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BY MATTHEW STEVENSON

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The Ambiguities of Political Command: The Case of Ukraine



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Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman is Emeritus Professor of War Studies at King's College London and the author of numerous books on war and history, including (of interest to Americans) *Kennedy's Wars: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (2002) and *The Future of War: A History* (2017). He began teaching at King's in 1982 and retired in 2014. Beyond teaching, he was appointed in 1997 the Official Historian of the Falkland Islands Campaign. He and his son Sam blog on Substack under the rubric *Comment is Freed*. He lives in London, where this interview about the conflict in Ukraine took place. —M.M.S.

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Matthew Stevenson: I am with Professor Freedman in south London. Your new book was published by Oxford in September 2022 under the title *Command: The Politics of Military Operations from Korea to Ukraine*, and it addresses the confluence of politics and military command. How would you summarize the book for a reader who does not have a copy of it in front of himself or herself?

Lawrence Freedman: The first thing about it is that it's a book that starts post-Second World War. Lots of military history, for good reasons, is preoccupied with those great conflagrations of 1914-18 and 1939-45. I felt that the post-war period was neglected. There was an awful lot, unfortunately, of military activity afterwards.

The book is not just about American and UK conflicts, although they're the two countries I know best. I've tried to bring in conflicts involving Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, which are not particularly well known, but to me interesting.

Then, of course, the book is about command, about the higher direction of wars. It addresses the question of the relationship between civilian and military leadership, those who are supposed to set the political objectives of the war and those who are supposed to work out how to achieve them. The basic theme of the book is that this division of labor doesn't quite work as neatly as the theory might lead.

One is to suppose that the politicians need the military to tell them what their options are. But once the military get to work, the politicians take a pretty keen interest in how they're going about their business. And so that's a running theme, that then shows the effective difference between authoritarian and democratic systems and so on.

Matthew Stevenson: Before we get into some of the issues of *Command*, please explain a little about yourself. Your background is at King's College London, but it goes far beyond King's.

Lawrence Freedman: I've been involved in the study of war in one way or another, really, since I started graduate studies in the early 1970s. The early part of my career was in think tanks, and then, from 1982, I was at King's. But this is an area, if you're dealing with international affairs, where you get involved with a lot of countries and a lot of different institutions. So I've been around for quite a long time, in a number of different settings.

Origins of the Ukraine War

Matthew Stevenson: This book starts with the Korean War, with General MacArthur going up to the Yalu River, and continues, in a fairly direct line, through to the current war in Ukraine.

For the purposes of this conversation, I thought it would be interesting for our readers to focus on the current Ukraine conflict, and to apply the lessons from your case studies.

You write about the Cuban Missile Crisis, which involved the US and the Soviet Union.

You have a chapter about Kosovo, which may be one of the origins of some of the current conflicts in Ukraine.

How would you describe the origins of the current war in Ukraine?

Lawrence Freedman: The origins go back to the breakup of the Soviet Union—listen to Putin and the origins go back to the Bolsheviks, and then to the way that Crimea was handed over to Ukraine [in 1954] while they were both part of the Soviet Union.

After 1991 it was clear that many in Russia found it difficult to get their heads around the idea that Ukraine was a separate country. They found it hard to think of it in that way, and they sought in whatever way possible to influence its political development.

This first came to a head in 2004, with the Orange Revolution, which was a mass complaint about vote rigging. Then again, in 2013-14, with the protests against the pressure, which was actually put on a very pro-Russian president, Viktor Yanukovich, not to sign an association agreement with the European Union.

The matter brought to a head the whole question of the political orientation of Ukraine—such as the question of membership in NATO, which by 2014, wasn't really in the cards. It was raised in 2008, and in principle kept open, although in fact it had actually been closed off.

The European Union was then for Putin the key battle, and he managed to get Yanukovich to withdraw his signature. This caused a massive upsurge in Kyiv of political protest and eventually Yanukovich ran away, and that's the origin of the current trouble. It was the result of Putin deciding that this was such a threat that he had to respond.

