# Episode 1_ What are Small Wars?

May 21, 2020 • 32:14

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

irregular warfare, small wars, counterinsurgency, insurgents, Afghanistan, Iraq

**SPEAKERS**

Jake Shapiro, Pat Howell, Nick Lopez, Kyle Atwell

**Jake Shapiro** 00:05
You know, if we think about the last era of great power competition that the world saw was the cold war between the US and USSR. How was that war actually fought the vast majority of military engagements in that conflict? Where small wars?

**Pat Howell** 00:21
This Bridging the Gap effort can help with a base, a can hopefully the policymakers off the easy topics, which is tactical stuff, and get them to the harder topics, which are the strategic level questions which are much harder answer, but it's easy not to get to them when you're debating between 28,000 or 30,000, or 30,000 and 200.

**Jake Shapiro** 00:40
The category mistake in some sense our Strategic Community is making is they're saying we more or less try that algorithm in Afghanistan and Iraq. We did not get strategic outcomes that we're happy with in either country. Therefore, that algorithm was wrong. And that's incorrect.

**Kyle Atwell** 00:59
Welcome to the irregular warfare podcast. In this inaugural episode, we examined some fundamental and big picture questions about irregular warfare that set the scene for the rest of the podcast series.

**Nick Lopez** 01:11
to start, what are small wars and why do they matter? And do they matter at all in the era of great power competition, where US national security strategy has shifted over the past couple of years from the global war on terror to near peer competitors? Also, what lessons have we learned, or have we not learned in the past decades focused on fighting small wars to include in Iraq and Afghanistan?

**Kyle Atwell** 01:33
Our guests for this conversation are Jake Shapiro and Pat Howell. Jake is a professor of political science at Princeton University and co-author of the book small wars, big data. The conversation

focuses heavily on his book, which examines the nature of small wars, and how they can better be strategized in one.

**Nick Lopez**  01:51
Colonel Pat Howell was the director of the modern war Institute at West Point. Among many interesting experiences, he conducted the analysis to determine how many troops should be sent to Afghanistan in 2009, for the counterinsurgency surge,

**President Barack Obama clip**  02:03
this review is now complete. And as Commander in Chief, I have determined that it is in our vital national interest to send an additional 30,000 US troops to Afghanistan. These are the resources that we need to seize the initiative, while building the Afghan capacity that can allow for a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan.

**Kyle Atwell and Nick Lopez**  02:27
I'm Kyle Atwell. And I'm Nick Lopez.

**Kyle Atwell**  02:33
And this is the irregular warfare podcast, a joint production of the Princeton empirical studies of conflict project, and the modern war Institute at West Point, dedicated to bridging the gap between scholars and practitioners to support the community of irregular warfare professionals. Here's our conversation with Jake and Pat. And Dr. Shapiro and Colonel Howell, thank you for joining us today. I'm gonna jump straight into the conversation. Jake, you co-authored the book, small wars, big data with Le Berman and Geofilter. In the book, you describe what small wars are and examine lessons learned from decades of fighting them. What motivated you three to write this book?

**Jake Shapiro**  03:15
Yeah, Kyle, thank you. And I'd love to start there. I think, for me, unfortunately, this is a podcast. So, I can't show you the picture that instantiates and kind of encapsulates what the book is about. But let me try and tell you paint the picture for you. So when Robert Capa, the famed war correspondent of World War Two, follows the first wave ashore at Omaha Beach. 11 of the photos he took that day survive, and as kappa waves ashore. at Omaha Beach, he's got one picture of the men wading through the water. And the soldiers are elements of the 16th Infantry Regiment of the First Infantry Division. They are leading the charge on to Omaha Beach on D Day. Fast forward almost a little bit more than 70 years. And soldiers from the 16th Infantry Regiment, First Infantry Division are pulling security on top of a neighborhood council meeting hall in Baghdad in March 2007. As the first stage of what is now known as the surge begins in Baghdad, the thing that some people say turned around the war in Iraq. And as my colleagues and I were sitting in kind of watching this happen in 2007 2008, and my co-author Joe was deploying to Bilad and Ellie and I were spending time in Afghanistan trying to get research projects running and help with the the war there a few years later. We were very frustrated by the fact that people were talking about the fight that those soldiers in 2007 were fighting in terms that had not really changed significantly since Soldiers from the same unit waited to short Omaha Beach 70 years before. So, as we looked at that, we thought, gosh, we need to really understand the kind of conflict that we're in today. And that conflict to us was defined, or those conflicts were defined by a couple of

