Unedited Transcript

Peter Roberts: Welcome to the Western Way of War. This is a weekly podcast that tries to understand the issues around how to fight and succeed against adversaries in the 2020s. I’m Peter Roberts, Director of Military Sciences at the Royal United Services Institute on Whitehall and, every week, I talk to a guest about the Western Way of War. Has it been successful? Is it fit for task today and how might it need to adapt in the future? The podcast is only possible because of the kind sponsorship of the good people at Raytheon UK, a subsidiary of Raytheon Technology, a British company that creates jobs in England, Wales and Scotland, contributing over £700 million to the UK economy. Much of the debate about the current Western Way of War, let’s be clear, that’s the US-led or simply the US phenomena that dominates contemporary concepts of operations in how we fight across Western militaries, so, all of that has two, sort of, driving forces within it. First, an idea of the philosophy that sits behind that use of force. A desire to be a force for good order in the world, in challenging bad actors, in maintaining a global structure that has seen prosperity and peace delivered to a large part of the world population since 1991. Second, the belief that technology and science can drive faster, more assured national security solutions in an environment where challenges are investing more and in a more focused way than in the West. Both of these presets became almost absolutes during the Obama administration in the US between 2009 and 2017. Their foundations, while perhaps routed in a, sort of, East-West construct of the Cold War, they really embedded themselves in the early years of that administration. The defence policy of that time was built less on the raw passion of 9/11 and more on some clear and hard headed analysis about US failures of previous campaigns.

Of course, all of that thinking was my guest today, who served as Under Secretary for Defense for Policy from February 2009 to February 2012. Now, for non-US audiences, this means that she was the principle advisor to SecDef in the formulation of national security and defence policy, oversight of military plans and operations and in National Security Council deliberations. She led the development of the DOD’s 2012 strategic guidance, represented the department in dozens of foreign engagements in the media and, perhaps most dauntingly, before Congress. Prior to her confirmation, Michèle Flournoy co-led President Obama’s transition team at the Defense Department. For those unfamiliar with how defence policy teams are constructed in the US, the best people spend some time in government and then rotate out into industry or the think-tank sector to get a more rounded experience, so it's no surprise that Michèle has had a similar journey. What is less orthodox is that instead of returning to a sort of alma mater of CSIS between appointments in the Pentagon, in January 2007, Michèle co-founded CNAS, a bipartisan think tank dedicated to developing strong, pragmatic and principled national security policies. As one would expect, Michèle has a rich background at CSIS, National Defense University and CNAS, as well as serving on the boards of numerous companies and charities, including the Leadership Council for Women in National Security. She is also a former board member of the President’s Intelligence Advisory Board, the CIA Director’s External Advisory Board and the Defense Policy Board. In government, previously, Michèle had been Principle Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy and Threat Reduction and Deputy
Assistant Secretary of Defence for Strategy. She has got more medals, awards and honours than I can mention and is regularly quoted in all the premium media platforms, but to give you a better feel for Michelle, I want to go back a bit to what I think is a really important moment that captures her drive and her ethics for me.

One of her first or early tasks at the Pentagon, at a junior level, was in doing a lessons exercise on the US intervention in Somalia in '92 and '93 that ended in that ill-fated battle of Mogadishu. It took, according to reports, months, and resulted in a complex report that highlighted a requirement to better sync and harmonise diplomatic, humanitarian and military efforts. Sound familiar? But in drawing all this together, Michèle left no stone unturned, no report unread and due attention, this is the critical bit for me, due attention was paid for lived experiences of those who were there, as well as those who judged it from CENTCOM, or the Pentagon or elsewhere. That emphasis on the reality comes perhaps from a life lived hand in glove with the military, a father who was a veteran of the US army air corps in World War Two, a husband who served 26 years in the US Navy and US Navy Reserve. I mean, service seems to be in her blood. It's this understanding of people that came through in her work on the National Defense Strategy of the 1990s and is lead author of the QDR in 2010. Her positions on the need and justification for military interventions in Libya, Syria, for the destruction of potential WMD sites in Iraq in 2002 and for the troop surge in Afghanistan in 2009, they're all well-known, but whilst she's sometimes described as, sort of, an archetypal, liberal interventionist, her decision-making, her policy guidance, seems far more guided by common sense pragmatism, rather than ideology. She's also a firm believer in military technology delivering the edge or superiority of US forces and has been calling for the prioritisation of funding of AI, cyber and autonomous weapons, but instead of this linked directly to ways of fighting, Michèle has been really clear that this is linked more to about deterring, rather than defeating.

