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Andrea J. Dew, Marc A. Genest, and S.C.M. Paine, eds. *From Quills to Tweets: How America Communicates about War and Revolution*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2019. ISBN: 9781626167117 (hardcover, \$110.95); 9781626167124 (paperback, \$36.95).

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REVIEW BY TODD GREENTREE, OXFORD UNIVERSITY CHANGING CHARACTER OF WAR CENTRE

This important new book, edited by three senior members of the Strategy and Policy Department at the U.S. Naval War College, contributes significant knowledge that will be of value to both scholars and practitioners in our information age. Keeping in mind that national security concerns launched and continue to propel the information revolution, *From Quills to Tweets* uses historical case studies of the United States across three centuries to strengthen our understanding of information as an elemental strategic dimension of war. This approach offers a corrective to the prevalent paradigm that emphasizes information technology and operations at the expense of content and purpose.¹ To the extent that cyberwar focuses attention on the future, history deepens our ability to distinguish between what is new about the character of war in the twenty-first century and what is fundamental to its nature. While historical narratives of information and the U.S. at war are themselves worthwhile, the authors are no less diligent in applying lessons from experience and raising serious questions about the enduring elements of strategic success and failure.

The editors have curated an exemplary volume that achieves high standards of coherence, organization, and content. *From Quills to Tweets* begins with a concise introduction that establishes the central themes of messengers, messages, and media. Five chronological sections, each headed with a scene-setter written by Genest, include 15 chapters from contributing authors that span America's wars from the Revolution to the counterterrorist campaigns against al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The three editors conclude with a substantive chapter that synthesizes the historical perspective on information and war, with clear explanations that connect the past to today.

The introduction begins by placing information at the center of a classical definition of war as "a lethal form of political messaging that relies on violence to defend one's interests or compel others to ... accept one's aims." (1) Each section of the book tracks how the evolution of communications technology, from the printing press to social media, shapes the efforts of protagonists to manage and convey information. The greatest attention is given to political leaders, whose communications, regardless of medium, are, by virtue of their positions, inherently strategic. The chapters are well-conceived and -written, contributing unique interpretations to the central themes.

Part I covers early America in the era of pamphlets and newspapers, from the Revolution, when communications was essential to building popular support for the rebellion, to the War of 1812, when both the British Crown and the fledgling

¹ Conrad C. Crane, Michael E. Lynch, Jessica J. Sheets, Shane P. Reilly, *A Return to Information Warfare*, Historical Services Division, U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center, 2019; Thomas Rid, *Cyber War Will Not Take Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Roger C. Molander, Andrew Riddile, and Peter A. Wilson, *Strategic Information Warfare: A New Face of War* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1996.)

U.S. government intentionally used propaganda to shape public perceptions. Marc Genest's chapter on founding father Sam Adams and the Sons of Liberty tells how American revolutionaries rallied people to the cause 'heard round the world'; their resilient covert networks, ability to exploit press freedoms, and simple but powerful messages are a prototype of information strategies observable right down to insurgent campaigns today.²

Part II takes on the wars of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, from the Civil War to World War I, when mass circulation newspapers, paired with the telegraph, demanded sophisticated communications strategies to influence increasingly literate and informed publics. Martin Manning's chapter on the Civil War explores the revolutionary impact of the telegraph on the information space, multiplying the speed and impact of President Abraham Lincoln's oratorical leadership, while introducing new problems of information management, particularly as journalists insisted on unfettered reporting from the battlefield.³ Michelle Getchell's chapter on the Spanish-American War narrates the efforts of Cuban revolutionaries to build sympathy for liberation before they lost control of the narrative as nationalistic newspapers promoted U.S. entry into war against Spain.⁴

Part III deals with the transforming additions of broadcast radio and newsreels to mass communications in the mid-twentieth century. The subjects of Michael Carew's and Steven Casey's respective essays are how President Franklin Roosevelt helped forge national unity during World War II, whereas in the opening years of the Cold War, Presidents Harry Truman and Dwight Eisenhower had to grapple with domestic frustrations as limited war in Korea dragged on without achieving victory.⁵ Sally Paine's chapter explores American journalist Edgar Snow, who painted a positive portrait of the Chinese Revolution, as an unwitting adjunct to Chinese Communist Party leader Mao Zedong's communications strategy.⁶ His case is an important illustration of the power of bias and disinformation to shape perceptions while hiding undesirable truths.