characteristics. The first was that one side had a predominance of combat power. So, if they knew the geo temporal coordinates of elements of the other side, they could reach out and touch them in various ways, at most any point of day or night. And then the second was that they were not conflicts which could be won in the sense of seizing and holding the territory through military force alone, at least not in in situations where they're being fought by Western democracies, or by countries supported by Western democracies. And so those two things came together. And they created a very different kind of conflict than what had been seen in the past and what was driving the policy discussions at the time we started working on this research project.

**Nick Lopez**  06:05
Jake, in the first chapter of your book, you provided some stats on how common small wars have been historically, it'd be great to understand your perspective on why small wars matter, either historically or for the future of warfare, especially when as a threat stream, they need to be balanced against other national security priorities.

**Jake Shapiro**  06:24
There are a couple of ways to think about this. One is to think about how often historically has the United States, and it's its NATO allies engaged in small wars. And if you look at the data from 1975, through 2005, when a project out of Kansas State, the international military intervention dataset was created, the US or NATO, or both engaged in a new militarized intervention overseas, in almost every year, between 1975 and 2005. Many of these were small, and some did not end up involving combat, but many involve combat and ended up being quite substantial. Whether that's the deployment to Bosnia Herzegovina, and a peacekeeping mission, the deployment to Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines. The list goes on. So, there's an extensive number of such conflicts that have gone on, and there's no reason to think the arrival rate will change in the future. And then if you think about the consequence of these things, between the end of World War Two and 2010, more than 90% of the people who died in battle around the world, died in battle in asymmetric conflicts, and of those people, that's like a massive undercount of the overall consequences of those conflicts. Because in every one of those where you observe 10,000 or 25,000, or 100,000, battle deaths in any given year, there's an uncounted number of civilians who lost their lives and their livelihoods as a consequence of those conflicts. And so, you know, when you just like think about what are the things that we need to understand in order to minimize human suffering in the world, small wars loom really large on that list.

**Pat Howell**  08:18
If I could jump in this is Pat here like to actually give a comment on the first question of why the small wars matter. And that's always very excited about the topic of the book won't be released in my some of my personal research and experiences. But secondly, actually relates to the current security environment the United States is in, as everyone knows, US, I was heavily involved with counterinsurgency for 15 plus years, and only recently, in the last few years with the new National Security Strategy, national defense strategy and military strategy, the military has is focusing back to what we're calling the big four, we're going back to returning to great power competition, with the four main the big four countries being Russia, China, North Korea, Iran. And so, some people say that this is a major change for the military, we're leaving that coin behind, as we're gonna go back to old school fighting against the peers in your peer enemies, which is what we're used to. But we'll remind folks that

in the national defense strategy, it's still identifies counterterrorism as a threat that we're still facing, which is basically handed off to SOCOM, as well as countering WMD. But just because we recognize that we're going back to a great power competition, doesn't mean small worlds don't matter because while we might have peers and near peers, both of our peer near peer adversaries have said, we don't want to engage with you, one on one that they've they saw Gulf War One and Gulf War Two, just because they're a near peer adversaries, they don't want to go toe to toe with us. They have told us they're gonna go about competing with us with other means, which opens the door for irregular warfare where they might promote an insurgency among our allies, in which case, we're now back into the small world topic, or in some cases, the future especially for those those listeners who are special forces officers, we might try to instigate problems in one of their allies country. And that's, again, an aspect of irregular warfare. So it's a long way of saying that even with the shift back to Great Power competition, the importance of understanding these types of asymmetric conflicts has not going away, maybe it's going to be a little bit different because now we're having great power sponsors behind these combats. They're not understanding this asymmetric conflict is just as important now as it was a few years ago.