Russia responded in two ways: one by taking Crimea and, secondly, by encouraging an upsurge in protest, much of it led by Russian citizens although not all, largely in eastern Ukraine. And it's the messy nature of that conflict, which led to two disputed enclaves—that created the conditions for the current war, as the disputes were left unresolved.

There were agreements in 2014-15, agreed in Minsk, which were supposedly going to allow these enclaves to stay part of Ukraine, but with some sort of veto over Ukrainian policy. They were never implemented; they were never likely to be implemented because of all sorts of practical reasons.

In 2021 Putin thought that this was an unsatisfactory situation, that the enclaves were actually becoming dependencies of Russia. They had to be subsidized, the Ukrainians

weren't paying the pensions or whatever, while on the other hand, the rest of Ukraine was getting closer to NATO and so on.

One part of Ukraine was becoming *de facto* part of Russia, the rest of it was becoming a *de facto* part of NATO, or so it seemed, and Putin decided to bring this issue to a head a year ago. The war's origins lie in Russia's, more generally, and in Putin's reluctance to allow Ukraine an independent path.

How Good is General Putin?

Matthew Stevenson: How would you evaluate Vladimir Putin as a military commander?

Lawrence Freedman: He's not a military commander. His background is in the spy world. I think he has the old KGB belief that there are endless possibilities for manipulation and fabrication that will allow you to create your own reality. He's ruthless, as we know, and the people around him tend to be from that world. So he's not a military commander.

He has, however, one would say, up to 2022, been quite shrewd in his use of armed force. He used the conflict in Chechnya in 1999 and 2000— when he had just become prime minister and was running for president—to gain the presidency. He's then had conflicts in Georgia, in Crimea, and more recently with Syria, where armed force has been used in a direct and effective way.

You get a sense he was limiting his liabilities all the way through, that he was a risk taker, but a calculated risk taker, which is, by and large, how he got away with it. That was why he caught many people by surprise when he launched an all-out war in 2022.

He's been, I think, one of the worst sorts of political leaders in terms of orchestrating the war, in that he underestimated the opponent, believed the war would be easier than it would be, and he has encouraged his armed forces to take reckless risks.

As it got bad, Putin doubled down. Instead of looking for a way out, he escalated the crisis and has kept on doing so. So now it's a terrible situation for Ukraine, but a terrible situation in a different way for Russia, without an obvious way out.

Whatever he thinks he's achieved in the first two decades of leading Russia, he has lost it this year.

Coup-Proofing a Fragile Regime

Matthew Stevenson: In your new book, you use a phrase in more than one of your case studies. For example, in the case of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, you talk about "coup proofing" a regime. To what extent has Putin "coup proofed" himself?

Lawrence Freedman: I don't think it's as big an issue in Russia as it is in other countries, because there isn't the tradition there. The military has a pretty clear sense of a subordinate role going back to the Soviet Union. But Putin has gone for loyalty, which is the other side of the same coin in some ways. He has looked to see if he can get those who have become members of the Russian elite and have had quite a good life, and they've been well looked after. And so the military leadership—led by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov—they have been in position since the early part of the previous decade. They're well established, in some sense, as courtiers of Putin. And if people show loyalty to him, he shows loyalty to them. By and large, Putin doesn't dispense with people that easily. Lots of people around Putin have been around him for some time, so it's quite a close-knit group. A war, of course, makes it difficult for any outsiders to burst in and reshape the political leadership.

President Zelensky's Charismatic Leadership

Matthew Stevenson: Volodymyr Zelensky, how would you categorize his style of political military leadership?