Part IV arrives at the threshold of contemporary American experience, as Vietnam became the United States' first television war and cable TV turned the first Gulf War into an instant war. In his survey of how presidents explained Vietnam from 1954 to 1975, David Kaiser explains how American leaders misconceived and underestimated the North Vietnamese dedication to national liberation, while the Cold War narrative and the obtuse threat of falling dominoes, which were complicated by false narratives and intentional lying, failed to justify increasing sacrifice in a distant war to the American people.⁷ This messaging quagmire was integral to America's Vietnam tragedy.

Part V brings us to the wars of the twenty-first century and the information challenges that have accompanied the explosions in instant communications, fragmentation of outlets, and the advent of social media. Craig Whiteside and Hororo Ingram's chapter on the Islamic State, along with Andrea Dew's chapter about the misconceived and misnamed Global War on Terror, highlight how armed groups consistently outcommunicate the U.S.; they are not optimistic about efforts to counter

² Marc A. Genest, "The Message 'Heard Round the World' and the First American Political Campaign," *From Quills to Tweets*, 7-23.

³ Martin J. Manning, "The Communications Revolution during the US Civil War," *From Quills to Tweets*, 45-61.

⁴ Michelle D. Getchell, "The Cuban Junta in Exile and the Origins of the Spanish-American War," *From Quills to Tweets*, 62-77.

⁵ Michael G. Carew, "Franklin Roosevelt and World War II," *From Quills to Tweets*, 148-164; Steven Casey, "Selling a Limited War in Korea, 1950-53," *From Quills to Tweets*, 165-184.

⁶ S.C.M. Paine, "Edgar Snow and Shaping US Perceptions of the Chinese Civil War," *From Quills to Tweets*, 131-147.

⁷ David Kaiser, "How American Presidents Explained Vietnam, 1954-75," *From Quills to Tweets*, 187-206.

radicalism, which intentionally exploits violence as a lethal form of political messaging.⁸ Islamic fundamentalists benefit from the strategic asymmetry that accrues to insurgents who can appeal to their audiences with simple and direct messages like ‘jihad is forever.’ In contrast, the notion of ‘forever wars’ has come to convey ambivalence among leaders and the American people about the purposes of costly and protracted interventions outside the narrow and negative aim of combatting terrorists. The troop surge in Afghanistan, which President Barack Obama announced with appropriate solemnity and national symbolism at West Point in December 2009, was a truly unhappy case of conflicted strategic communications. By limiting the surge to 18 months for domestic political reasons, the president foredoomed its strategic impact by signaling to the Afghan Taliban that they only needed to wait out the U.S., which is precisely what they have done.⁹

In the concluding chapter, the editors summarize strategic themes from the record of messengers, messages, and media across three centuries of American wars. The issues they assess include the impacts of evolving technology; the advantages and disadvantages of technology for regimes, contingent on the degree to which they are opened or closed; how messages for foreign and domestic audiences interact with technology; and how leaders manage communications, including through censorship and disinformation. A principle focus throughout the book is the roles of U.S. presidents as the ultimate strategic communicators. In looking to the near-future, the editors raise strong concerns about Tweets as an instrument of information war, given their combination of messaging power with simplification.

It is not a criticism to propose that much more remains to be said. *From Quills to Tweets* stands firmly on its own, especially by demonstrating the centrality of communications throughout the history of the United States at war. It is easy to envision a second volume that would further the book’s historical analysis, lessons, applications, and questions. It could, for example, address the nature of the challenges to strategic communications from the rise of geopolitical competitors, including China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea and how today’s ‘Gray Zone’ wars that aim to subvert and disrupt rather than achieve victory change the information calculus.

