



**Frank G. Hoffman, *Mars Adapting: Military Change During War*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2021.**

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One unwritten rule of warfare is that a military force will never be thoroughly prepared for the next war. Regardless of how much time and resources armed forces dedicate to preparation, they will never fight the battle they had trained for. To lower the uncertainty about how the next war will be, military strategists should acquire a solid understanding of its nature. Still, sometimes this awareness comes once the forces

are already on the battlefield. Therefore, the ability to adapt to combat circumstances is essential for every military institution if they want to manage unforeseeable circumstances and achieve victory. In this respect, military institutions face a great paradox – the necessity of changing while retaining their doctrine and way of war intact (2). Because it is so vital to fighting, military adaptation in both peace and wartime has increasingly sparked the interest of many scholars. However, no one has managed thus far to establish a model of analysis that includes all its facets. Frank Hoffman, a distinguished research fellow at the National Defense University in Washington, DC, tackles this literature void and provides new life to the debate on military adaptation. Understanding that adaptation occurs primarily on the battlefield when a military institution must face the shortcomings of its preparation is the pivot of his theory.

Starting from Carl von Clausewitz's master contribution to the study of war, Hoffman asserts how adaptation is inherent to the nature of war, given the impossibility of predicting the enemy's every choice (2). If other scholars have already included adaptation in wartime as part of their research, Hoffman decisively steers away from most of his peers' analysis when it comes to innovation. Hoffman argues that the fragmented literature on military change has so far chiefly defined innovation as those significant doctrinal and technological changes that occur in peacetime (5). This majority viewpoint includes renowned historian Williamson Murray. In his 2011 volume *Military Adaptation in War*, Murray identifies adaptation and innovation as similar but ultimately different phenomena, with the latter occurring in peacetime.<sup>1</sup> Hoffman tackles this assumption and employs a multi-disciplinary perspective to examine how military change, whether as adaptation or innovation, chiefly results from the conditions of necessity that a military institution meets in war.

From these premises, Hoffman details his innovative model in chapter two. First, he classifies the current literature into four groups, which broadly encompass all the theoretical contributions to the study of military adaptation from International Relations theory. This detailed account systematically organizes and carefully lays out each theory's unique and vital aspects, with which Hoffman engages synthetically yet directly. Through the description of the authors' most representative ideas, Hoffman

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<sup>1</sup> See Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War: With Fear of Change* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

conducts a schematic and exhaustive review of each contributor's work and identifies elements such as the state's institutions or inter-service competition as playing a crucial role in studying military adaptation from the angle of International Relations theory (19-26). This literal introduction allows Hoffman to explain progressively to the reader why war is the ideal scenario to investigate military adaptation and innovation and the motivations for creating a more effective model of analysis. Although he admittedly does not present a new approach (19), Hoffman's theory provides Organisational Learning Theory with an original role in studying military change by adjusting the basic tenets of the related literature to the necessities of military studies (26-31). Through a thorough examination of business management theorists, Hoffman consolidates all these contributions and converges the two fields of study to achieve the two fundamental goals of his book. The first is finding a feasible model of analysis for military adaptation, thus giving this topic a framework encompassing most cases in a single operative scheme. The second demonstrates how key aspects of Organizational Learning Theory, such as organizational culture and Organizational Learning Capacity (31-34), play a vital role in military adaptation, thus delivering the analytical instruments missing from the International Relations toolbox.

Although chapter two is less stylistically engaging than the rest of the volume, Hoffman's clarity and steady pace make it easier for the reader to follow his lead through the tortuous maze of the various scholarly views that have overlapped over the years. Most importantly, Hoffman does not emphasize competition among these theories, but he employs a streamlined logic that gives his model the best of both worlds. On the one hand, International Relations theorists acknowledge how the many elements of a military institution and the broader operational environment contribute to developing successful adaptive measures in warfare. On the other, business management literature provides the conceptual bases to integrate this multitude of elements into a cohesive model that tests military adaptation through specific variables.

From a stylistic perspective, chapters three to six are the most appealing in the volume. Although Hoffman aims to put his theoretical model to the test, he does not forget that history must also be pleasant to read. From a narrative viewpoint, the interplay of different characters in the complex operations he describes helps the reader brush off the technicality of the two previous chapters and exalts one of the core pillars

of Hoffman's theoretical model, the direction along which adaptation and innovation originate and blossom. Generally considered a top-down process, this volume will question even the staunchest believers. The anecdotes and descriptions of how individuals and single units had a hand in wartime adaptation truly support Hoffman's case; change occurs in multiple directions, though processes from the bottom-up and across units have resulted in the most achievements. Throughout these chapters, the importance of tracing the movement of adapting activity is Hoffman's constant concern. In this respect, he pays much attention to detail on how organizational culture and historical circumstances shaped the reasoning of military officers and, eventually, their actions. Lastly, in his meticulous study, Hoffman consistently bounces these three elements off one another, showing how determinant military adaptation and innovation are for the institution's growth and the leadership development of its members.

To show how impactful military adaptation is under fire, the choice of examples is vital, and Hoffman does not let his readership down. Although all the case studies are from the American military, the validity of his theoretical model does not suffer from this lack of diversity. Indeed, the US military serves as a perfect candidate to test the pillars of Hoffman's theory due to its history of different campaigns through the last eighty years and the identifiable culture of its branches. As Hoffman points out, any comparison of these examples with others from non-American military institutions is not to be warranted (14). By neutralizing the national element, Hoffman can focus his model on the core pillar of institutional culture, thus accentuating how Organizational Learning Theory can provide foundational tools to analyze military adaptation and innovation in wartime. However, the few references to other national contexts that Hoffman includes in his initial chapters clearly show the great potential of testing his theory elsewhere. Also, the historical span that Hoffman considers – roughly from World War II to the beginning of the twenty-first century – may facilitate cross-national comparison. As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated, military adaptation is still one of the biggest challenges that any conventional force faces on the ground. Because Hoffman's model pays attention to culture, leadership, and service character in military adaptation, his volume has the potential to become the gold standard for military service members and future analysts.

One element that nearly goes undetected in Hoffman's model is time. Throughout the case studies, time seems to be one of the determinant variables of effective military adaptation and innovation in wartime. Hoffman's volume generally shows that military institutions, especially in the upper ranks, were proverbially slow in responding to the adaptive inputs from the battlefield. Yet, the time they took to respond to the challenges in combat had a spill-over effect – which was uneven at times – on strategy, tactics, and operations depending on combat conditions. In this respect, it would be intellectually stimulating to see Hoffman expand on his thoughts and eventually connect his model with other subjects in the strategic studies cohort. If military adaptation is an essential part of combat and proper to the nature of war, then its processes must affect all the other aspects of warfare, even those farther remote from the battlefield. Eventually, as Hoffman demonstrates, military adaptation can make a difference between victory and defeat because it influences how both parties manage or suffer the consequences of how fast it occurs.

In conclusion, although Hoffman primarily takes inspiration from previous literature, his ability to integrate different theoretical fields and produce a practical and sound model for a wide array of cases of military change makes this volume a masterpiece. *Mars Adapting* is a must-read for any military officer. Whether someone is finishing up their education, approaching their assignment, getting a promotion, or simply preparing to lead in combat, any officer needs Frank Hoffman's tools to become a better observer of the battlefield and sponsor of any necessary military change to achieve victory. As Hoffman shows, military change can follow different directions. Yet, the most successful way is to bring the expertise, experience, and ability of the personnel on the ground to the eyes and ears of the top brass in central command.

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