Lawrence Freedman: Zelensky as everybody knows, has got background in the entertainment business. One has to emphasize the business as much as the entertainment, because he's a very shrewd businessman who has an attractive personality, well known in Russia, who came to power in an election as a peace candidate. He was the one who was most likely to do a deal with Russia, and he found he couldn't do it, which may partly explain Putin's irritation. And the result of that was that up to the start of the war, Zelensky wasn't seen as an amazing success in his job, but he rose to the challenge.

I think Zelensky has got a very clear understanding of his role, which is to give political direction, which I don't think is very difficult for Ukrainians. I don't think there's much disagreement about what they're trying to do, which is to get the Russians out of their country. But his strength is in his messaging to the international community. From day one, he was creating both a moral and a geopolitical imperative that Ukraine must be supported.

I think, instinctively, many in the West understood it and warmed to it, but he's been extremely effective in pushing it and never letting it go. There's been a clarity of message. Zelensky is an attractive character: he's fluent, he speaks well, and he's been brave. I mean, he's gone to the front line; while Putin has stayed hidden away and avoided any unpleasantness, Zelensky has put himself about.

Imagining the War's End

Matthew Stevenson: How do you see the war ending, if it ever does in Ukraine; it may go on and on. Once before, Europe had a thirty years' war—we hope that isn't the case here—but there's no immediate end in sight. Do you imagine an end someday?

Lawrence Freedman: So it's a war that could dribble on. I don't think you can sustain a war indefinitely at these levels of ammunition usage and weapon degradation and army degradation. But though you can't sustain it at these sorts of levels, it can dribble on without a conclusion. Or else you can have a ceasefire which allows preparations for the next round. A peace deal is hard at the moment because there are big issues that will be hard to get compromises on. Reparations and war crimes—pretty obvious. Or release of sanctions, there's another.

A lot just depends on who's in charge in Russia. As this war was started in Moscow, to my mind, that's where it has to end. The Ukrainians aren't going to stop wanting their country back and, having suffered as much as they have done already, they're going to carry on fighting. Russia at some point has got to work out that for all the effort that they put into this, they've achieved really very little.

Most of the gains they made militarily were made in the first week or so. Some of them were relinquished after a month and then some very grueling fighting for both sides since then—they've inched forward while then losing some more territory themselves. I think a crunch is coming soon.

Both sides, I think, are looking to the spring for major offensives. Which is why you're seeing the Russians talking up their troop numbers. Because that's the main thing they've got now—manpower after the mobilization, while the Ukrainians are bringing in lots of new equipment from the West, which they then have to get delivered and learn to work and integrate into their military system.

I think that it's possible that there could be some serious fighting in the spring, which could create a balance of power that in the end will require some political compromises. That's one scenario.

One of the things we've learnt from this war is that the conflict has all sorts of twists and turns, and that the basic proposition is that it's much easier to start a war than to end one. That remains the case.

Lessons from Other Conflicts

Matthew Stevenson: In Command, you have a chapter on the Cuban Missile crisis, a chapter on Kosovo, and chapters on the earlier conflicts in and around the Soviet Union

and Russia after the breakup of the Soviet Union. Which of these case studies do you think applies here?

Lawrence Freedman: I think it's always dangerous to assume that one situation will replicate itself later on.

The Cuban Missile Crisis is relevant because it demonstrated that both leaders, Kennedy and Khrushchev, were quite scared of the prospect of nuclear war. They really didn't want it, while at the same time had to be seen as protecting vital national interests. And that, in the end, worked because there was a compromise solution, in which Khrushchev withdrew the missiles and Kennedy agreed not to attack Cuba, which was a real pledge, given what had happened before with Cuba. In that case it showed that the fear of escalation was such that when there was a direct confrontation, the two sides avoided fighting.

I spend time in the book looking at the role of Russian submarines [in the Cuban Missile Crisis] and the anti-submarine measures that were taken against them, but these were to force them to the surface, not to destroy them. It shows just how powerful the fear of escalation can be. And of course we've seen that in Ukraine, but it's a very different situation because the United States isn't doing the fighting, Ukraine is doing the fighting.