Given all that, and I'm really excited to have Michelle on the show, I do wonder what she's going to make of our first questions. So, Michèle, what does the Western Way of War mean to you?

Michèle Flournoy: Well, Peter, it's great to be with you and thank you for that incredibly warm introduction, I wish I was writing it down to show my kids, but, you know, the Western Way of War, I have to go back to my roots. I wrote my Oxford thesis about the ethics of nuclear deterrents and I went back to just war theory. So, the place I would start in describing the Western Way of War is that it's something that is rooted in the just war tradition, which talks about whether our objectives are just, it talks about discrimination between civilian and enemy populations, it talks about proportionality, making sure that our actions are proportionate. So, there's an ethical grounding to the way that the US has historically thought about war. Now, do we have a perfect record? Obviously not, but it is at least the aspiration that is always there. If you fast forward to the Gulf War and since, I do think there has been an effort to focus on deterrents, preventing conflict where we can, but if we do have to fight, the focus has been on an unfair fight, making sure that we have the better quality people, the better technology, the better concepts of operations to go in, establish superiority in all the necessary domains, air, land, sea, and now I would include things like space and cyberspace and then gain freedom of action to prosecute a rapid campaign that stops an aggression, reverses the aggression, restores the status quo, whatever our war aims are. I would also say another aspect is bringing partners and allies along, that we have very much of a coalition mindset at this point.

The challenge we face now is that our competitors, particularly China but also Russia, have gone to school on our way of war. They have studied the Gulf War ad nauseam and they have spent the last two decades, while we were busy with counterterrorism and counterinsurgency in the Greater Middle East, they have spent that time investing in asymmetric counters to our areas of strength and investing in ways to undermine our strengths and exploit our vulnerabilities and so our traditional way of war is not going to work. If we ever get into a situation where we have deter or confront a China because they're going to be focused on destroying our networks right up front, using cyber attacks, space attacks, other kinds of means to try to prevent US forces from moving, from seeing, being able to communicate, being able to identify targets and,
ultimately, to prosecute those targets, which means we have to now go back to the drawing board and think about how do we respond to that? We have to have a much more asymmetric mindset to approach this because if we just try to do things the way we’ve always done them, at least since the Gulf War, that’s going to be a very ugly scenario and not a very successful one.

Peter Roberts: There’s so much in there. I mean, right back to Thomas Aquinas and then seeing the reality of it as the unfair fight, rather than the just war is a really beautiful way to look at it, but this idea, I wonder, about rapid campaigns that we’ve been used to, that we’ve tried to characterise our interventions, we wanted them to be rapid to reduce particularly the treasure that we want to expand on some campaigns, and, yet, the reality of our experiences is that these don’t happen. It’s not unusual for us. I mean, the Russian actions in Afghanistan, their entwinement now, they’re caught in the cycle in Syria, it looks like they’re feeling the same way (TC 00:10:00) in North Africa. These aren’t quick engagements that we can get out of. We engage in these things, we want them to be rapid, but the result tends to be generational, doesn’t it?

Michèle Flournoy: Well, it really depends on what you’re trying to do. I mean, it’s one thing to go in and have a rapid campaign that reverses Saddam Hussein’s aggression against Kuwait, expels him, stops, withdraws. That’s something you can do in fairly short order. If you’re going in to change the regime in Iraq or change the regime in Afghanistan, you know, history tells us you’re almost certainly going to deal with some kind of insurgency, some kind of opposition and that is a very long, long exercise. That gets you into the world of regime building, national building, counter insurgency and history tells us that those kind of campaigns are a) a pretty mixed bag in terms of whether they’re successful or not, whether the conditions are right and b) they take a very, very long time, often longer than the political will that leaders are willing to spend, if you will, their political capital they’re willing to spend for these long campaigns.

