

BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *A Call to Action: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force*

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¹ United States Army

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A Call to Action: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force. Edited by John Nagl and Katie Crombe. Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2024. 323 pages.

A Call to Action: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force advances a conversation about preparing for large-scale combat operations (LSCO) by deftly consolidating a wide variety of lessons learned. The book is a collection of eighteen articles produced by twenty-seven scholars under the oversight of John Nagl and Katie Crombe at the U.S. Army War College. It is freely available online and searchable as a PDF. Each chapter stands independently, but together the collection follows a sequence of bold but tangible proposals centered on Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC). Chaplains who are concerned about providing religious support in potential future conflicts would be wise to consider them carefully.

The authors of *A Call to Action* analyze the Russia-Ukraine War as it played out in 2022 and 2023. The first three chapters provide an overview of the situation in Ukraine in terms of Ukrainian history, U.S.-Ukrainian relations, and the state of international nuclear deterrence efforts to counter Russian threats in eastern Europe. Chapters four through sixteen, the bulk and heart of the book, offer detailed looks at various warfighting functions and their implications. The last two chapters consider what the aftermath of this conflict might look like and what working toward a better peace might entail.

Contributors vary in style, expertise, and opinion, but share commitments to long term revitalization of culture and put forward specific recommendations. They largely maintain this balance even in the face of vexing problem sets that include a growing U.S. civil-military cultural divide, or the harrowing possibility of a much higher casualty rate on the battlefield or home front, or how decentralized decision-making will require senior commanders to delegate. They advocate for changes that could send ripple

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effects through the tactical, operational, and strategic layers of military operations: continuous movement and minimal electronic signal at command and control nodes, decentralized leadership structures, an end to the all-volunteer force (replaced by partial conscription and a robust ready reserve), a public-private partnership that affords quicker access to artificial intelligence, a more explicit embrace of deception and open-source intelligence in specialized communities, and principles of multi-domain operations widely communicated across the conventional force.

The book has limitations, of course. Its collaborative format prevents a cumulative or linear argument at points. It can be tricky to distinguish between recommendations based on what is already happening in Ukraine and those based on what could potentially happen if the U.S. and a near-peer went to war.¹

Another limitation of the book is its scope, which is sometimes in tension with the vastness of the problems it seeks to address. It can be tough to see how desired long-term culture changes to mend the civil-military divide can be affected when they go so far beyond military influence, especially in the absence of an actual declaration of war or clearly identified, imminent threat. Revolutionizing training methods will only go so far, and it analyzes an ongoing, unpredictable conflict while other notable wars and other international stakeholders go unmentioned.

Another limit is the book's timing; it reflects research done in 2023 before October 7, 2023. Readers never receive a full explanation of why exactly Russia-Ukraine is *the* war from which to draw broad conclusions as of June 2024, or why the 1973 Yom Kippur War features heavily in the analysis as an opportunity for the U.S. Army to learn and change but might not have an equally compelling parallel in the current Israel-Gaza War. There would be no way to predict, even in early-mid 2024, how that conflict would spill into Lebanon or possibly provoke Iran. So far that conflict is thankfully not a compelling model for LSCO. But it is a war which complicates the book's oft-repeated assertion that the U.S. Army is now decisively in a post-counterinsurgency era.

To the extent that *A Call to Action's* contributors are on the right track, religious support teams training for LSCO will encounter complex obstacles. There may be no clear front line, no secure way to circulate in person to even a fraction of a unit or area, and no obvious way to predict the effects of

¹ I am indebted to Katherine Voyles for this insight in a conversation over a previous draft of this review about the diversity of approaches to calculating casualties. Rather than sticking to the hair-raising data from Ukraine in 2023, Jason Lojka and Jason Du project 3,600 casualties per day in a large-scale war between the U.S. and a near-peer. Later arguments from Sarmiento for expanding the capacity of Role 1 casualty collection points and increasing the protection of medical assets do not seem to hinge on this projection. This comparison does not win the day for either argument, but it complicates attempts at a cumulative case. See Jason R. Lojka and Jason Du, "Russia-Ukraine Lessons on Maneuver," in *A Call to Action*, 184; cf. Dennis M. Sarmiento, "Military Medical Adaptation in the Russia-Ukraine War," in *A Call to Action*, 219-222.

deceptive or devastating military operations on the souls of servicemembers over large distances or sustained periods of time. In the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Ukrainian battalion command and control nodes lack noisy lights and generators and consist of “seven Soldiers who dig in and jump twice daily,”² where “trenches and city sieges exist alongside remotely piloted aircraft” and maneuvers also involve “information operations on social media.”³ Will U.S. battalions replicate this? Matthew Holbrook highlights a premium on small unit tactics, deception, and countermeasures to relatively inexpensive drones that can utilize facial recognition software to target individuals or destroy multimillion dollar pieces of equipment in seconds.⁴ Nagl and Crombe describe a “convergence activity” that integrates all the recommendations of the book into premobilization training that involves scattered formations and chat programs fueled by generative artificial intelligence.⁵

A Call to Action has become one of the most-downloaded resources offered by U.S. Army War College Press. If this is an indication of its enduring relevance and influence, religious support teams at brigade, division, or Corps levels will also be forced to continue wrestling with longstanding questions. Will unit ministry teams tasked with responding to these relentless mass casualty events need restructuring?⁶ If so, will the higher premium need to be placed on disciplined cooperation between ministry teams across a brigade or division or joint task force, or on the capabilities and competency of battalion-level ministry delivered by smaller mobile teams, perhaps pairing inexperienced or newly conscripted chaplains with seasoned non-commissioned officers? Meanwhile, at the Corps level, adequate preparation might involve strengthening ties between chaplains, their endorsers and community partners, civilian denominations or local congregations to address both recruiting and garrison/home front support on a massive scale.

A Call to Action is a sobering but important work for all military professionals, and especially those tasked with religious support. It highlights how future conflicts will likely demand more of chaplains as religious leaders and as staff officers than they may be currently prepared to give. There may well come a time when those at all echelons and ranks will take stock of the physical, emotional and spiritual wounds they encounter and only be able to

2 Katie Crombe and John Nagl, “Introduction: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force,” *A Call to Action: Lessons from Ukraine for the Future Force* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2024), xxiv.

3 Rebecca W. Jensen, “Operational Art in the Russia-Ukraine War of 2022,” in *A Call to Action*, 62.

4 Matthew S. Holbrook, “Protection: Electronic, Air, Civilian and Infrastructure,” in *A Call to Action*, 197-199.

5 Crombe and Nagl, “Introduction,” xxvii.

6 Cf. Douglas Ball, Sean Wead, Jorge Torres, David Clement, Edrena Roberts, John Cushman, Hector Lopez, J. Maddox Woodberry Jr., *Religious Support During Large Scale Combat Operations* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2024).

echo the piercing words of Dr. Oleksandr Sokolov, a vascular surgeon from Dnipro, in October 2022: “We are currently doing our best in a difficult situation, preserving humanity and valuing every human life.”⁷

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⁷ Sarmiento, “Military Medical Adaptation,” 218.