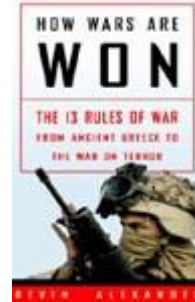


Bevin Alexander, *How Wars Are Won: The Thirteen Rules of War From Ancient Greece to the War on Terror*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002). Pp. 416.

**By Aaron Plamondon**  
**University of Calgary**



The history of warfare is truly vast in scope and complexity. Although there are many survey books on the subject, from hoplite to urban warfare, many fall short of competent scholarship simply because the writer cannot adequately explore each era, nation at arms, the weaponry used, or the success or failure of high command. Bevin Alexander's recent book, *How Wars Are Won: The Thirteen Rules of War From Ancient Greece to the War on Terror*, has successfully avoided this weakness by restricting his topic to common principles of war and providing case studies for each throughout history. The book is not a chronology of warfare, therefore, but an analysis of military axioms using operational examples of how they were formed and why they exist. Each chapter corresponds to one rule and ends with a post September 11th analysis as to the rule's application to the future of warfare.

The author, a journalist and writer of general audience military history, has used the works of Sun Tzu and Carl von Clausewitz as a framework, and has decided upon thirteen rules by which, he asserts, wars are won; for example, striking at enemy weakness, feigning retreat, employing deception, and paralyzing systems as opposed to killing men. Alexander's focus on these practices challenges the relevance and effectiveness of the 'Western way of war,' as articulated by Victor Davis Hanson and John Keegan, which emphasizes intense, direct conflict focused on decisive battles whose outcomes are determined by relative loss rates.

While the book opens with an explanation that the rules of war are consistently valid regardless of time, Alexander correctly states that the application of these rules is anything but uniform. They must be carried out flexibly by the commanding officers and used interchangeably by appropriate means for a given situation. Alexander is quite adept in his handling of the issue of command and has prepared articulate illustrations of classic generals, including Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan, Napoleon Bonaparte, Stonewall Jackson, Erwin Rommel, and Douglas MacArthur. The importance of their command decisions and individual use of the 'rules' – which brought both victory and defeat – is revealed skillfully throughout the text and supports his argument effectively. One problem, however, is that the maps used to illustrate these campaigns often offer no indication of troop movements, so are essentially useless to those who are not already familiar with the battle.

The book is also valuable for its understanding of military technology and technology's effect on the battlefield. Alexander effectively elucidates the problem of applying innovation and experimentation within a conservative institution like the military, which does not encourage questioning of the *status quo*; the officer who attempts to break down the wall of bureaucracy is often crushed by it as it falls.

Although the book has skeletal sourcing, the examples used are, for the most part, relevant to his point. It is indisputable, for example, that Cannae is a classic example of a battle of encirclement. The book loses its effectiveness, however, when he begins using contemporary evidence, as the asymmetrical struggles of today are less salient to his points. The link, for example, between operational-level "cauldron battles" like those fought in Russia in 1941, and the tactics employed by the U.S. in Afghanistan against the Taliban is unconvincing. Although the historical case studies are far more effective at supporting his thirteen rules, it is understandable that he has attempted to make links to the highly relevant and ubiquitous topic of the current war on terror; the book will sell many copies because of it.

Alexander's contention that the world sees war more in its 'truest' form – that of deception and of attacking the morale of the enemy - after September 11th, is also debatable, since the attacks on the World Trade Center was not the first instance of international terrorism. And the 'Western way of warfare' has been challenged constantly – perhaps most notably in Vietnam, which the American people have certainly not forgotten. These things are not as new as Alexander postulates, nor is the idea of 'the officer who can accomplish missions without constant supervision and instruction that Alexander claims will be vital to his 'new warfare.' The Prussians were using this decentralized form of command in the 19th century – it's called *Auftragstaktik*.

His concentration on the 'new war' is somewhat exaggerated and his statement that 'fire and maneuver' through a combination of armed units is now 'out of date' is too resolute, if not simply wrong. American armoured columns, used in combination with airpower and infantry, were deployed just recently against Iraq, just as they were against Poland by the Germans in 1939. Furthermore, his claim that the traditional military units, from Corps to Battalion, will soon breakdown is highly unlikely. The Division has been around since before Napoleon, and we will not likely see it dissolved unless armies diminish to shockingly small troops sizes. If this change ever does occur, it will not be as soon as Alexander has postulated, considering the present state of international conflict and the size of the American military and its budget. It will not only be the 'rules' of war that persist into the future, but also many traditional ways of carrying them out. Soldiers will still be required to defeat the enemy where they live and consolidate ground to gain complete victory. The traditional battlefield has changed, but it will not disappear any time soon.

Alexander's writing is very fluid and it makes the work a quick read. The consistent structure for each chapter also allows for easy digestion of his primary points. Unfortunately there is no conclusion to unify the ideas of the book, but his thesis is clear nonetheless. His simplistic explanations and definitions – such as the difference between strategy and tactics – make this a good introduction to military history and strategy for the general reader. Although the book is open to attack by academic military historians, as it constantly meanders in counter-factual history, it is obviously not meant for them. For students in search of a text that will lead them to other sources, or for original research, they would be wise to look elsewhere in the literature, as insights are present, but rare.