

Couch Warriors

How video games aren't helping the military win the war on terror.

By Avi Klein

In 1973, a reporter for *Rolling Stone* visited the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Lab to check up on computer hackers—"a mobile new-found elite, with its own apparatus, language and character, its own legends and humor." Although much of the nation's investment capital for computer science came from military and government sources, the reporter found the hackers—the term was not yet a pejorative—mainly counter-culture types, a clan of intellectual druggies staying up all night playing and coding primitive computer games. "These are heads, most of them," he wrote. "Half or more of computer science is heads."

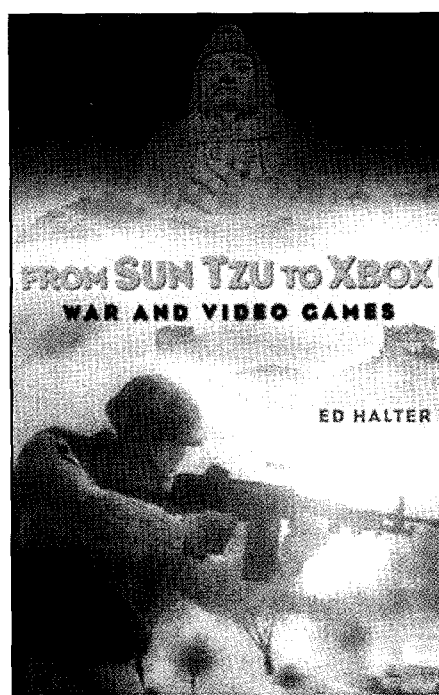
The article gave the impression of a new counterculture that had somehow bridged the gap between dorks and dopeheads, playing video games on the military's dime. It's no wonder that some parents viewed the arcade as their own parents might have a pool hall. But the hackers' efforts were critical in laying a bridge between the number-crunching of the 1940s and 1950s and the video-game culture that took off in the 1980s and lasts to this day. During the day, they might have programmed a tank simulator for the army. But at night, they were tweaking it to enhance playability, and these efforts eventually ran downstream into the consumer market. It is no accident that most video games involve shooting ballistics.

The rise of video game and computer culture neatly tracked the martial and patriotic impulses of the Reagan years.

Before, computer games were associated with the underground. Suddenly, however, it was the age of the nerd warrior, like Matthew Broderick in *WarGames*, out-thinking renegade computer programs and the fogey military planners who didn't understand the dangerous power of technology. Drugs were out, America was in, and for the first time the pasty math-club president could see himself as the next Patton. Trolling through the arcades, Martin Amis thought gamers—"intense, thin-lipped characters, whose fantasy lives are clearly of martial bent"—were seeking more than a vicarious experience. They actually saw themselves on the front lines.

Amis could afford to be critical, but the President of the United States could not. Video games were the first popular technology that kids understood but their parents didn't. This ignorance led many to exaggerate their value. "Watch a 12-year-old take evasive action and score multiple hits while playing *Space Invaders*," Ronald Reagan told a crowd gathered at Epcot Center in 1983, "and you will appreciate the skills of tomorrow's pilot." Reagan cautioned his youthful listeners not to "tell their parents the president of the United States says it's all right for them to go ahead and play video games all the time. Homework, sports and friends still come first." It was morning in America, yes, but no Nintendo before breakfast.

Reagan was not the first leader to connect games and sport to military skill, explains *Village Voice* film and literary critic Ed Halter in *From Sun Tzu To X-Box*, an interesting if unfocused survey of the



From Sun Tzu to Xbox
By Ed Halter
\$16.95, Thunder's Mouth Press

history of playing at combat, an activity that has captivated men and boys since war and play were invented. Nearly all ancient civilizations, Halter writes, "reveal evidence of skill and chance that take the form of abstracted battle—miniature metaphors for war, primitive board games composed of props made from stone or wood, clay or porcelain."

