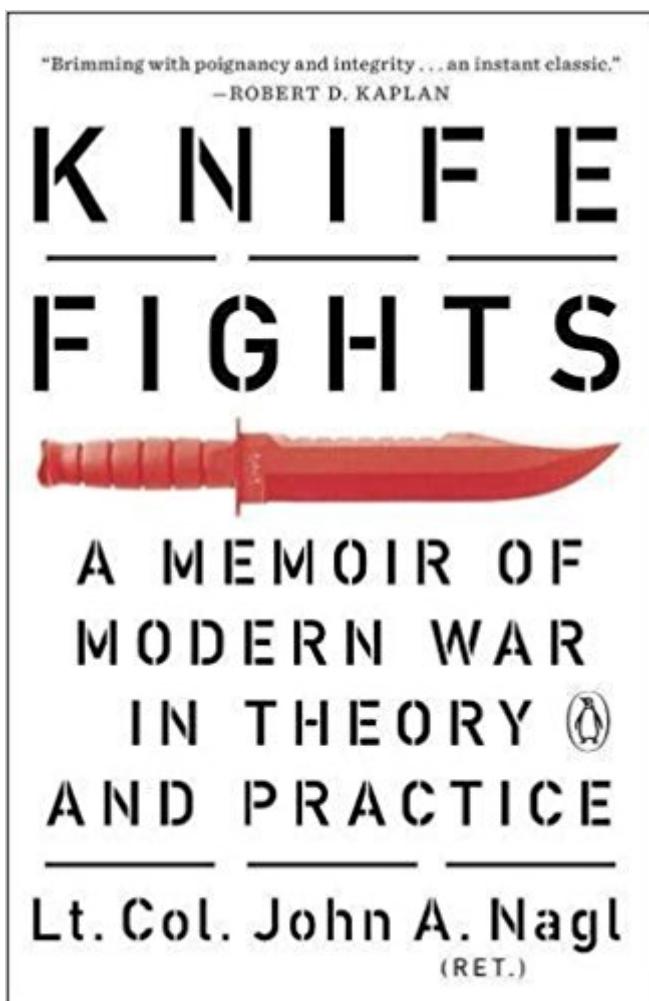


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# Knife Fights: A Memoir Of Modern War In Theory And Practice



## Synopsis

From one of the most important Army officers of his generation, a memoir of the military's revolution in counterinsurgency warfare Delivering a profound education in modern warfare, John Nagl's *Knife Fights* is essential reading for anyone who cares about the fate of America's soldiers and the purposes for which their lives are put at risk. As an army tank commander in the first Gulf War, Nagl was an early convert to the view that America's greatest future threats would come from asymmetric warfare—guerrillas, terrorists, and insurgents. His Oxford thesis on the lessons of Vietnam—eventually published as a book called *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*—became the bible of the counterinsurgency movement. But it would take 9/11 and the botched aftermath of the Iraq invasion to give his ideas contemporary relevance. After a year's hard fighting in Iraq's Anbar Province, where Nagl served as operations officer of a tank battalion in the 1st Infantry Division, he was asked by General David Petraeus to coauthor the new Army and Marine Corps counterinsurgency field manual—rewriting core doctrine that would change the course of two wars and the thinking of an army. *Knife Fights* is the definitive account of counterinsurgency and its consequences by the man who was the doctrine's leading architect.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Foreign Policy: "[An] invaluable memoir of service" [KNIFE FIGHTS] is also a cautionary tale of how the U.S. Army became an "un-learning" institution,

