



# WHEN A GENERAL WRITES FOR THE GENERALIST (ON WRITING)

By Rupert Smith, Ilana Bet-El and Michael Neiberg January 6, 2021  
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**Michael Neiberg:** Hello and welcome to A Better Peace, the podcast of the U.S. Army War College. I'm **Michael Neiberg** Chair of War Studies here and your host. Today it is an honor and pleasure to welcome **General Sir Rupert Smith** and his wife **Ilana Bet-El**, co-authors of *The Utility of Force* now available in a second edition. The book argues that we have left the paradigm of industrial war behind and entered a new paradigm of war amongst the people. The book offers a powerful hypothesis, and it is a book that I frequently discussed with students here. Welcome to both of you.

**Ilana Bet-El:** Hi.

**Rupert Smith:** Hello.

**MN:** I should note that Rupert and Ilana are talking to us here from Brussels, so forgive a slight delay in the audio. I'd like to begin by asking the two of you how this book came about? Ilana, you are a strategist, a writer and historian. Rupert, you wrote this after serving as Deputy SACEUR and after a tour in Yugoslavia. So, who first had the idea to write this book, the historian, or the practitioner?

**RS:** The practitioner. When I was still in the service, I would be frequently asked if I was going to write a book and I understood that what people wanted me to write was what I would call a kiss and tell book which was full of stories that had happened and naming names and so on. And I didn't want to write that. However, for a number of years since, certainly since the middle 90s, a series of thoughts that had started, at least 15 years before that, began to crystallize, and I did think that I had something to write about. And if you read the preface of the of the book, I say what it was, which was essentially; Every time I went on operations, I went in a different organization than I trained in, for purposes I had not trained for and using the weapons and equipment for different reasons than they were purchased for. And this was happening so often that I began to try and workout what we were doing wrong and why was it happening as I've

described. And there were two words or groups of words that I used. One was we don't understand the utility of force, and the second is that we were conducting war amongst the people. And that's where those two phrases begin. So, when I left the service, I wrote a little proposal, on the encouragement of Ilana, but this didn't pass muster with any agent or publisher. And now I will hand over to Ilana who got it to be published.

**MN:** Well, Ilana if you don't mind, I'd like to share an anecdote. When I first wrote invited Rupert to be a part of this podcast series, he said he would have felt like a fraud because it was in fact you who had done most of the writing. So, I really want to talk to you about that, and I have to say the first question that I wrote down on my notebook as I was thinking about this is why your name is not also on the cover, so I'm curious to hear your version of this.

**IB:** Yes, that's a very good question, isn't it? I think it is because the publisher felt a book on the use of force is sold better if a general's name is on it. What also happened in this particular case was that Rupert wrote this proposal, which I actually had absolutely nothing to do with and wasn't interested in at all. There's a lot of publishers said they were interested in a book from him they just can't understand the proposal. And he felt he said everything he had to say, so there it sat. And for variety of reasons, largely, I suddenly had time about two years after he wrote his first proposal, I had a look at it and felt that there was an excellent book here. He, Rupert, just doesn't understand about books. So, what then happened, and here I should probably fill in slightly, as you said, I'm a historian and writer, but also, I worked for several years in the UN. And I have a background also in the media, so that is important because both in terms of communicating I'm a huge believer that anything that you write, and it doesn't matter in what area, has to be understood. It doesn't matter if it's in academia, it doesn't matter if it's in the military or in a newspaper or a blog, if you write things that other people don't understand, then what's the point of it? And so, communication, I think, is something if I were to say anything at all that would be of use to people in this podcast, it is always think that what you write, it's got to be understood, and if it can't be understood, there's no point to it.

**MN:** I couldn't agree with that more.

**IB:** I don't know how you feel about academic writing, which has become a lot better, but I remember, you know, I did my BA Tel Aviv University, in the early 80s and then did my PhD in London. And at that time a lot of academic writing was just baffling. You know it was OK to be understood by the five people in the world who were going to understand you kind of thing as opposed to really be well written and open minded. Being an historian of the First World War in my time, the woman who really opened my mind to all of this with Barbara Tuchman, of course who you know, *The Guns of August* is still a wonderful book. Though I suspect all of us can find fault with it, but it was beautifully written, it was beautifully communicated. So, going back to *Utility of Force*, what Rupert had written was a rather dense, five pages of military speak

combined with a lot of complicated analysis. And I understood it all because of my background but felt that what we needed was to put it into a much larger context that would lead a reader into it so that they could understand it. And that is how the book really started, that I understood that you know everything that Rupert's just said comes because there was a background an historical background to the use of force that people had to understand really in order to then understand why it was wrong for now.

