



Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice

By John A. Nagl

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From one of the most important Army officers of his generation, a memoir of the military's revolution in counterinsurgency warfare

Delivering a profound education in modern warfare, John Nagl's *Knife Fights* is essential reading for anyone who cares about the fate of America's soldiers and the purposes for which their lives are put at risk.

As an army tank commander in the first Gulf War, Nagl was an early convert to the view that America's greatest future threats would come from asymmetric warfare—guerrillas, terrorists, and insurgents. His Oxford thesis on the lessons of Vietnam—eventually published as a book called *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*—became the bible of the counterinsurgency movement. But it would take 9/11 and the botched aftermath of the Iraq invasion to give his ideas contemporary relevance. After a year's hard fighting in Iraq's Anbar Province, where Nagl served as operations officer of a tank battalion in the 1st Infantry Division, he was asked by General David Petraeus to coauthor the new Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency field manual—rewriting core doctrine that would change the course of two wars and the thinking of an army. *Knife Fights* is the definitive account of counterinsurgency and its consequences by the man who was the doctrine's leading architect.

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Editorial Review

Review

Foreign Policy:

“[An] invaluable memoir of service...[KNIFE FIGHTS] is also a cautionary tale of how the U.S. Army became an ‘un-learning’ institution, ‘over-learning’ the lessons from Vietnam that were most convenient to its bureaucratic interests and ‘under-learning’ those lessons most central to victory in this type of warfare...Nagl’s exceptional memoir chronicles an important period in the wars of insurgency the United States waged following 9/11; it is also a story of how one professional soldier received a brutal education not just in war but in the harsh reality of politics.”

Cleveland Plain Dealer:

“Nagl, steeped in both the theory and practice of modern war, speaks authoritatively... This distinguished soldier-scholar continues to render valuable service with this thoughtful, important book.”

Harper’s Magazine:

“Nagl devoted the next twenty years to teaching the Pentagon table manners. ‘Eating Soup with a Knife’ inspired the title of his dissertation and his intellectual rallying cry. KNIFE FIGHTS is the story of [Nagl’s] career and an intellectual genealogy of contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine... A window into how the Pentagon thinks and, crucially, how it—slowly—changes its mind.”

Foreign Affairs:

“This engaging book exhibits droll humor and a sharp grasp of the limits and possibilities of the U.S. Army as a learning organization.”

Washington Times:

“Writing a book about formulating military doctrine for a general audience is no easy task, but Nagl has mastered the challenge. His memoir, KNIFE FIGHTS, revolves around the writing of the American doctrine for counter-insurgency, and his wry wit and writing skill make it a good read, even for casual readers.”

Library Journal:

“An honest and informative glimpse into both the past and the future of the ongoing war on terror. Military buffs, policy wonks, and anyone wishing to learn more about America’s role in the world should find Nagl’s work an alluring and important read.”

Kirkus Reviews:

“A lively memoir that combines battlefield experiences with military politics...A thoughtful, lucid, not-terribly-optimistic autobiography of a scholarly soldier.”

Publishers Weekly:

“Nagl writes evocatively about his wartime experiences, clearly explaining his theories of waging asymmetric warfare. A critic of the Iraq war (‘a war that did not need to be fought’), Nagl offers perceptive critiques of the serious mistakes made by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the military’s general officer corps... Nagl makes a strong case that the next war the U.S. engages in will require stronger counterinsurgency planning than Pentagon policy makers currently anticipate.”

Booklist:

“An essential addition to military history collections.”

General David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army (Ret.), commander of the surge in Iraq:

“A wonderfully readable and strikingly forthright memoir by a brilliant Army officer turned think tank leader who achieved an exceptional record on the battlefield, in the academic arena, in a high-powered job in the Pentagon, and as one of the so-called ‘insurgents’ who helped transform the way the U.S. military thought about, prepared for, and conducted the wars of the post-9/11 era.”

General Jim Mattis, U.S. Marines (Ret.):

“John Nagl’s illuminating journey as a combat Soldier-Leader-Thinker provides a refreshing perspective of the changing character of today’s security challenges. To those searching for a relevant and historically grounded understanding of today’s erupting realities, his book is uniquely enlightening.”

Admiral James Stavridis (Ret.), Supreme Allied Commander at NATO 2009-2013 and current Dean of The Fletcher School at Tufts University:

“In *Knife Fights*, John Nagl takes the reader from the halls of the Pentagon to the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan, and illuminates the modern battlefields - both in Washington and overseas - in harsh and vivid light. His work on counterinsurgency is deep and profound, and this book is the essential back story both of the intellectual process that underpins it and the personal journey that formed it. A powerful and meaningful memoir that will resonate in today’s Army and tomorrow’s society.”