Peter Roberts: Then, you went on to talk about, which I thought was a great characterisation, that the enemy wants, effectively, an unfair fight too, right? They don’t want to fight the way we fight, they’ve spent years coming up with a new, sort of, concept for operations that bypasses all of our strengths, certainly in conventional force numbers. Now, it feels to me looking at how the West is adapting to this is that we are almost mirroring their investments in many ways. Russia has invested one-third of its defence budget in electronic warfare since 1996 every year and we’re sort of trying to catch up. The investment in cyber, in space, in AI, I mean, we’re joining a competition that they’re already, I wouldn’t say ahead in but they’re very, very focused on. Because of the way that their states are constructed, they can define how industry bleeds across their knowledge in AI, and space and cyber into the military domain, right? It’s a very difficult competition to enter. Do you think we’re right trying to compete in these ways where they’re already organised and may hold organisational advantages or do you think advantages are merely a myth?

Michèle Flournoy: I think it depends, you really have to have a bigger concept of how you’re going to operate. How you’re going to deter, how you’re going to fight. I would like to place the emphasis on deterrents when we’re dealing with nuclear powers like China or Russia. You’re trying to prevent a war that could escalate into a nuclear conflict, but I think you have to derive the answer to your question about where do we care about winning the technology competitions in specific areas, from what it is you’re going to try to do and how you’re going to approach it. So, for example, I think, again, we know the Chinese doctrine is systems, destruction, warfare, that they’re going to try to disrupt, or degrade or destroy parts of our command control intelligence surveillance reconnaissance network. We have to build a resilient network of networks that can keep functioning, much as an electrical or electricity grid keeps functioning when there might be a brown out in one area of a black out or another it reroutes, it configures automatically and it keeps the lights on for the most important areas. We have to build that resilient network of networks and that means investing in certain types of capabilities. We also have to build AI-enabled support to more rapid and better human decision making. We have to be making better, faster decisions than the other guy and that will require AI to sort through a lot of information, separate the wheat from the chaff and get the right insights to the right decision makers at the right point in time. Then, we need to do things like invest in autonomous systems
that can be teamed with human operators to try to lessen the tremendous Chinese advantage that they will have quantitatively in any Indo-Pacific scenario that’s likely. They’re going to be in their backyard, easily deploying their systems, we’re going to be projecting power from very far aware with fewer numbers. There are ways that you can counter that and we’ve got to be investing those.

That’s just a few examples but I think how much we should put into electronic warfare, how much we should put into AI and how much we should put into unmanned systems, it has to tie to a larger concept of how we’re going to negate some of their advantages and play to some of our strengths in dealing with a situation where you're trying to deter or defeat aggression.

Peter Roberts: This is why it comes back to that core question of the Western Way of War because I’m not convinced that we have a good enough concept of operations right now to drive investments in the right technologies that we want. So, you know, I always go back to if you want to develop an effective product, you have know what you're developing it for. There has to be the purpose behind it and I feel a bit like, ever since the third offset strategy, we’ve been running around grasping at whatever’s available out there and trying to innovate that into our way of fighting, which, in many ways, doesn't make us particularly strong in my eyes and you might tell me I’m wrong about this. It strikes me that we need a better concept of operations which will then allow us to drive investments better and I don't think we got that third offset, I don't think this is what MDO is. I just think there's something beyond that and, so far, we're missing the point. Do you think I'm wrong?

Michèle Flournoy: No, I think you're right. I think it’s some of the most important work that needs to be done is at the sort of conceptual level and I don't think you can be successful in a very top down, hierarchical approach to that. I think you have to create competitive spaces where you bring really smart operators, thinkers, historians, all kinds of technologists, into a space where people check their rank at the door and everyone has an equal voice and you give them some hard problem sets and you give them some tools and you see how they play them. The competition breeds innovation and that includes competition in the conceptual realm and I think we need to do a lot more of that.

Peter Roberts: We've got a history of doing it well. We seem to have gapped that in many ways. I went across to the Frunze Academy a few years ago and there was an amazing group, like you said, they checked their rank at the door, they were dentists and architects and engineers and theologians. I mean, it was the most wacky collection of people altogether but they were tasked with a military problem and they came up with some really vibrant thinking and some really interesting approaches to it that we wouldn't have come up with just in simple military thinking and we in the West-, I mean, you know, I was talking to them about, 'How did you come up with this way of putting all these weird and wacky people in the room together?' and they were like 'It's a Western approach, right? This is what you did and we've learned this from you,' but we seem to have forgotten that. There feels to be a greater division between industry and the military and the public service almost sitting between the two. We've lost, in many ways, what I think was a very impressive way of galvanising industry, national economies and society around concepts of deterrent and coercion historically and it feels like we've lost a bit of that. It feels, like, that somehow, maybe post-1991, maybe even more, post-2001, it has become fractured and this conversation over the industrial military complex has demonised that kind of interaction and cooperation. Would you say there's something in that?

