic order and peace with Israel. And, after the quick overthrow of the Taliban, the mission in Afghanistan morphed into installing democracy. So, these were wars of magical thinking, a policy process of wilful naivety. It was in the context of the aftermath of 9/11, so there was little public debate,
and critics were bullied for being un-American and lacking moral courage. We were told we were going to transform Iraq and Afghanistan into democracies, like we did with Germany and Japan, post-World War II. We believed we had the power to transform these countries and did not understand the limits of our power. We were pre-eminent militarily, our resources seemed endless, and there was nothing to limit us, no peer competitors. We displayed incredible hubris, we treated the countries as laboratories for democracy, and regarded the local people as passive recipients of our benevolence.

We believed we could bring government in a box, hold elections and, hey presto, liberal democracies would emerge. We believed that every problem has a solution, and that we were the ones to solve every problem, and we’ve always looked for technical solutions to problems that were inherently political, and frequently, we unintentionally created more conflict, with unforeseen second and third order effects. We trained local security forces so that they could replace US forces, but despite billions of investment in train and equip, Iraqi security forces disbanded in the face of ISIS, and militia forces rose up in the vacuum. And, the Taliban have now encircled key cities in Afghanistan, with Afghan security forces infiltrated, unable to supply remote outposts and unable to evacuate casualties. Our leaders told soldiers they were fighting over there to keep Americans safe at home in their beds at night, and they kept repeating that failure is not an option, even though it clearly was. Now, our Generals never told their civilian masters that the mission was not possible, and instead, constantly asked for more time and resources. We lacked leaders with strategic vision who could define an overall strategy maintained by Joint Staff, and instead, they were too often (TC 00:10:00) focused on tactical victories and media cycles. And they always remained optimistic that we had turned the corner, that we had achieved irreversible momentum, with a good news slide of the day regularly appearing in briefings.

Now, I want to stress that the surge in Iraq was a notable exception, when we had the right leadership strategy and resources and brought the civil war to an end. But, that success was then squandered. Now, our soldiers on the ground did everything that was asked of them, and more. Year after year, after year. Being permanently deployed became the norm, it became generational. Soldiers who had not even been born on 9/11 are now serving alongside their parents. And, so it was that young Americans were put in harm's way, on missions that did not make America or its allies any more secure, nor bring about a better peace. And these were wars without a full mobilisation of our society, only 1% of Americans serve in the military, and they come from disproportionately working class and minority backgrounds. The general public back home lost interest and didn't seem to care about the wars because the outcome didn't affect them. Taxes weren’t raised, Americans went to the mall while their soldiers risked life and limb patrolling the poppy fields of Helmand, and the IED strewn paths in Iraq’s Triangle of Death. The media and columnists failed to ask the hard questions, either because they were enamoured with the military, or feared being denied access, and frequently embedded with units, they became cheerleaders for the troops, reporting stories of heroism, not asking why the soldiers were there, nor spotlighting the lack of strategy.

Congress authorised the President to take action immediately following 9/11, and those authorities for the use of military force remain in place up until today. So, America's politicians have been keen to profess support for the troops, and thank them for their service, but less keen to question the way the wars were going, for fear of being accused as anti-military. So, this is how the most powerful country in the world came
to be forever at war, with three Presidents promising to end the endless wars, but ending US involvement does not bring peace to these places. History doesn't end.

Moderator: Emma, that was a really powerful intervention, and I do want to get to the-, about what was different in the surge, but it strikes me that, from what you've articulated, that this was a societal failure.

You've outlined where the military failed, where the politicians failed, where society failed to be engaged, where journalists failed. We all failed to a certain amount to get this done, but there are some other underlying points that I'd like to pick out in here, and this idea right at the start you brought up of endless wars. One of the reasons being that we kept changing what the ends were supposed to be. And I wonder if you feel from your experiences that this way that we have of defining Western strategy at the moment, for interventions, for war, about ends, ways and means, is rather too fixed on the unrealistic. I mean, ends don't end, right? I mean, you know, as you said, you don't come to an end and society suddenly stops, and you end up with this perfect Nirvana, or even a near-Nirvana. Societies, peoples, culture, they continue to evolve, right? Is our reliance on this ends, ways and means, is that part of the real problem we have with thinking about any kind of intervention?