Ã¢ “over-learning” and the lessons from Vietnam that were most convenient to its bureaucratic interests and Ã¢ “under-learning” those lessons most central to victory in this type of warfare. Nagl’s exceptional memoir chronicles an important period in the wars of insurgency the United States waged following 9/11; it is also a story of how one professional soldier received a brutal education not just in war but in the harsh reality of politics. A Cleveland Plain Dealer: Nagl, steeped in both the theory and practice of modern war, speaks authoritatively. This distinguished soldier-scholar continues to render valuable service with this thoughtful, important book. Harper’s Magazine: Nagl devoted the next twenty years to teaching the Pentagon table manners. “Eating Soup with a Knife” inspired the title of his dissertation and his intellectual rallying cry. KNIFE FIGHTS is the story of Nagl’s career and an intellectual genealogy of contemporary counterinsurgency doctrine. A window into how the Pentagon thinks and, crucially, how it slowly changes its mind. Foreign Affairs: “This engaging book exhibits droll humor and a sharp grasp of the limits and possibilities of the U.S. Army as a learning organization. Washington Times: “Writing a book about formulating military doctrine for a general audience is no easy task, but Nagl has mastered the challenge. His memoir, KNIFE FIGHTS, revolves around the writing of the American doctrine for counter-insurgency, and his wry wit and writing skill make it a good read, even for casual readers. Library Journal: “An honest and informative glimpse into both the past and the future of the ongoing war on terror. Military buffs, policy wonks, and anyone wishing to learn more about America’s role in the world should find Nagl’s work an alluring and important read. Kirkus Reviews: “A lively memoir that combines battlefield experiences with military politics. A thoughtful, lucid, not-terribly-optimistic autobiography of a scholarly soldier. Publishers Weekly: Nagl writes evocatively about his wartime experiences, clearly explaining his theories of waging asymmetric warfare. A critic of the Iraq war (“a war that did not need to be fought”), Nagl offers perceptive critiques of the serious mistakes made by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and the military’s general officer corps. Nagl makes a strong case that the next war the U.S. engages in will require stronger counterinsurgency planning than Pentagon policy makers currently anticipate. Booklist: “An essential addition to military history collections. General David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army (Ret.), commander of the surge in Iraq: “A wonderfully readable and strikingly forthright memoir by a brilliant Army officer turned think tank leader who achieved an exceptional record on the battlefield, in the academic arena, in a

high-powered job in the Pentagon, and as one of the so-called 'insurgents' who helped transform the way the U.S. military thought about, prepared for, and conducted the wars of the post-9/11 era."General Jim Mattis, U.S. Marines (Ret.):"John Nagl's illuminating journey as a combat Soldier-Leader-Thinker provides a refreshing perspective of the changing character of today's security challenges. To those searching for a relevant and historically grounded understanding of today's erupting realities, his book is uniquely enlightening."Admiral James Stavridis (Ret.), Supreme Allied Commander at NATO 2009-2013 and current Dean of The Fletcher School at Tufts University:"In Knife Fights, John Nagl takes the reader from the halls of the Pentagon to the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan, and illuminates the modern battlefields - both in Washington and overseas - in harsh and vivid light. His work on counterinsurgency is deep and profound, and this book is the essential back story both of the intellectual process that underpins it and the personal journey that formed it. A powerful and meaningful memoir that will resonate in today's Army and tomorrow's society."Peter R. Mansoor, Colonel, U.S. Army (Ret.); author, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War*:"A magnificent memoir from one of the most brilliant officers of his generation. Knife Fights details John Nagl's journey from the halls of West Point and Oxford to the battlefields of Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom, as well as his struggles and triumphs among Washington's power elite. Highly recommended for those who seek to understand how the Army overcame its initial dysfunction to wage the messy counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan."F. G. Hoffman, National Defense University, Washington DC:"There are many books from veterans of America's costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Few will combine the intellectual heft, emotional power, and exemplary moral courage of John Nagl's *Knife Fights*. It traces the development of the author from his early days as a cadet at West Point to the darkest days of fighting in Al Anbar province in Iraq and beyond. This book will stand on its own special shelf as a personal memoir of a soldier/scholar, a warrior and a great teacher. Highly recommended for all military students, and anyone interested in the journey of an institutional insurgent and patriot who followed his own path."Robert D. Kaplan:"Brimming with poignancy and integrity, John Nagl's book is an instant classic of America's decade of war in the Greater Middle East. Its core argument, moreover, is undeniable: that insurgency and counterinsurgency have been part of the history of war since antiquity and thus will be part of its future. May the United States Army and Marine Corps hold close the lessons of this book!"David E. Johnson, senior researcher at the RAND Corporation; inaugural director of the Chief of Staff of the Army Strategic Studies Group; author of *Fast Tanks and Heavy Bombers: Innovation in the U.S. Army, 1917-1945*, *Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and Gaza*, and *The 2008 Battle of Sadr City: Reimagining Urban Combat*:"John Nagl's *Knife Fights* is a

brave book by a soldier - scholar who has always put himself out there for the right reasons. John's remarkable memoir is a directed telescope into how the U.S. Army changed its doctrinal paradigm for the first time since World War I from 'closing with and destroying the enemy' to 'protecting the population.' Readers will also see that he was a key intellectual force in this shift and how difficult these changes are for the institutions - and for the catalytic advocates like John."Peter Maass, author of *Love Thy Neighbor*:"John Nagl has written an exceptional book that shows in words the type of bravery he exhibited on the battlefield. Nagl deftly reveals what worked and didn't work in Washington, Iraq and Afghanistan after 9/11. His critique of Donald Rumsfeld is uniquely powerful because he writes from the vantage point of an Army officer who waged war in the Sunni Triangle and afterwards served in the defense secretary's office. *Knife Fights* is essential reading - the rare memoir of war that integrates ideas, combat and politics. It is an invaluable addition to the literature of wars that we are still trying to comprehend."