**Kyle Atwell**  10:29
Yeah, that is a great comment and touches on an important question, which is what role should irregular warfare play in the context of great power competition? It seems like in both academia and in government, the focus has shifted largely to how to fight a conventional war with China or other near peer rivals. But the shift in focus is not meant that irregular warfare threats have decreased. Jake, how do you reconcile small wars and great power competition?

**Jake Shapiro**  10:56
You know, if we think about the last era of great power competition that the world saw was the cold war between the US and USSR. How was that war actually fought the vast majority of military engagements in that conflict, were small wars. They were the insurgencies and counter insurgencies in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Angola, Mozambique, DRC, Somalia, Ethiopia, Vietnam, just to name a few. And so the idea that we're going back to Great Power competition is absolutely consistent with the idea that there's going to be a continued importance of understanding how to engage in and as successfully as possible, prosecute small wars.

**Kyle Atwell**  11:41
Thanks Jake. So, you have explained what small wars are, and why they remain important, including in the context of great power competition. I'd like to pivot the conversation now to what lessons have we learned about how to fight irregular wars, the US has had a lot of experience now fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, and several other places that you mentioned. And scholars have studied these conflicts, what have we learned about the world of irregular warfare?

**Jake Shapiro**  12:07
When it comes to what we do know about the world, you know, one of the striking things about working on this topic for more than a decade now, and spending lots of time talking with people who are out there in the field, doing the hard work of putting together the programs is that so many of the things that we thought would work ended up not working. And, you know, for the people out there who are like early in their career, and they're thinking about what is the like, what's the big or lesson to take from this

whole literature, it should be I don't believe that we know much at all, in some sense. And you want to think about how to make the best bets that you can. And you know, one of the great examples of this, this program called the local governance and Community Development Program in Afghanistan. You know, this was a program that USAID spent hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars on, they thought very carefully about the program. And what they did is they went in, basically to 2600 or so different projects that were designed to address local grievances and put a bunch of money into communities around the country, in these like small scale, very local projects, which is what the doctrine would say, as of kind of like mid 2007 Onward, was probably a good way to spend money. And systematically in every fighting season, from 2007, when the program was really up and running onward, the places where this program was, was being administered had more violence per capita than the places where it was not administered. Now, you can kind of look at that a couple of different ways. One is like, wow, that program totally didn't work. The other is maybe it was put into the harder places. But what is for sure true, is that if you had at the start of the program, asked anyone in USAID who was in the authorization chain for this program, do you expect that the places where you're doing this will be more violent, this fighting season and every fighting season for the next eight years, than the places where you're not doing it? They would have looked at you like you were crazy. And that happened again and again, with different programs over the last 15 years. And so there's like this, I think, important lesson of caution and the importance of thinking about local context, which should come out of these fights and out of the research base. That I think is a very important lesson for people early in their career for getting out there and starting to think about running programs and starting projects.

**Nick Lopez** 14:36
Colonel Howell you've deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa fighting in irregular wars as an active duty Army officer. Districts comment resonate with your experiences.

**Pat Howell** 14:46
Yeah well, thanks for the question. I'll give a historical story, a personal story of mine. And my story goes back to 2009. I was a planner in Afghanistan I was called the lead planner in the future operations section. For the for the NATO force, there was General McChrystal was the commanding general. And I was the planner that that did the analysis that was called the troop to task analysis. It was the analysis that Jerome McChrystal used when he went to the president to request 40,000 more troops. So, while it was a large planning team, the methodology for how we got to 40,000, that was mine. And while to this day, I will stand by the rigor and hard work that my planning team did. I knew even then, that it was based on a very shaky foundation piece at that time, the doctrine that we had for what we call it, boots on the ground ratios, or how many soldiers it was, we came from doctrine, but doctrine was based upon two small studies done in 2000 2005. What the study did one was from random one, one was from combat Studies Institute it in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, to figure out how many how many soldiers do we need to win and to do well in a counterinsurgency, they, they both looked at a small number of successful counter insurgencies. So they and then they said, Well, here's the average number of troops per 1000 people, the population, so for every civilian, you'll might need 20, counter insurgent forces. And they did that by looking at five to eight successful cases. Well, if you study the full population of, of counterinsurgency, I can find, I can find 20 cases that had ratios of 40 to 1000. And they lost. So it was a research design problem by only picking successful they just ignored part of the data that was out there. So, doctrine was built upon that. And that's the only thing we had. And I would we would get very