Peter R. Mansoor, Colonel, U.S. Army (Ret.); author, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War*:

“A magnificent memoir from one of the most brilliant officers of his generation. *Knife Fights* details John Nagl’s journey from the halls of West Point and Oxford to the battlefields of Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom, as well as his struggles and triumphs among Washington’s power elite. Highly recommended for those who seek to understand how the Army overcame its initial dysfunction to wage the messy counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

F. G. Hoffman, National Defense University, Washington DC:

“There are many books from veterans of America’s costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Few will combine the intellectual heft, emotional power, and exemplary moral courage of John Nagl’s *Knife Fights*. It traces the development of the author from his early days as a cadet at West Point to the darkest days of fighting in Al Anbar province in Iraq and beyond. This book will stand on its own special shelf as a personal memoir of a soldier/scholar, a warrior and a great teacher. Highly recommended for all military students, and anyone interested in the journey of an institutional insurgent and patriot who followed his own path.”

Robert D. Kaplan:

“Brimming with poignancy and integrity, John Nagl’s book is an instant classic of America’s decade of war in the Greater Middle East. Its core argument, moreover, is undeniable: that insurgency and counterinsurgency have been part of the history of war since antiquity and thus will be part of its future. May the United States Army and Marine Corps hold close the lessons of this book!”

David E. Johnson, senior researcher at the RAND Corporation; inaugural director of the Chief of Staff of the Army Strategic Studies Group; author of *Fast Tanks and Heavy Bombers: Innovation in the U.S. Army, 1917-1945*, *Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and Gaza, and The 2008 Battle of Sadr City: Reimagining Urban Combat*:

“John Nagl’s *Knife Fights* is a brave book by a soldier - scholar who has always put himself out there for the

right reasons. John's remarkable memoir is a directed telescope into how the U.S. Army changed its doctrinal paradigm for the first time since World War I from 'closing with and destroying the enemy' to 'protecting the population.' Readers will also see that he was a key intellectual force in this shift and how difficult these changes are for the institutions - and for the catalytic advocates like John."

Peter Maass, author of *Love Thy Neighbor*:

"John Nagl has written an exceptional book that shows in words the type of bravery he exhibited on the battlefield. Nagl deftly reveals what worked and didn't work in Washington, Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11. His critique of Donald Rumsfeld is uniquely powerful because he writes from the vantage point of an Army officer who waged war in the Sunni Triangle and afterwards served in the defense secretary's office. *Knife Fights* is essential reading - the rare memoir of war that integrates ideas, combat and politics. It is an invaluable addition to the literature of wars that we are still trying to comprehend."

About the Author

John A. Nagl is a retired lieutenant colonel of the U.S. Army. A graduate of West Point and a Rhodes Scholar, he received his PhD from St. Antony's College, Oxford. He is the former president of the Center for a New American Security and the ninth headmaster of the Haverford School in Pennsylvania.

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This is a book about modern wars and how they affect the lives of young men and women. It is a tale of wars that needed to be fought and wars that were not necessary but that happened nonetheless, at enormous cost in blood and treasure. It is also an intellectual coming-of-age story, that of both the author and the institution to which he devoted most of his adult life, the American military. It is a book about counterinsurgency and its journey from the far periphery of U.S. military doctrine to its center, for better and, some would argue, for worse. It is also, then, a book about America's role in the world, and specifically about when and how we use military force abroad in the name of national security.

The book largely takes the form of a memoir, which feels somewhat self-indulgent to me—I was very much more shaped by than shaper of the events this book relates. But my hope is that following the arc of my own learning curve will be the easiest way for a reader to understand the broader story of the American military's radical adaptation to a world of threats very different from those involving nuclear weapons and Soviet tanks massed at the Fulda Gap that I studied at West Point a generation ago. Following that arc will also help to explain why, after decades of responsibility for the lives of American soldiers, I have recently shouldered the responsibility to prepare another generation of young men for a life of service far from the battlefield, in the classrooms and on the playing fields of friendly strife as the ninth headmaster of The Haverford School.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Sherry Ellis:

Book is definitely written, printed, or illustrated for everything. You can recognize everything you want by a e-book. Book has a different type. As we know that book is important issue to bring us around the world. Close to that you can your reading proficiency was fluently. A publication *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice* will make you to always be smarter. You can feel a lot more confidence if you can know about every little thing. But some of you think that will open or reading the book make you bored. It is far from make you fun. Why they are often thought like that? Have you trying to find best book or suitable book with you?

Ira Atwood:

Spent a free time to be fun activity to accomplish! A lot of people spent their leisure time with their family, or their own friends. Usually they undertaking activity like watching television, likely to beach, or picnic inside the park. They actually doing same every week. Do you feel it? Do you want to something different to fill your own free time/ holiday? May be reading a book might be option to fill your totally free time/ holiday. The first thing you ask may be what kinds of reserve that you should read. If you want to try look for book, may be the reserve untitled *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice* can be very good book to read. May be it is usually best activity to you.

Terrance Bartholomew:

Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice can be one of your beginner books that are good idea. All of us recommend that straight away because this guide has good vocabulary which could increase your knowledge in vocabulary, easy to understand, bit entertaining but delivering the information. The article writer giving his/her effort to set every word into pleasure arrangement in writing *Knife Fights: A Memoir of Modern War in Theory and Practice* although doesn't forget the main place, giving the reader the hottest along with based confirm resource information that maybe you can be one of it. This great information can easily drawn you into brand new stage of crucial pondering.

Herbert Knight:

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