The issue of nuclear use is really raised largely by Putin as a deterrent to stop the United States and its allies getting directly engaged. And it's worked; it's worked perfectly well for Putin in that sense as a deterrent. Much harder to see is how Russia could use nuclear weapons to turn the war around. Personally I don't think he will, because then he's given up on his deterrent, which is playing an important role in the West, which then might get involved in a much bigger way.

Chechnya is relevant because that was another case where the Russian military went in believing that they were the strongest and could push the rebels aside, and they suddenly found themselves getting severely embarrassed. This was before Putin's round of the war—the first round, end of 1994, start of 1995—when the Russians were embarrassed by the Chechens. And it demonstrated that what appeared to be a formidable military machine wasn't quite so formidable when it went into an operation.

The Limits of Russian Power

Matthew Stevenson: *You have this quote in your book: "In his memoirs, Yeltsin described the war as a moment when Russia 'parted with one more exceptionally dubious but fond illusion – about the might of our army ... about its indomitability'."*

Lawrence Freedman: Yes. So that you couldn't order up an invasion like you could order up a new limousine. It was a shock. And I think this generation of Russian leaders thought that they spent enough time and effort remedying all the flaws that were apparent.

But to go back to the theme of command, if you have very hierarchical systems of command and inflexibility in the system, and if you're relying on soldiers whose heart isn't in it, shall we say, it doesn't always work out very well. There are parallels with Chechnya, although Ukraine is on a far greater scale.

Of course, Kosovo is different again, because Kosovo was a situation in which Serbia, while not quite a client, was a country with whom Russia felt some affinity. Serbia was dealing crudely, with an insurgency, with a rebellion in Kosovo, one of its provinces. And NATO had acted to prevent people from being pushed out of the country, becoming refugees, but who were also in real humanitarian distress. It was a sort of classic humanitarian intervention, and it led to one clash [with Russia] at the end, which is revealing because it's a point at which Putin first makes an appearance in a high position in the Russian security apparatus.

I think it had a big influence on him. And it's probably most relevant in a way that you could say backfired on NATO in encouraging the view that if you could make a case for self-determination of a breakaway province, then, that can be supported now.

NATO never quite went that far, although Kosovo did end up eventually being independent. But I think Putin used this idea of self-determination and kept on coming back to Kosovo to justify the recognition of the enclaves in Donetsk and Luhansk and tried to turn them into separate entities, now to be incorporated, if he gets his way, into Russia.

Will Ukraine Join NATO?

Matthew Stevenson: How do you see Ukraine in the architecture of European integration going forward? Do you think Ukraine will be a member of NATO, will it be a part of the European Union? Will it be a sort of halfway house between Russia and the West?

Lawrence Freedman: I don't think the halfway house idea is tenable anymore. That's not what the Ukrainians want. The problem with buffer states is they tend to get buffeted. And that's what's happened to Ukraine.

I think a lot depends on Ukraine. There's a massive, massive job of reconstruction and revival to be done. This economy has taken a huge hit. A lot of its population is now abroad. A lot of its population has been traumatized by what has happened. It has not been good.

So there's a massive job—that can get moving once recovery starts to take off; I think it could be quite fast. But a key issue then is whether Ukraine goes back to some of its bad, old ways of corruption and so on that were problematic, very problematic, beforehand. And one assumes that the conditionality imposed by the International Monetary Fund and the European Union will be significant.

If all that is sorted, then I do assume it will become part of the European Union; maybe not immediately, but over time, and will be drawn more and more into the EU orbit, in terms of regulation and policies. NATO, I think the mood at the moment is, yes, it will become part of NATO, which is actually easier than becoming part of the EU.

A lot depends on how the war ends. For all the talk about the provocation of NATO enlargement, what's happened reminds us of why countries wanted to be part of NATO. You have more security as part of an alliance than outside it.

Does America Still Win Wars?