strange questions like, well, what if you had 28 and a half 1000 instead of 30,000? What's the difference? And intuitively, I knew I couldn't answer that question. Because I just don't have enough data. But I had no way to show it. But the great news is the academia, I think they started getting counterinsurgency into large and studies. And so, when I was at Duke, I pursued or did more research encountered large and counterinsurgency. And I actually, when I finished all my research are actually shot a note of General McChrystal with a No Hey, boss, this is this is the analysis I wish I could have given you 10 years ago, but the data didn't exist, and the research didn't exist. So, I think there's a great project. Because when we do when we bring in these intellectual tools from academia, it can help us understand better, what is the realm of possible not possible. And if I had this data back in 2009, the debates might not have been on the 28,000, or 29,000. But it might have been on should we do this, it might change the questions to the more importance or treated questions, instead of having the National Security Council wondering where we're going to put the next 10 soldiers.

**Kyle Atwell**  17:44
Yeah, definitely. And so, it is not all bad news. Jake, in your book, you make the case for what you call information centric warfare. And you lay out a fairly specific formula to fight a counterinsurgency, can you switch over to the upside of what you and your co-authors argue, we have learned can work in small wars?

**Jake Shapiro**  18:03
Absolutely. So when we talk about information centric warfare, what we mean is that the critical factor in success or failure in a given location, is not the number of forces present, it is the amount of information that the stronger side has about what the weaker side is doing, where they are, who they are, when they're going to be out operating, and all those little details. And the intuition is that everything an insurgent has to do, every time they move around every time, they go to set an ambush, or plant an IED or intimidate an aid worker. All of those things are observed by people who aren't combatants. And in the modern world, those people have 1000 ways to get information about what the insurgents are doing to the stronger side, whether that's the government or the government's allies, or people who are listening to the podcast out deployed, supporting governments in different places in the world. And so, if that information flows, then the government and its allies can take action against the insurgents. And so, what the insurgents do in that situation is they commit just as much violence and have just as much presence as they can manage, before people start sharing information with the government. And so, to bring violence down in an area, what the government's job is, is fundamentally to get the people to be willing to share information. And, you know, you see evidence that this is a useful way of thinking about it in quantitative data from dozens of places. And you also see it in the doctrine of insurgent groups themselves, who often put a lot of weight on being careful about how violence is used in avoiding civilian casualties. So there's like almost an algorithm to gaining control of any given village or valley and it basically runs through bring some forces in who can provide security, do some small scale nice things for the population. take the information that is received as a result of that, go out and run operations against the insurgents deliver more nice things for the population, and repeat through that cycle until the area is stable. So that's kind of like the good news, there's like, there's very good evidence that there is an algorithm to win the village or the valley.

**Kyle Atwell**  20:20

And it seems like implied is that the number like the number of boots on the ground does matter. But that's not the only thing that matters, because you can't win these villages, if you don't have anybody there to actually go out and kind of posture outside the villages is that accurate?

**Jake Shapiro**  20:32
that's exactly right, Kyle, and, but it's not, it's not that you need a, you know, a huge number of forces so that there is, you know, security at every, at every road in and out of a given area 24/7 365 That may be necessary to gain control of areas in certain certain places, but, but in the steady state, that's not what's necessary. What you need is that the people in the area when someone from the outside shows up, or when someone's nephew decides to do something stupid and attack a police station, they pick up the phone and call the police and say, hey, you know, Johnny's nephew is about to do something stupid, maybe you guys want to arrest him. There's what what is unfortunate, though, is, I think there's been a little bit of a misreading of what that set of tactical level findings means for the strategic level. Because when you're thinking about political contests like the one in Afghanistan, what matters is not is a neighborhood of Kandahar secure, or is a district in Oruzgan, pro or anti-Taliban. What matters is do the political leadership of the Taliban and the political leadership of the Government of Afghanistan, do they see a solution which will meet both their critical needs that is better than continuing to fight. And winning those villages in those valleys can contribute to moving towards those political solutions. But it's, it's not the same thing. And it doesn't accumulate to those political outcomes in the intuitive way. Because there are never going to be enough forces or enough government capacity in a country like Afghanistan, to go through the process I just described in every village in every valley at the same time. And I think that the category mistake in some sense our Strategic Community is making is they're saying, we more or less try that algorithm in Afghanistan and Iraq, we did not get strategic outcomes that we're happy with in either country. Therefore, that algorithm was wrong. And that's incorrect. The algorithm was right for controlling the villages in the valleys. But controlling the villages in the valleys was not sufficient to get the strategic outcome of the wars. And that I think, in many ways, is like the next frontier for research is figuring out under what conditions can you translate those local victories into the big political settlement that makes fighting the war worth it in the first place?