Of them, chess has been the most successful. Although the game's roots are obscure, there is no shortage of legends that emphasize its martial roots. One tale holds the game came to Persia from India as a "challenge of wits" between two jealous rulers, with all accounts to be settled on the simulated battlefield. The Indian king hoped to confound his Persian counterpart, but the Persian ruler, who also had to figure out the rules on his own, was victorious, "and for good measure [sent] a new game of his own court's invention, backgammon, as a gift in return." In another story, the viziers of an orphaned prince, anxious that the inexperienced monarch had not had time to learn about war, trained him with a chess set. "The same caution in attack and coolness in defense which you have to exercise here," they tell him, "you will have to put in practice on the battlefield." He follows their instructions and soundly routs his enemies, forever giving credit to his training on the squared battlefield.

Egyptian and Chinese traditions had similar games. Illustrations from the *Book of the Dead* show Ramses III in a match of *t'au* with Isis, probably "the earliest known game with battle as its theme," though nobody knows how it was played. Go, on the other hand, is still extremely popular in Asia today 4,000 years after its invention in China. Yet none of these games purported to imitate battle; they instead offered pedagogical lessons in wit and the virtues of planning—a stimulation, not a simulation. At least, that's how the army saw it. In first-century China, one games historian writes, Go "was popular not only among the military but also in literary circles, for many courtiers, not satisfied by mere literary distinctions, hungered for the military glory that could be won on the frontier."

The war game as a practical experience had to wait, as did many advances in military education, for the professionalism of the Germany army in the 19th century. *Kriegspiel* was played on a recessed table, sometimes using sand and plaster terrain, other times precise topographical maps, and always relying on authentic military order: The metal soldiers could advance and retreat only as far as real soldiers could move during each player's two-minute turn. The game could go on all night, which no doubt was part of its charm, and there are accounts of a young Prince Wilhelm taking on his cousin and future rival the Czarevich Nicholas, though Halter doesn't say who typically won. (Considering the German military aristocracy's mania for dueling, *Kriegspiel* was probably a healthy diversion all around.) And in choosing blue and red for the opposing teams, a certain Lieutenant von Reisswitz set the standard for centuries to come.

The tabletop versions, popularized for Christmas as Risk and Stratego, would remain the standard through the Second World War. But with its emphasis on land warfare and the seizing of territory, and with its reliance on two-dimensional space, alternating turns, and the almost perfect knowledge of the enemy's strength as represented by metal figurines, the board game has become a tad outmoded. "Modern war," says mathematician John Kemeny, "has become too complex to be entrusted to the intuition of even the most experienced military commander. Only our giant brains [i.e. computers] can calculate all the possibilities."

It was left to the RAND Corporation, working with Air Force contracts, to reinterpret games for the nuclear age, to connect gamesmanship to brinkmanship, board games to motherboards. Team members, who included both RAND staffers and military and diplomatic officials, would work over three days to resolve world crises scenarios. Unlike the traditional war game, this version "also factored in economic and diplomatic concerns, all of which were converted to numerical values for calculation."

Organizers downplayed physical verisimilitude, deemphasized rules, intentionally created incomplete and misleading information for the players, and encouraged the "exploration of novel strategies." It was a partnership for a new age, wrote one army planner in 1956, a "scientist-soldier team whose joint function is to outguess any conceivable enemy in any conceivable future situation."

As a way of predicting crisis outcomes, RAND eventually found the games unwieldy, but they were far from useless. RAND's interest in game theory was also responsible for popularizing ideas like mutually assured destruction and the prisoner's dilemma. As such, nuclear deterrence relied in large part on planners effectively thinking out problems in advance and being able to distinguish between nightmare situations and controllable outbreaks of instability. "Maybe the game's value was the experience of strategy formulation," writes Sharon Ghamari-Tabrizi in *The Worlds of Herman Kahn*, "rather than the outcome of play." It was strategy after all, and not tactics, that won the Cold War.