***Matthew Stevenson:** You write about the US military, in Korea and in Iraq, and you write a lot about Afghanistan. You have a chapter about Nixon in 1972 and the spring offensive, and the bombings of North Vietnam. In many ways, America-at-arms since the Korean War has not been a success. How would you evaluate the might of the American military, despite the very few results that it has achieved in the last seventy years?*

Lawrence Freedman: Yes, it doesn't lose in conventional war. It sort of won its battles in Iraq and Afghanistan. Its main military success was in 1991 with Desert Storm. So if it's just fighting a conventional war, it's very powerful.

Its problems have come when it hangs around and is engaged in trying to sustain unpopular governments or, in the case of Iraq, finding itself caught up in a developing civil war or major inter-communal violence, and got frustrated. It is perfectly capable of beating most opponents, fighting the way the United States likes to fight.

When it was put into positions where it was fighting insurgencies— guerrilla warfare, terrorism, whatever—it struggled more. Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq—none of them had particularly satisfactory endings. Iraq possibly better than the others, but after an awful lot of pain and heartache. For the United States but certainly for the Iraqis themselves, you wouldn't say this was a great success.

I suspect the lesson to be drawn from this is that the United States will be increasingly reluctant to put itself in positions where it's trying to create stability in inherently unstable situations. That's of course where we thought we sat after Vietnam but then along came Afghanistan and Iraq.

The US is a big power that tends to be called upon to deal with all sorts of things. I think the other thing about current strategic discourse is it's been dominated by assumptions of more great power war, particularly with China over Taiwan and so on. Again, just hard to know how capable the Chinese will actually be in building their forces up. But that, in a way, is the sort of conflict which the US feels more comfortable to understand.

Matthew Stevenson: *A set piece battle almost of Second World War proportion?*

Lawrence Freedman: Yes, a regular war against a proper great power. It would be terrible, tank the international economy and cause other uncertainties, but it's a war that the US prefers to think about rather than getting involved in more counterinsurgency operations.

Matthew Stevenson: *In these forever wars has there been a failure of political leadership in the United States?*

Lawrence Freedman: I think the difficulty is that you've got to look at the origins of these wars. In Afghanistan, any American president would have gotten involved after 9/11. Now there were diplomatic possibilities then that many would say were not explored as much as they could have been. I think that's one critique. You could argue that after the Taliban had been defeated, it was wrong just to exclude that constituency from political power in Afghanistan—if, when they were weak, they'd be brought in. There's all sorts of ways of looking at it and lamenting decisions, but it's hard to argue that it was easily avoided.

Iraq could have been avoided. I mean, at some point, Iraq, like Syria, might have exploded in some way for internal reasons. It wasn't a happy place. But there was no need in March 2003 for the United States to instigate a war there. That was a failure. For the US political leadership, it was hubris. It was because they knocked out the Taliban quickly at the end of 2001. They sort of believed the same could be achieved with Saddam Hussein without thinking through the political consequences of what they were doing.

The Anger of the Legions

Matthew Stevenson: *I believe you have a quote in your book, 'Beware of the anger of the legions', when you're talking about Algeria, and the French army veterans who were marched away from the defeat at Dien Bien Phu, both of which are excellent passages in Command. I wanted to ask you, which legions should we be worried about today? First, correct me on the quote.*

Lawrence Freedman: The quote is correct, but it is a fake quote.

Matthew Stevenson: *Was it from Jean Lartéguy's The Centurions?*

Lawrence Freedman: Yes in that it is where it was quoted. It was a fake letter, supposedly from Roman times, which one of the politicians in Algeria was trying to use to point to the danger of letting the legions take all the sacrifice and all the pain of protecting the republic or protecting the empire, and then being disregarded.

So it was essentially making the point, which is very relevant in Algeria, that in this case, the paratroopers and those who had squashed the Algerian revolution were not being treated properly because in the end, a political deal was being done that would mean the political objectives of the revolutionaries were achieved.