**MN:** I have so many questions that come out of that, but I want to come back to that proposal. So, in the end, how much of that proposal ended up influencing the book? Or did the ideas change as you rethought as you both rethought that proposal or was that really the architecture of the book in the end?

**RS:** The latter.

**IB:** No, the proposal used, are you talking about Rupert's original proposal or my proposal?

**MN:** His original idea of the first thing that he put together that nobody was interested in in the book that is now phenomenally successful. So, did the ideas in the proposal change or did you finally just find someone who understood what it was the two of you were trying to do?

**IB:** No, no the ideas have always been there. What changed dramatically was that the first two parts of the book, so in other words, several 100 pages, were added in order to make them at all comprehensible. Because actually, Rupert's ideas are what formed the third part of the book. So, if you understand that the introduction and part three are, I think in my opinion, the more abstract ones in some ways which deal with our current circumstances. In order for them to be salient then part one and part two, the historical parts had to be put in there in order for, and this is really, really really important also, so when I start out thinking about it, then I was asking myself what is the difference between this and, I don't know military history in the sense of talking about battles, and it took me awhile to understand that I'm talking about the history of the use of force, not the history of battles or the history of war. And that's right that that was a very cool thing.

**MN:** Right, so the first couple of sections for those who have not yet read the book is about Industrial War. It's about war as we sort of traditionally understood it, so that sets up the real change that the book is arguing for among war amongst the people and the paradigm shift. So, I have to ask before we get any further, I am a terrible coauthor in the sense that I tend not to write at the same pace, or the same rhythm is somebody that I'm writing with. How did this work for the two of you as a husband, wife, team collaborating on a project? How did the mechanics of writing together work?

**IB:** I told him what to do and he did it.

**MN:** That sounds eminently sensible to me. So, you did literally have one person who was kind of directing the project overall and then another person who was following that person's vision. Would that be a fair way to put it?

**RS:** Yes, it certainly that puts out the vision, because that was what I wanted to say.

**IB:** The vision of the book.

**RS:** We shared that, but the construct of the book the method of getting this point across was enormous. And broadly she told me to go away and write something on this and then I turned it over and we usually had a huge argument about whether that word is necessary and then it finished up as Ilana's piece and we slowly worked our way through the book. From the start to the finish.

**MN:** That part of co-writing I can do. I can compromise on what word and how we want to structure things and whatnot, but I can see where that would be a very, very difficult thing to do in a book that is so detailed and so involved. I've never co-written a book, only articles, so I guess I'm relieved to hear that there was some argument and discussion about this, because there needs to be that kind of back and forth, right?

**IB:** There totally needs to be. I think it's really important and you know, I think it's also important for people listening to this to understand. I learned from this process and maybe this, you would understand Michael, people have different kinds of imagination. So, Rupert could imagine a bombing campaign with great ease and how to escalate it, and where would it be going from A-Zed kind of thing. But he couldn't imagine the book even when he read the final proposal, which was accepted by Penguin, he still couldn't imagine the book. Whereas I knew once I finish the proposal, I knew what the book was. It was a question of then fleshing it out, but if you want in terms of imagination, I knew what the book was and therefore I could say to him here I need your input on this. Or not. And we also had an excellent researcher who, you know, I would commission to go away. He did all the core research on a lot of the wars and battles that are specifically mentioned and yeah, so between you know, Rupert, Wilfred, and then I would bring it all together into coherent hone.

**RS:** Wilfred was the researcher.

**MN:** Right, well I think you've hit it exactly. For me that's always the challenge. If I have an idea of what I want to write or an idea for a book in my head, it really doesn't mean anything until in my head I can see what the book is going to look like, what the chapters are going to look

like, how they're going to relate to one another. Once I've got that, I'm usually off and running, so that is the challenge. So, was that the key step between the proposal in the final book?