To return to the opening paragraph of this review, the issues that *From Quills to Tweets* raises extend to the broader crossroads where information technology and communications have diverged rather than merged. Recent history sheds light on this issue. In 1948, U.S. diplomat George Kennan identified information as an instrument of “political warfare” that was essential for defending democracy and containing the ideological threat of Soviet communism.¹⁰ The United States Information Agency (USIA) was created for this purpose in 1953 to complement nascent CIA covert political action capabilities and military psychological operations. The internet itself grew from the joint public-private initiative in the late-1960s led by the forerunner of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) to develop a communications network robust enough to survive thermonuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1992, the RAND corporation published *In Athena’s Camp*, which became a bellwether “vision of conflict in the information age.”¹¹ The editors emphasized new technologies and information structures, predicting that information-driven swarms and networks would supplant warfighting hierarchies. The creation of U.S. Cyber Command in 2008 was its organizational culmination. Yet, as RAND and many others have recognized, with American democracy again under attack and political warfare

⁸ Haroro J. Ingram and Craig A. Whiteside, “The Challenge of Outcommunicating the Islamic State,” *From Quills to Tweets*, 247-264; Andrea J. Dew, “Communicating the Global War on Terror from Speeches to Tweets,” *From Quills to Tweets*, 265-282.

⁹ Todd Greentree, “Strategic failure in Afghanistan,” *The Journal of Strategic Studies*, 26 November 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2019.1684232>.

¹⁰ Sarah-Jane Corke, “George Kennan and the Inauguration of Political Warfare,” *The Journal of Conflict Studies* 26:1 (Summer 2016): 101-120.

¹¹ John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt, eds., *In Athena’s Camp* (Santa Monica: RAND, 1997), 455.

prevalent throughout the world today, information war and cyberwar are intrinsically linked.¹² In hindsight, the decision to disband USIA and its cadre of public diplomacy professionals in 1999 was a mistake bordering on folly.¹³ This intersection of the institutional and information dimensions of strategy is certainly worth further investigation.

The evolving challenges of information war can also be viewed as part of a greater civilizational transformation. As Brad Allenby of Arizona State University puts it, “Today’s technologies, especially the ‘Five Horsemen’ of nanotechnology, biotechnology, robotics, information technology and applied cognitive science are not only revolutionary in scope, scale, and speed of innovation; they constitute a fundamental shift in the state of the earth system.”¹⁴ *From Quills to Tweets* reminds us that, from a historical perspective, even as technology drives this shift, other fundamentals remain the same. To reach back further, for good reason the Naval War College has long-deployed Thucydides’ history of the Peloponnesian War in the fifth century B.C. as its strategy and policy touchstone. In his famous Funeral Oration, Pericles honored warriors killed in battle to rally his fellow Athenians in the war against Sparta, just as Spartan leader Brasidas raised rebellion against Athens throughout the Aegean by promising to “free the Greeks.”¹⁵ Their narratives speak directly to us today as archetypes of communication about war and revolution.

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¹² Frank Hoffman, “On Not-So-New Warfare: Political Warfare vs. Hybrid Threats,” *War on the Rocks*, 28 July 2014, <https://warontherocks.com/2014/07/on-not-so-new-warfare-political-warfare-vs-hybrid-threats/>; Linda Robinson, et al., *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2018); Gabriel Cederberg, et al., *National Counter-Information Operations Strategy—Defending Digital Democracy*, Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard Kennedy School, February 2019. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/national-counter-information-operations-strategy>.

¹³ Peter Wilcox, “The United States National Security Council Needs an Information Warfare Directorate,” *Real Clear Defense*, 4 December 2019, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2019/12/04/the_united_states_national_security_council_needs_an_information_warfare_directorate_114892.html; Leigh Armistead, “Fall from Glory: The Demise of the United States Information Agency during the Clinton Administration,” *Journal of Information Warfare* 1:3 (Winter 2002), 107-119.

¹⁴ Braden Allenby, “The Dynamics of Emerging Technology Systems,” Gary E. Marchant, Kenneth W. Abbott, and Braden Allenby, eds., *Innovative Governance Models for Emerging Technologies* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing Ltd.), 19-43.

¹⁵ Robert B. Strassler, ed., *The Landmark Thucydides* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 2.35-47: 111-118; 4.85-87: 269-271; Karl Walling, “Thucydides on Policy, Strategy, and War Termination,” *Naval War College Review* 66:4 (Autumn 2013): 47-85.