Halter goes through all this at a fine pace, (although there are so many spelling and punctuation errors that the reader will wonder if the copyediting was simulated as well.) But his real interest is in video games and how the military might incorporate them into training. Infantrymen already train in live-fire exercises and mock laser-gun battles, he explains. Training them using video games takes advantage of the gamer's tireless need to master certain skills before advancing to the next level. "It's about instilling patterns of actions, and making those patterns second nature," Halter argues. It was Reagan's video-game fantasy come true. In the 1980s, recruiters staked out arcades, looking for new soldiers. One pinball wizard, who doubled as arcade attendant, even claimed that a recruiter promised him he could skip boot camp and go right into ballistics training. Now the military wanted to set up arcades of its own.

In the 1980s, commercially available video games were too primitive to approx-

imate the first-person experience of combat. But by the late 1990s, hyper-realistic games were selling millions of copies nationwide. Best of all, the price was right. Tank and flight simulators cost millions of dollars per unit. Commercial video games, however, could be bought for less than \$50. After examining 30 titles—not bad work if you can get it—the aliens in the adventure shoot-em-up *Doom II* were replaced with Warsaw Pact troops and set in a dusty eastern European environment. One commander recommended that *Marine Doom* be played under the most realistic conditions possible: “Leaders can generate stress by placing time limits on decisions, [or] by conducting games immediately following a strenuous PT session or forced march.” What fun. It was not a success, for reasons Halter fails to explain. Still, the effort “signaled a new interest in the use of publicly available games for official military training,” what came to be known in typical purchasing jargon as the “commercial platform training aid.”

Whether these efforts of the “military-entertainment complex” will ever come to anything is unknown, but many start-up companies are trying to jump on board while the military interest in video games lasts. Halter details them exhaustively. In one, soldier-participants wear a vibrating waist-pack that delivers a brief shock when the player is hit. Another is developing a “scent collar” for those that want to smell the napalm in the morning. Newer games emphasize desert and urban scenes, and one company even specializes in providing game-makers with authentic former Iraqi officers to play the bad guys. But one can’t help but see the military’s efforts as akin to the traveling salesman who believes a new business-card scanner from Sky Mall will ramp up his monthly numbers. There just isn’t any evidence that any of it works, and Halter doesn’t even bother trying to prove otherwise.

Of course, wasteful, misguided military spending is not a new story. And video simulation will always have its place in the military, one or two missteps

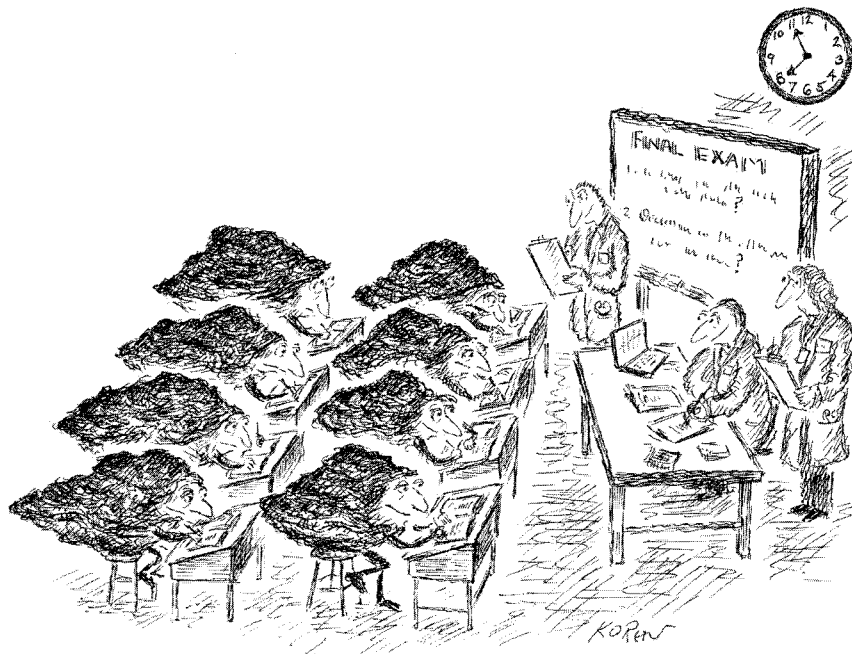
regardless. But if we want smart, technologically savvy, freethinking armies of one, setting the grunts free to play video games hardly seems like a good step forward. Instead, the military should consider embarking on a crash chess training program. It might not help the troops much in the field, and some might resist

it. But as Napoleon observed, “A soldier will fight long and hard for a bit of colored ribbon.” Authorize a chess medal, and the troops will gladly lay it all out on the white and black squares.