**IB:** Yes, absolutely. I mean, I think there's no doubt about that. I mean, of course, you know sort of you come across things that you thought that you knew, and then in the writing they didn't work or actually they revealed something else. But that's the beauty of writing, isn't it? That the writing can reveal something. The act of writing makes you suddenly see something or understand something in a way that you assumed before and then realize that it means something else now. But I think the steps are as you are describing that I suggested before, which is first you've got to understand what you're going to talk about. And only then can you write it. I've never understood people who just sit down, right?

**MN:** Yeah, unless it's just that activity to figure out what you don't know, which can also be quite useful. You know the other thing about this book that so impressed me when I first read it. I think I first saw it in the bookstore that's in St Pancras Station in London. I was getting a book on the way for a train journey somewhere and I saw it and I started flipping through it in the bookstore. And I saw references to Thomas Kuhn structure of scientific revolutions and Foucault and his understandings of power. And it made me realize this was a book that was going to be about much more than just military. This was going to be a book that could speak to an awful lot of audiences. Did you have that in mind already as you were writing? Or was that just coming from your own intellectual background?

**RS:** We're both quite widely read. I think things like Foucault I think I introduced because I've always found his analysis that needs to be in a relationship and extremely important thing to understand in warfare and I think it was Ilana who reminded us both of Kuhn. But you know, there was no, it was a question of he showed the difference, or rather he allowed the difference to be shown.

**IB:** I mean, I think it's also one of the ways of looking at it is that yes, Rupert had read widely within areas that interested him. I of course came with a background, academic background and had read very widely and benefited hugely from a variety of, you know, sort of courses and reading and all the rest of it. And I think that that made a very big difference. One of the things I was determined not to do, however, was to turn it into something too academic with hundreds of footnotes because I thought that would put off the general reader. So, I often if you're asking about audience, which I think is important, I was writing for the educated general reader. I was not writing for necessarily the specialist and the professional.

**MN:** Well, I think you achieve that balance spectacularly because it's a book that can be read by specialists. I assign it here at the Army War College. It's also a book that somebody with no background in the military could pick up and understand, and the explanations of Kuhn and

Foucault and these other theorists are done in a way that...the expression I was once told never write a book in which your reader feels like they're at a cocktail party, and that where they don't know anybody, and you certainly did not write the book in that one. It's an extremely accessible book that that could be, you know, purchased at Hatchards on the way on a train journey. I think I was going to Glasgow or something like that.

**RS:** Well, I hope you finished it.

**MN:** I think on the way back. Were the two of you, were you surprised by what the book became? Because it can be frustrating when you have an idea and you put a proposal together and initially you can't get anybody interested in the proposal and then the book has now become a remarkable, and influential, successful book. Were you surprised by that? What did you expect this book to do?

**RS:** I'm not sure I thought of it in quite those terms. I wanted to say that we needed to change our institutions and the way we understood the use of force or our ability to do so is going to get worse and worse. And as Ilana says, once I've said something, I'm not usually repeating it, I've said it. And so that was my expectation. I think Ilana was more hopeful.

**IB:** I think I had a number of motivations. I had an expectation. It was very clear to me that what he had to say was hugely important. I'd interfaced with a lot of militaries and they were delightful and useful and fantastic and nonrestorative clearly thinking was going somewhere else entirely. So that was one motivation to actually get the words out there. The other one was very much also trying to get a book again [inaudible] back to the communication thing. A third one, which just amused me was that as an ex-academic or part time academic, whatever it is I am, then you know, I remember that most academics would give their eyeteeth to write a textbook. You know everybody on the one hand wants to write the important book that is the definitive one to sit alongside, you know, sort of Mommsen and *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and all the rest of it. But in their hearts, everybody wants to write a textbook that you know everybody's got to buy. Because that's the one that's necessary. So, there was a part of me that wanted to do that. So yeah, I'm satisfied with that.

**MN:** I want to ask you about, hopefully you remember how this came about, but I at the very beginning of the book the first four words of the introduction are quite striking. The first sentence, the first four words "war no longer exists", a very powerful, very provocative way to put that together. Do you remember how you thought about writing that first part of that introduction? It's a very eye catching, very attention-grabbing thing.

**IB:** Yeah, well, there you are. If you have somebody who's been a journo for enough years, they can do that. I remember it exactly. This was when I looked at his proposal. And I said, you know,

nobody can understand a word you're going to be saying in this proposal. No wonder they don't want to publish it. What you have to do is attract someone's attention and tell them that you're not, you know - that you understand the world and you can communicate it. And since in many ways there is an essence to what war no longer exists in the sense of the way people understand, understood, and still do understand what that it's all about tanks, and you know thousands of people rushing in a field or something that no longer exists. So, we were sitting on the Euro star, in fact, and I wrote that sentence and he looked at it and said Nooo, and I said Yesss. And there you go, I'm the writer so it stayed, and it sold the book in three weeks. The proposal sold in three weeks.