John A. Nagl is a retired lieutenant colonel of the U.S. Army. A graduate of West Point and a Rhodes Scholar, he received his PhD from St. Antony's College, Oxford. He is the former president of the Center for a New American Security and the ninth headmaster of the Haverford School in Pennsylvania.

I have a grandson who is a captain in the 101st airborne and he represents the type of people who should read this excellent story. The author says the Pentagon must adjust their military "tank battle" mind set. It's not about war anymore, but about pacification, and convincing foreign leaders to integrate and pacify their opposition . The big problem is the lack of US soldiers who speak the various Arabic languages. Also, I was surprised to read of how many senior officers have Masters and Doctorates, even Rhodes Scholarships. General Petraeus is one example. In other critiques, I have read that the author talks too much about himself. This is true in a positive sense---the author is super qualified on the subject and proudly integrates his own interesting and outstanding autobiography into his recommendations on Modern Warfare.

A very smart review of military policy in the 21st century and exposes the absolute failure of the behemoth Army / Pentagon to update its strategy over the last 20 years; and further the failure of the politicians to listen to the expert opinions of leaders like Dr Nagl. On the down side there is a LOT of repetition; a good editor was needed. On the whole; a worthy read for anyone interested in the military strategy for counter-terrorism.

If you are a "cisper," that is a soldier that joined the Army during the Cold War but served in the Global Wars on Terrorism, you must read this book. Nagl's personal transformation from cadet to command should resonate with many whose world view changed following the satisfying success of Operation Desert Storm. We would never "taste" such satisfaction again, rather we would lead forces in a series of unsatisfying victories in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq. Indeed, Readers will discover a liberal serving of the word "unsatisfying" in the later chapters. This is important because when it comes to counter-insurgency, it truly is like eating a bowl of soup with a knife -- slow, messy and extremely unsatisfying. As a serving Army commander, I would certainly recommend this book on a military professional reading list. Specifically, I would urge all to read the brilliantly written chapter, "Counter-insurgency Revisited" for in it lies a series of truisms that may be found piecemealed amongst a number of other great works. While Nagl may not have the reputation of Woodward, yet, I found this chapter enormously satisfying.

On first impression, this seems a more readable and popular version of the author's PhD thesis "Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife." As such, it should be required reading for all US citizens. We are so involved with insurgency/counterinsurgency actions that the electorate needs to be well informed. At minimum, learning the theories and terminology of unconventional warfare allow us mere mortals to understand all the stuff of surge and the like that we see in the paper daily. In a broader context, however, this book is history in its finest expression. We are carefully presented with events, ideas and personalities in context and as they interact. Finally I understand the events in the recent past in the Middle East and why we are going where we are. This should be required reading!

A very well written, insightful and illuminating treatment of our most recent military conflicts in the Middle East. Dr. Nagl writes with conviction, direct knowledge and historical perspective offering the reader the opportunity to understand some of what has transpired in the past quarter century. In the course of doing so he pays homage to the men and women who have served with bravery and success, though they themselves have not always been well served, on and off the battlefield. Even more than a memoir, *Knife Fights* provides much food for thought about how we should approach not only our present engagements but future ones as well.

This book is an excellent study of the complexities we face in today's warfare, where the enemy is unconventional, lives in an area he understands far better than we do, knows Mao's precepts of guerilla war, and refuses to face us in the Army-on-Army battles for which we've prepared for centuries. Reading this will help one to understand the challenges we face in today's era of insurgencies and terrorism.

Good "summation" of knife fights in this chronological career of LTC Nagl and his pursuit to fight the established conventional culture of the Army and the military as a whole. The details and combat experience, foresight, and articulation are very well laid out. A good read for those interested in strategic studies, military history, and definitely innovative thinkers.

I thought that this book would actually be about actual Counterinsurgency tactics and philosophy. While there was some attention paid to this, this seemed to be more of an autobiography of Lt. Col. Nagl's career. A lot of Washington and military insider name dropping. Very disappointing.

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