Michèle Flournoy: Well, I think in the wake of some of what happened in the 1990s, there’s a lot of risk averse behaviour in the US Department of Defense in terms of being very careful about how the interaction with industry works and there’s good reason for that. I mean, there were situations where dialogues led to giving particular companies advantage in procurement compositions and that was illegal and people went to jail for it, right? In the wake of that, there’s a lot of risk aversion, but what we have now is we have a rise of great power competition, we have a very urgent situation to deal with, we have got to create safe spaces for the war fighter, the operators to be able to explain what their problems sets are. For technologists and
folks from industry and academia and think-tanks to come in and say, 'Here is what we think is possible.' Way before you ever get to a request for a proposal or an actual procurement, you've got to be able to have people come together to have this conversation. Some of that is happening in the think-tank community in and around town, but it's not at the scale and with the focus and the senior leader bandwidth that it needs to be and I think that is an important area of investment and that's for the mid to long term. That's for conceptualising creating a concept onto which you can peg specific investment and procurement decisions. We also have a nearer-term problem which is deterring China launching aggression against Taiwan in the next five to seven years. I don't think it's likely, but I think they could miscalculate. If they drink own Kool-Aid and they believe their own rhetoric on US decline, they could decide 'Hey, now's the time for us to take the risk.'

So we also have to do more of an Apollo like project where, 'Okay, let's look at everything we have in the force now and (TC 00:20:00) put it together in creative combinations that aren't typical to solve some really hard problems, at least as a stop gap, yes, sure, and to strengthen deterrents in the near term until we can get to that point where we've fielded the AI-enabled autonomous systems that can team with the human operators and create a new problem for China's calculus.' So, we need some near-term measures and creative thinking. This was really the focus of the office that Ash Carter created when he was SecDef, the Strategic Capabilities Office which is basically, assess what our biggest problems are, take what we have, put it together in new ways and then get the services trained and implementing that as a new capability, but it's really just mixing and matching things we already have and using them in new ways. You can get a lot out of that exercise.

Peter Roberts: There has been huge progression, I mean, there have been enormous jumps. If you look at what their front-facing forward deployed elements look like 2011 compared to a decade on, they're remarkably different now about how they're integrated, how they're scaled, what they're looking at, how they're thinking of fighting, but there are still some disconnects, there's still some friction that potentially needs to be driven out, which can happen through development. The next big idea beyond MDO that takes them into an area of, not just parity but overwhelming superiority, again, against any adversary, is still some way off, right? I mean this is the key work that needs to be done beyond it and who does that? Who is that down to? I mean, US Armies Futures Command are the ones who before (mw 21.42) came up with Multi Domain Battle, which became Multi Domain Operations. Who should be driving this? Who will deliver it, do you think?

Michèle Flournoy: I think it has to be bottom-up and then integrated, competed and integrated. So, what I mean by that, I don't believe that you can deductively come up with the right concept of operations. I think you have to set the environment that incentivises, that rewards the concept innovation bottom-up within each of the services, brings that up to higher and higher levels for review, adjudication, I think the Secretary and the Deputy Secretary of Defense in the US should have a funded competition and experimentation effort which they can, sort of, review concepts and the ones that seem most promising coming up from the services can get extra money to go off and do a fleet experiment or do, you know, an on-the-ground experiment with army units or whatever and that it's aggregating up to the best ideas. Then you make choices about, 'Is this a roles and missions question where I want to say, "Okay, air force, I like your concept better than the Army's" or vice versa and so, "Army, you're going to stop doing that. Air force, it's yours," or is it an area where you say 'Boy, we need all the help we can get. We need redundancy, we need to be able to make it much more complicated for the Chinese in their attack planning so we want both in this particular area and so we're going to fund both.' I really think a lot of the initial work has to be done at that bottom-up level and that's what I see is not adequately structured, or incented or rewarded right now to really engage the field commanders of the future, the general officers of the future. They're the ones that are going to own this, right? The best and the brightest of those are not being fully engaged in a concept development effort.
Peter Roberts: They are a phenomenal generation, aren't they? I mean, you know, we've had a few on this show and they really blow you away. They're much more imaginative than I was. They really are out there, but, as you say, it's very difficult for them to engage. We've created structures that really don't allow them to access those power points so what you describe in the Secretary, the Under Secretary's potential office with this funny capability and experimentation effort that is competed and integrated. I mean, that is a genuinely exciting proposition. It would take nothing to sell that. You'd have people knocking at the door, right? I mean, I think it's huge.