Emma Sky: I think it's part of the problem. I mean, as you've said, these wars may appear endless, but that's probably the wrong way to conceive them. They're historical processes which are ongoing, and seeing these things as having some defining great battle that would bring about a victory is probably the wrong way to conceive them. At the end of the day, we need to deny our enemies from achieving what it is they want to achieve, and that perhaps is a more realistic idea to get behind. Rather than to think the only solution is to turn these countries into liberal democracies. So, I think being more realistic is really important. I think it's also really important to understand that the context has really changed. Now, for the first time really America is up against an adversary of the same strength in China. So, before in these wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was a very different context, and there was nothing to limit what America did. Now, it would be an absolute disaster if America and China came into conflict, it would be a disaster for both countries and it would be a disaster for the world. So, I think the context in which we see things has really, really changed, and the rivalry between the US and China is ultimately over which country offers a better road to progress. Now, America, you know, remains powerful both militarily and economically. but its reputation as the model and standard bearer of democracy has been greatly tarnished by the wars in the Middle East, and the dysfunction of its own political system. So, when you look at China, President Xi Jinping is offering an alternative model of authoritarian capitalism. And so, when you look at the wars in the Middle East, it's important to see that the failures there are not limited just to there. China and Russia, watch. What is it that they take away from these failures? What impact it has elsewhere can be really, you know, really huge. So, I think it's important that we better understand our own interests, and to set realistic goals based on our capabilities.

Moderator: So, I'm struck there by this differentiation between the post 9/11 mission which was partly revenge, partly retribution, and it was about mowing the lawn, you know? Keep the heads down, keep it down to a level at which is suitable, and it's a terrible metaphor to use, but in many ways, it's like a policing approach to drugs. Drugs continue at a level at which they don't disrupt society too much, that society's willing to accept them, but if they go above that then there is a degree of mowing that lawn that needs to happen by policing action. And in many ways, it was felt that the direct mission after 9/11, which was
going into Tora Bora, it was operation Anaconda, this was the mowing the lawn. This was keeping the heads down, this was taking it down to a level that was acceptable, of reducing the capability. What changed was the mission after that, which went beyond that into something that became nation-building, you know, and, within that, there was the hubris and the systemic failures that we all demonstrated in going for that. But there’s part of that that relates to the answer to the first question, which was about the Machiavellian differences between us and the adversary. If we were trying to impart change through love, and money, and industry, and aid funding, and governance, and democracy because we believed that was right, the Taliban and others were offering a different model. Much like we have Xi Jinping, as you said, offering a different model. And it really does come down to a competition over these ideas that we are familiar with throughout history, right? This is not something new, this is something that humanity should be well used to, I mean Sun Tzu and Thucydides were both writing about it 2,500 years ago, I mean, surely this is not too new, right?

Emma Sky: You're absolutely right, it's not new at all. But the potential for miscalculation is just immense, and when you look at the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it didn't seem to matter that much to America, really. For most Americans, the outcome of those wars didn't matter so much. It mattered for the people in Iraq, and it mattered for the people in Afghanistan, but for ordinary Americans, it didn’t matter so much. Now, America is up against a competitor that has extraordinary capabilities, and the risks of miscalculation are really, really high, particularly when you see the mistrust between China and America. (TC 00:20:00) Now, you can look around the world and you can see, you know, refugees are not queueing up to get visas to go and live in China. Most refugees would rather live in Europe or America. So, the appeal of the West, the freedom of the West still stands strong. But, when it comes to path to progress, China’s rise is extraordinary and we hoped it would integrate within the US-led international order, but it isn't, it's challenging it. And we see this with Taiwan, we see it in the South China Seas, we see it with Hong Kong, and of course, with the cultural genocide of the Uyghurs. And China is constantly claiming that the US democratic model doesn’t work, and it says, it argues that its model, state authoritarianism, state-led capitalism, provides a better path to prosperity. And I think it’s really, really important that there’s a dialogue now between high level American and Chinese officials, so that they both understand each other's viewpoints, each other's red lines. And the risks of going beyond that.

Moderator: So, there is, to me, a fascinating point in this, in that, China is offering a model, as you say, of assistance, of finance, but also potentially, of alliance to anyone who wants to come with them, without ethical handcuffs, without a need to conform to the Western ideals, the Western rules of international order, as they've laid them down for the past hundred years. And China has made a very interesting offer, which others will necessarily find attractive. Do you think that the West, that the United States, that the democracies of the world are going to need to adapt, and are going to need to lower some of their ethical standards in order to retain alliances? Or are they going to be able to retain the moral high ground, because that's one of the things that will make them attractive? Will the West have to break its own rules?

Emma Sky: Well firstly, China doesn't have lots of allies, you know? It's not a country that you can look around and think, 'Who are China’s allies?' North Korea, Iran, it's-, you know, you can look at America, and America has an extraordinary number and set of allies, and that’s always been America's strength, because it is open,
because it is transparent, because it values allies. Now, obviously you can look at this last period of the post 9/11 wars and say, ‘Really? Did America keep up to its values? I mean, really?’ You can look at 3,000 Americans killed on 9/11, but the US response, invaded Iraq and Afghanistan, it held thousands without due process. It tortured detainees in Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, kidnapped suspects in one country, took them to another through extraordinary rendition, and it’s been assassinating people in countries where it wasn’t at war. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans have died. And this obsessive hunt to eradicate terrorists, you could argue that America undermined the very rules-based international order, that it had established and led for 70 years. And so, there is an argument that, you know, we use human rights conveniently to spotlight our adversaries, and to lobby domestic support for our policies. But, you know, we need to really rethink some of those things. President Obama tried to draw a line under what happened in those early years of the global war on terror, but still to this day, Guantanamo Bay hasn’t been closed. So, we need to really, really do more to uphold those values that are dear to us, because they do define what our societies are, and what our citizens want our states to be.