This, you know, led to an attempted coup, in a Western democratic country [France]. This is the most serious example of that and it's something that still resonates in French discourse and the way that it happened. And even a few years ago, there was sort of talk of disgruntled officers and so on taking up arms. President Kennedy—having dealt with very recalcitrant military who thought he'd been too weak on the Missile Crisis and should have taken the opportunity to get rid of Castro—saw the senior military as potentially a threat, not impossible to imagine as involved in an American coup.

There are plenty of places where you have military coups, not because the legions are furious, but because the generals are ambitious, or because they feel that the politicians are hopeless and weak and decadent and so they're needed to produce some order. That's what happened in Pakistan, on quite a regular basis.

There is always this issue—that the people who control the means of violence could turn inwards and use it to overthrow their own government as much to deal with external threats. It happens quite often, but not normally in Western democratic countries.

You even see it talked about in Russia, as if the military are so fed up with situation they've been put in, that they might turn on Putin. I don't think there's any evidence of that. And go back to the “coup proofing” that you mentioned before, where there is a concern it leads to senior officers being chosen for their loyalty rather than their professionalism, sometimes from the same tribe or clan or family or whatever, and that undermines the military effort. South Vietnam was a very good example of that.

Heroic Political-Military Leadership

Matthew Stevenson: Let's end on a more positive note than furious legions. You quote the historian, writer, probably colleague of yours, John Keegan, who said that great leaders are heroic and that they're also risk takers. Can you give us the name one or two military leaders, political leaders whom you admire, who you feel embraced Keegan's idea of the heroic?

Lawrence Freedman: Well, Keegan saw heroic as a performative thing and a lot of the leaders he had admired – such as Ulysses Grant or the Duke of Wellington – weren't particularly heroic since they didn't go into the performative sides of the business. Keegan was quite cautious on heroic leaders. Alexander the Great was his great example, and he was very performative in the way he led and inspired his men.

I think what you want in political leadership, and this is why Zelensky has been good, is somebody who understands the interaction between the political objectives and the military side, but doesn't claim to be a better soldier than his own generals; someone who understands that he has to defer at some point to professional judgment but understands their role in terms of political leadership and making the coalitions work, which in any strategy is critical.

In terms of generals, I think what one finds is that often it is the meeting of the man with the moment. One of the generals I spent a lot of time on [in *Command*] is [the Israeli general] Ariel Sharon, who was heroic. No doubt he was performative. He was a risk taker, he was brave, he was audacious tactically, he was very accomplished, but politically he was disastrous, and he was disruptive because he was very egotistical. But his men would follow him and take risks for him.

In the 1967 war and again in 1973, Sharon made a difference. When he was minister of defense in 1982, he was completely disastrous because he got Israel involved in a calamitous war in Lebanon, which did enormous damage to Israel's reputation at the time and created conditions with which it's still living.

I tend to look at whatever sort of strategy one is talking about as well as the rule about which commanders do best in which circumstances. I open the book with General Dwight Eisenhower. He was not heroic. He'd not made his name in battle. He hadn't really fought a battle at a junior level. But he was a brilliant manager of people, decisive in judgment, and knew how to hold a coalition together. And that's what was needed in the Allied forces in 1944. So I think there are a variety of different roles. Some of the more flamboyant generals of that period just couldn't have played that role. They would have just rubbed people up the wrong way.

Matthew Stevenson: *Thank you, Professor Freedman, for speaking with us today.*

Lawrence Freedman: My pleasure.

Matthew Stevenson is a contributing editor of *Harper's Magazine* and the author of many books, including [Reading the Rails](#), [Appalachia Spring](#), [The Revolution as a Dinner Party](#), about China throughout its turbulent twentieth century, and [Biking with Bismarck](#), travels

across France and the landscapes of the 1870 Franco-Prussian war. His new book is: [Our Man in Iran](#).

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