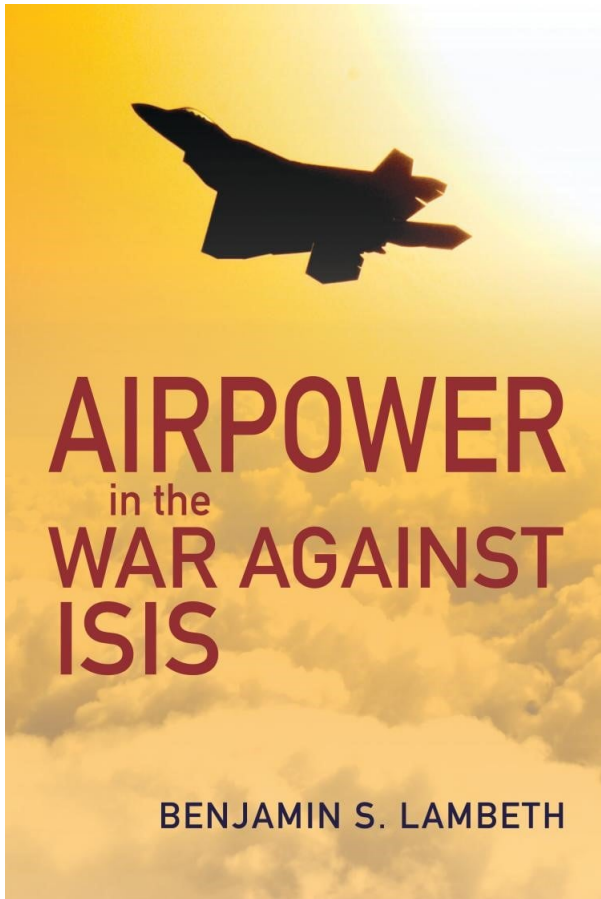


Small War Meditations

by [G. Murphy Donovan](#) (March 2021)



A candid book about small wars, Muslim conflicts in particular, is a rare volume these days. Government sponsored and/or commercial authors are loath to touch anything Islamic, especially fascist religious states like ISIS, in any context tactical, operational, or strategic.

Writers with the grit to challenge or take on CENTCOM, USAF, or the strategic conventional wisdom at the Pentagon should be read if for no other reason than as a salute to literary bollocks. After all, small wars aren't just trending anymore, conflict in the *Ummah* is now an American military albatross.

Mind you, Ben Lambeth (PHD, Harvard) is no Daniel Ellsberg, although both are products of the same think tank wars at RAND Corporation, Santa Monica. Lambeth, with 37 years *in situ*, is probably one of those unfortunate souls who was always smarter than his employer. Such are the vicissitudes of civil or contract service these days.

Before we get to Lambeth's argument, a few words about RAND are in order. There are two RAND Corporations, before and after Daniel Ellsberg (1971). Ellsberg was the egghead who leaked the TOP SECRET *Pentagon Papers*, a report on another pyrrhic war, a study commissioned by Robert McNamara. That research blew up any illusions America had about winning in South East Asia.

Alas, speaking truth to power has a darker side. Unfortunately, for many observers, classification, not content became the issue when Ellsberg leaked the *Papers* to the press. Predictably, Uncle Sam shot the messenger, in Ellsberg's case a righteous target. Daniel was more politicized egoist than scientist. Ellsberg leaked TOP SECRET collaborative contract research without a hint of collegial consent.

Nevertheless, the Ellsberg affair was seismic in Santa Monica. The president of RAND Corp was fired. Mahogany Row feared losing their Project USAF contract. Under a new president, Donald Rice, the research agenda was expanded to cover social issues. Gay studies are an example. Strategic focus was amended to accommodate politically correct memes. RAND realized that while speaking "truth to power" might be the ethical high ground, truth did very little for the bottom line. Rice went on to become a double dipper, a revolving door icon, as Secretary of the Air Force.

Surely, there's more profit in telling folks what they want to hear. Truth is always dangerous. Thus, RAND grew like Topsy in an era where analysis and politics were joined at the merge.

Newspeak, as Orwell observed, simply sells better.

Conflict avoidance, cowardice really, in think tank or journalistic analysis these days has a sure tell. Single author by-lines have vanished, unless you are Maureen Dowd. RAND reports, and media analysis, now have multiple authors. *Group think is now literally the research and media reporting standard.* RAND reporting today probably makes chaps like Bernard Brodie, Herman Kahn, or Andy Marshall turn over in their graves.

Back to Lambeth, now researching and writing for and by himself. His volume, *Airpower in the War Against ISIS*, is old school, a truth-seeking missile. RAND, by happenstance, published a contracted research report on the same campaign, *Operation Inherent Resolve*. The RAND report features *nine* named authors. Makes you wonder how many Santa Monica wizards might be required to screw in a lightbulb. The contrast between RAND corporate product and Lambeth's book tells you everything you need to know about the vacuity of institutional analysis, group think, and the think tank racket at large.

If the subject is air operations, there is no better forensic analyst than Lambeth. Most importantly, he covers the spectrum tactics, operations, and strategy – and the political context behind all three.

Lambeth points out that CENTCOM and team Obama, treated ISIS depredations as just another insurgency, failing to recognize ISIS as a toxic proto-state. Indeed, at the time, President Obama referred to ISIS as the “junior varsity.”

Fighting the last war is nothing new at the Pentagon, but you might have thought that CENTCOM or the USAF brass, with skin in the game, would have had bigger stones – if for no other reasons to husband resources and save lives. Alas, Lambeth touches the same third rail that got General Mike Flynn fired, viewing *Jihad* as a genuine menace, a global

struggle where proto-states, terror groups, and Islamic sponsor states are all part of the same problem, a matrix that needs to be confronted and defeated in detail as quickly as possible. In short, Lambeth doesn't get lost in the weeds of data or the forest of political correctness. He sees the big picture that military politicians at CENTCOM, shades of Vietnam, fail to appreciate to this day.

Contrast, if you will, Lambeth's analysis with *The Air War Against the Islamic State*, RAND's rhetorical fellatio on the same subject, the kind of "research" designed to please USAF or CENTCOM sponsors. The nine authors, yes **nine**, don't just get lost in the weeds, they write and think like social workers. Dressing the dogs of war with a muzzle, a leash, and a diaper just raises the ante; in dollars, duration, and body bags.

Air campaigns break things and kill people. If rules of engagement, collateral damage, and tepid responses are primary concerns, the fight lasts for years not months. The Afghan campaign, as an example, has been under way since 1980 and a Pentagon victory is still AWOL.

Cui bono?

The contrast between Lambeth's book and the RAND report on the same subject, a kind of social piffle in mufti, makes you yearn for [Andrew Marshall](#) (aka "Yoda"), another RAND veteran, the legendary Director of the small Office of Net Assessment at DOD. Back in the day, ONA would commission single subject, single expert analysis on issues of concern to Defense. The idea was to avoid group think and provide unfiltered, independent counsel to Defense secretaries who might not be experts on all things tactical, operational, or strategic.

Alas, while all institutions are born of a good idea, the institution often becomes the enemy of ideas. No think

tank has a fiduciary interest in telling government, at any level, anything it doesn't want to hear. Such is the case with military contractors like RAND, now just another Beltway sutler, another tower of "non-profit" babble. Lambeth's book reminds us that unique analysis by bona fide military experts is still a good idea that still perks.

[Table of Contents](#)

G. Murphy Donovan is a former senior USAF Intelligence Research Fellow at RAND corporation, Santa Monica.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)