**Kyle Atwell**  23:07
Actually, throw in real quick that Jake, may be my dissertation advisor, and I think he's throwing me some hints right now on what I should

**Nick Lopez**  23:15
Want to make it easy for you. I could see the title R&D Is the aggregation challenge. Is that right, Jake?

**Jake Shapiro**  23:23
I was thinking the aggregation dilemma, but challenge works.

**Nick Lopez**  23:26
There you go. Nice, nice. But

**Pat Howell**  23:31

I'll jump in real quick. One thing I really liked from Jake, that I brought from your book is, and I liked it, I'm stealing the verbiage that you used. And there's been a number of military writers writing within military circles that have critiqued the DoD is counterinsurgency strategy, as it's it's a strategy of tactics we are focusing on how do we take the village? How do we win the village? And that's great. Yeah. And I like the way you're putting it, the way you put it in your book that's absolutely necessary to buy the time space to get some degree of peace. But then there's a very separate problem, which is the strategic level problem. And I think you even use the principle eight, you brought in the concept of principal agent on its strategic problems, a different problem, you just can't simply do the aggregation symbol and say, look, we we brought peace to 1000 communities, therefore we have strategic success. No, it just means we have peace. But the strategic problems is a very, it's a very different problem that will require a different set of intellectual tools to think through. So, you put into words what I've been thinking, but I never knew how to put it. And when I read it, read it in your book. I'm like, yes. That's the way to describe it.

**Jake Shapiro** 24:31
That's awesome to hear. I mean, I think when I think of, you know, Iraq in 2014, to me, that's the shining example of this in the sense that the tactical victories in you know, starting from mid-2006 through 2009 brought the level of violence down to the point where there was political space and opportunity for settlement of the long running sectarian divides in the country. And then we didn't manage the strategic process of how between the Iraqi people and Iraqi politicians get to whatever that bargain was. And so, then the war reignited in 2013, and then really exploded in 2014, again in Iraq. And that's being taken as like a marker of the idea that things which were done from 2006 to 2009, weren't actually the things you needed to do to to get strategic victory. And it's, I think that's yes, it's mistaken that they were a step along the road. But then there was this other process that needed to come in. And it was that other process which failed in that setting. And it's that other process, which has never succeeded in Afghanistan.

**Kyle Atwell** 25:38
I'm going to shift us toward our last question, you know, the, the final question is, what are the policy implications of your findings? The one kind of comment I'll throw in there is that if, if we agree that the tactics used for the surges is correct, and effective, and then if you if you believe that you would still get the same number, one thing I always ask myself is, even if the tactics are militarily correct, are they domestically politically sustainable? And if you have a strategy that isn't rooted in what we can actually do based on the American electorate, or the electorate of our allies? Maybe it's not an effective strategy, again, at the strategic level? I'd be interested in your thoughts on that. And then just broader implications for information centric warfare and your experiences on on what policymakers should be thinking about?