Michèle Flournoy: It's not a lot of money either. I'm not a military historian, nor do I pretend to be one, but I remember going to one of Andy Marshall, the late, great founder of the Office of Net Assessment, incredible mind and innovator. I went to one of his summer studies and I remember him talking about the whole thing of how did the Germans get to Blitzkrieg and according to Andy Marshall's telling, again, I'll leave it to the historians to confirm to deny, the tank had already been developed in World War One but it didn't have much of an impact because it really didn't change how people were fighting. The Germans said, 'We have this incredible technology that we've stolen from the Brits, but we really want to leverage it.' So, they brought their best field-grade folks in and they said, 'There are a few rules. Number one, you have to leverage this new technology. Number two, you have to break current doctrine. Number three, you have to win.' and that was it, 'Go at it.' They had these competitive teams and, out of that exercise, you got the basics of Blitzkrieg. So, I think that's the kind of thing we need to be structuring and it's not that hard to do. I think there's a little bit of that going on in some of the services. I think the corners of some of the marine corps that have fed into the marine corps' new concept, there are parts of this happening the air force with the All-Domain Battle Management System or ABMS and what that really looks like conceptually, but it needs to be done at much more of a scale across the department.

Peter Roberts: A, sort of, systemic approach rather than the sort of ad hoc stuff we've got at the moment. I love the idea that it would go in right at the top because that's who's looking for this solution, isn't it? The Chief of Staff for the Army is not necessarily looking for the solution that contains China, right? He's looking for a solution that does his part of it so feeding this in right at the top, that is the one area that desperately wants this approach that can win, that is joint integrated. It's across coalition members. It's bigger than a single service approach.

Michèle Flournoy: Yes. And it's absolutely critical to getting the Congress, in our case, to go along with changes to the existing programme. I mean, if you're going to say I want to buy fewer tactical aircraft in order to invest in these key capable AI electronic warfare quantum whatever, capabilities, you can't just sort of throw that over the transom and expect them to say, 'Okay.' You have to present them with why these trade-offs will enable a better performance, better outcomes, better chances of winning, better chances of deterring. So, the conceptual piece is really, really key to actually getting the hard choices made, both in the executive branch but also in the Congress.

Peter Roberts: Michèle, listen, I've got time for one final question with you. And one of the things you're just known for is being this phenomenal mentor to people, growing their experience and expertise in entering the field of National Security. If you could offer one piece of advice to people who are trying to enter the National Security environment in any country, what would it be?

Michèle Flournoy: I would say first choose something you're passionate about, do you very best and be excellent and, most importantly, choose the boss, not the job. So, turn down the perfect job by job description if you have the chance to work for a fantastic mentor, someone who's going to invest in you, who's going to grow you, who's going to give you opportunities that you can never imagine. I got that advice at a critical moment in my career, going into the Pentagon my first time, and it was one of the most impactful pieces of advice I ever received, so I pass it on.
Peter Roberts: Michèle, thank you very much and thank you for your service as well. Absolutely brilliant. You can find out show on all major podcasting platforms including iTunes and Spotify. Your downloads regularly place us in the top 3% of nearly two million podcast shows globally. More and more of our first time listeners seem to go back and dig into previous episodes. Why not? The guests are superb and the topics are seriously broad. The show is produced by Peppi Väänänen and Kieron Yates and is sponsored by Raytheon UK. We have been lining up some amazing guests for the next set of episodes to take us through to the summer. We have a few spots left, so I'm turning this over to you, the listener, who do you want on the show? Shoot me or Peppi an email and let me know who you want to have an episode of their own. I can't promise that your suggested guest will agree to come on but we will certainly try. Thanks for listening.