Moderator: And, we can’t forget that, you know, within all this, we can paint a very dower picture, and in some ways we should, about the societal systemic failure to engage with the ideas that we really needed to engage with. But, there were successes, and as you pointed out, your definition of the Western way of war did not necessarily include the surge which was, amongst other things, a successful operation tactically and operationally, and potentially strategically, right? So, what made the surge so different?

Emma Sky: The surge was an extraordinary time, I think anyone who was involved in Iraq in that period between 2007 to 2009 feels that that was extraordinary, because for the first time we had the right leadership, the right strategy and the resources. We got the big ideas right, so we understood what was driving the conflict, it was a power struggle between different communities, in the context of a failed state. That was critical, and the objectives that we set ourselves were realistic. So, the objective was to buy the time and the space for the Iraqi government to move forward with providing public services and reconciliation. So, it was about bringing the violence down. So, I think to start with, it was actually having realistic objectives. One of the big ideas during this time was, it wasn't about just hunting the bad guys, it was about protecting the Iraqi population, so the Iraqi people became the centre of gravity, rather than the obsessive hunt for bad guys. Another thing was the Sunni awakening. Now, you know, convincing the tribes to turn against Al-Qaeda, was quite something. Now, a lot of these tribes had been on the same side as Al-Qaeda, and they had blood on their hands, and there were plenty of people who said, 'You cannot do deals with people who have killed our soldiers.' And so, having leaders who accepted yes, you don’t make peace with your friends, you make peace with your enemies. So, having leaders that were prepared to do these deals with the insurgents, who then became known as the Sons of Iraq, that was quite extraordinary.

And so, all the reconciliation meetings that we held with tribes and government officials to rehabilitate them back into their communities. But, I think a third factor was actually luck, and you need luck, but I say luck, because I think the timing of the surge was very fortuitous. By that stage, the civil war in Iraq had, kind of, run its course, and the Shia militias had ethnically cleansed Baghdad and the Sunni tribes realised that Al-Qaeda was taking them to absolute, certain defeat. So, I think that was what pushed them to really say, 'Enough,' to Al-Qaeda. Yes, Al-Qaeda had-, you know, it wouldn't allow people to smoke, it chopped off...
fingers for smoking, it wouldn’t allow tomatoes and cucumbers to be sold in the same vegetable stall, go figure that one out. And, it took too many daughters as wives, that was true, but I think it really was the sense that they were losing, and they were going to lose bad unless they turned against Al-Qaeda. And so, the leadership that we had at that time, with General Petraeus and General Odierno was extraordinary, because with lesser leaders, we would have missed those opportunities. And so, I think to answer your question, it really was the right leadership, the right strategy, the necessary resources and luck. We were lucky with our timing.

Moderator: Emma, that is the perfect place to land on, I really should do an entire podcast about luck and the military, because it's one of those defining features. It’s just a shame that the West has no preordained right to be the lucky ones in combat. You can find our show on all major podcasting platforms, including iTunes and Spotify, your downloads regularly place us in the top 3% of nearly two million podcast shows globally. And, more and more of our listeners seem to be going back and digging into previous episodes, both in this series and in series one, why not? The guests are superb, and always provides you with a new line of thinking to delve into. Thanks too for all your feedback, I'm a bit behind still, but I'm trying to respond to everyone, even the grumpy people who send me grumpy emails. We’re busy thinking about series three of this podcast, and what that might look like. Does it need to change, can we adapt? (TC 00:30:00) Are there different angles we should be looking at? More of this over coming weeks, and in the meantime, you can try our other digital outputs at rusi.org/professionofarms. You might also consider becoming a member of RUSI, the institute was founded by the Duke of Wellington a few years after the battle of Waterloo, to counter the institutional and systemic bureaucracy he found in the war office. His agenda of free thinking, stimulating intellectual curiosity and challenge, remaining at the heart of our work. We receive no core funding from the UK Government, Ministry of Defence or Military, and we’re a charity, so we cannot make a profit. Our aim is to provide you with an opportunity to grow and improve, as a member of the Profession of Arms. You can find details at rusi.org/membership. The show’s produced by Peppi Väänänen and Kieron Yates, and is sponsored by Raytheon UK, thanks for listening.