**Jake Shapiro** 26:20
It, Kyle, it's a great question. And I'll take a stab at one big implication, which is that policymakers in the US government at senior levels, ought to spend a lot less time thinking about how to fight the fight, and a lot more time thinking about what comes next. And so, the debate that Colonel house analysis played into, in terms of the numbers of soldiers, was a huge preoccupation of the Obama administration during their Afghan policy review. And really, if you think about what the research suggests, in terms of there

being an approach to when the village or the valley, complete damn waste of their time, they should have been thinking about what is the political strategy, which we can enact with Pakistan, and India, that will make it possible that as we put pressure on the Taliban, the Taliban leadership can come to the table and make a bargain that's accessible to everyone. And instead, they spent huge amounts of cycles at the NSC level, and at the Joint Chiefs level, worrying about 38,000 or 40,000. Soldiers, which is like just nonsense. And I think it is reflective of a broader lack of realism in how the US government approaches planning for these kinds of missions. You know, my other favorite example of this was the debate over the civilian search. So, the civilian surge was this policy that was put in place starting in 2009, that as the US military increased its presence in Afghanistan, the civilian elements of national power, state, USAID, ag and others, were also going to plus up there and strength. And it basically failed, they didn't meet their goals in terms of the numbers of folks they were going to send, and they didn't meet them for entirely predictable reasons having to do with manpower, rules, rules regarding salaries, and what you could bring people back into the government to work on if they left the government, and the availability of people with the relevant regional or language skills and the availability of people with the required qualifications to be contracting officers and whatnot. And all of that was, like knowable, but they came up with this plan, which was premised on the idea that you could rapidly send an additional 1000 civilians to work in Afghanistan. And there's like an element of kind of like fantastical thinking, which sometimes happens in our policymaking process that sat behind I think that decision and all that also said, I think behind the choice that was made to focus on N strength, as the thing that senior leaders should spend time on, as opposed to saying, got it, we'll figure out some number that will succeed tactically in a bunch of places, how are we going to transmit that into a political settlement that could actually end this thing? And I don't know how we change that pattern. But to me, that's the big policy implication of this is like, senior leaders should be focused on the politics and not the details of execution.

**Pat Howell**  29:28
Yeah, I'm going to just completely agree, maybe I'll say it slightly differently. I think to use the quote I said before, if I had the data in 2009, I've had all the research that I had in 2016. My recommendation on the question I was given, which is how many troops should we have? I would have the same recommendation. But with all this analysis, there's a bridge the gap from academia into sort of the planning or practitioner realm. I think all the one or two months we spent debating back and forth the National Security Council, we could have boiled that down to one or two days. He's because the numbers of the numbers, the numbers, so let's stop worrying about the tactical questions, which is what they're fixated on. But it would have been as focused on the real strategic questions. One is, should we be in Afghanistan? That's not my question. The answer is the army guy might know. But that's a question that could have been asked, or the other ones are. Okay, we see how you're going to take the village or when the village but how are we going to get strategic success of the point that we brought up earlier? So I think that this, bridging the gap effort can help with a base, a can hopefully the policymakers off the easy topics, which is tactical stuff, and get them to the harder topics, which are the strategic level questions, which are much harder answer, but it's a, it's easy not to get to them when you're debating between 28,000 or 30,000, or 30,200.

**Kyle Atwell**  30:45

I'm going to stop the conversation here. But I would like to thank both of you for joining us today. This has been a great conversation on irregular warfare, and a great inaugural episode for the irregular warfare podcast.

**Jake Shapiro**  30:56
Thank you, Kyle, super fun to take part and appreciate the opportunity to discuss this with all of you.

**Pat Howell**  31:01
Thank you, gentlemen. It's great.

**Kyle Atwell**  31:08
Hey, thanks again for listening to the inaugural episode of the irregular warfare podcast.

**Nick Lopez**  31:13
We will be releasing a new episode at least every two weeks. The next episode includes a discussion on whether drone strikes are effective and counterterrorism campaigns with esfandiar mirror of Stanford University. And then on deck we have a talk with Matt Kantian of MIT and Steve Biddle of Columbia University on whether building a partner nation's military capacity actually works.

**Kyle Atwell**  31:35
Be sure to subscribe to the irregular warfare podcast so you don't miss an episode. You can also connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn. Feel free to provide feedback on this episode or ideas for future topics.

**Nick Lopez**  31:48
And one last note, what you hear in this episode are the views of the participants and do not represent the views of West Point, the Army, or any other agency of the US Government.

**Kyle Atwell**  31:59
This wraps up episode one of the Irregular Warfare Podcast. We will see you next time.