Avi Klein is senior writer at the *Homeland Security Daily Wire*.

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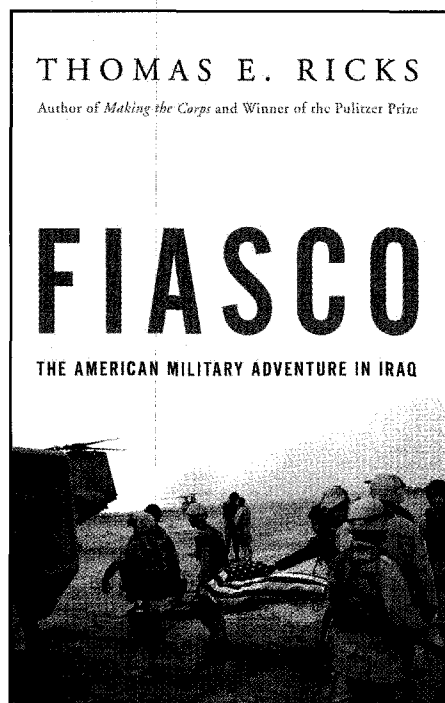
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Fiasco
By Thomas E. Ricks
The Penguin Press, \$27.95

Uniform Disaster

In blowing the Iraq war, Bush and Rumsfeld have had plenty of help—from the generals.

By Joseph Galloway

Unless the Visigoths are knocking at your gate and darkness threatens to consume the civilized world, wars are generally a mistake—a confession of a government's failure to find some other way of settling disputes short of sending out 19-year-olds with rifles to kill other 19-year-olds.

And even the most righteous of wars throughout history are riddled with errors large and small, strategic and tactical, that are paid for with the blood of soldiers and civilians. All of it falls under the term “fog of war”. The only righteous major war of the 20th century, which consumed some 60 million lives, was rife with bloody mistakes.

Even so, the current and ongoing war in Iraq may yet be written in history as the only war that was a total mistake from beginning to end, where virtually every decision taken both by the civilian leadership, which began it on false pretenses and an overdose of arrogance and ignorance, and the military leadership, which bungled and bumbled and knuckled under, was wrong, wrong, wrong.

When those future historians begin their search for how such a thing could happen, *Washington Post* veteran military correspondent Tom Ricks's most aptly titled book *Fiasco* will be an invaluable starting point. Ricks pulls it all together—how the Bush administration, prodded by its neoconservative handmaidens, took us

into an unnecessary war in a tinderbox country and region, and then screwed it up big time.

The dedication of *Fiasco* is simple: “For the war dead.” This is followed by a simple quotation from fourth-century B.C. military strategist Sun Tzu: “Know your enemy, know yourself, one-hundred battles, one-hundred victories.”

The confluence of arrogance, ignorance, and incompetence is stunning—and by now familiar to even the most casual consumer of the news. Ricks rightly notes that the fault lies foremost with President Bush, but he declares that “it takes more than one person to make a mess as big as Iraq.” The failures were systemic: major lapses within the national-security bureaucracy, from a weak National Security Council to an overweening Pentagon and a confused intelligence apparatus, coupled with the almost complete lack of oversight by Congress and the media.

All of this combined to create a haunting, costly and deadly debacle whose ending has yet to be written three and a half years, 2,550 dead American soldiers, and \$300 billion of taxpayer money later.

But what sets *Fiasco* apart from other histories of the Iraq war is Ricks's account of the inadequacy of the military leadership. Ricks, who interviewed more than a hundred senior military officers and sifted through some 30,000 pages of official documents, is withering: “While the Bush administration—and especially Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and L. Paul Bremer III—bear much of the