**MN:** So, we're saying this is something about St. Pancras Station that is influential in the history of this book. That's what I'm hearing from you, that I need to go back to St. Pancras if I want to come up with another book idea.

**RS:** Yeah, absolutely. It's a bit like Harry Potter.

**MN:** So, this book is now out in a second edition. What made you both think that it was time to update the book or to write something a little different on this?

**RS:** Well, there were two things. Firstly, in talking and lecturing, I was surprised by how few people understood certain ideas. How many people conflate war and battle, which I've always understood as two quite separate but closely related activities. And a lot of questions would come at you because they just didn't understand there was a difference and thought you were using the words are synonyms. And the same applied to confrontation and conflict, which I chose, and Ilana agreed, were words that would, as it were, encapsulate the ideas that led up to a war, and allowed you to talk about fighting without defining it as a war or battle. And so again, I found those sort of ideas had to be explained in more detail, and so I wanted to write a new introduction or preface and say that these things mean these words, or these words mean these things and you should now read the book on account of it. And then we wanted to write something on the big change or the continuing change since we published, which is the growth of we'll call it cyber, the whole of that that area. And so that was written mostly by Ilana and that's also in the second edition.

**MN:** So, Ilana why is your name not on the 2nd edition of the book?

**IB:** They refused to put it on. I'm telling you publishers are shite. Now that they've got a book by general why bother, you know watering it down?

**MN:** That's a real shame you. You should insist on this for the third edition, absolutely.

**IB:** Well, let me tell you about the 2nd edition also just had one thing, which was that we had a lot of ideas but basically neither of us felt like writing a whole new book. And so therefore a chapter appeared to be a sufficient way of addressing and updating some of the ideas. And you know bringing them into the current circumstances. I just think there's too many books out there, sometimes it occurs to me and too many words you know, as they say. Forcing yourself to write short, as in a whole new chapter as opposed to a whole new book, can be a great utility in itself.

**MN:** It sure can. It can also be harder than writing in a long book. So, I'm really sorry to say that we are running out of time here. So, the last question I always ask everybody on this podcast is what are you reading right now? And maybe as you get set to go into lockdown as we all kind of are what are the books that that are on your to read list?

**IB:** Um well we've both of us been reading, Rupert's finished it, I'm still reading Julian Jackson's amazing biography of General De Gaulle.

**MN:** It's fantastic, isn't it?

**IB:** It's amazing. It's amazing both as a writer and historian and as a person, I just, you know, I thank him because I didn't know much about De Gaulle. But also, I think he just does a fantastically good job. It's very long. We've Kindled it because it's so heavy, so reading that in bed is just never going to be a happy time, but I think it's amazing and I would recommend it without thinking twice about it.

**MN:** It's actually the book that's sitting immediately to my left. One of my social media profile pictures is me reading that with my puppy on my lap and she looks as though she's reading it too. It's fantastic.

**IB:** Have you finished it yet, or are you still in the midst?

**MN:** I have, I have. I'm going back through it for footnotes and sourcing for a book that I'm working on, so yeah, but a fantastic book. Well, what else are you reading?

**RS:** I read an awful lot of what in the profession is probably called crap and is, you know, popular novels and so on and so forth. So, I won't list those. The other thing I have on the go is a critique I suppose you'd call it, very lengthy written in the 50s about Kipling. I enjoy Kipling. And it's causing me to course to go back and read lots of Kipling short stories to see whether I agree with this man's point of view or not.

**MN:** Well, I am terribly sorry to report that we are out of time. Ilana and Rupert Smith, I would like to thank both of you so much. Ilana, we have to get your name on the 3rd edition of this



book one way or the other. And I sincerely hope that when this lockdown is over, we'll be able to get together. I was going to say in Brussels, but maybe we should do it in St. Pancras Station just to just to cover those bases.

**IB:** Absolutely. Well, it's been lovely to talk to you. Thanks very much.

**MN:** It's been fantastic thank you for your time and stay safe.

**RS:** Bye bye.

**MN:** Bye bye.