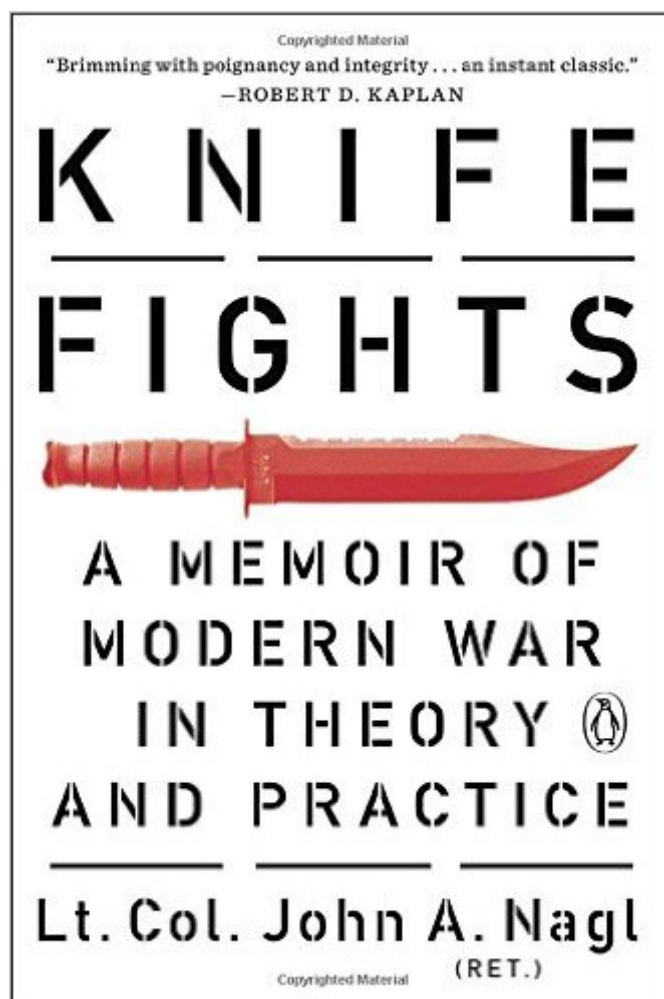


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# Knife Fights: A Memoir Of Modern War In Theory And Practice



## 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

John Nagl is known for penning a dissertation that eventually became a book that was a part of the process that led to the U.S. military's paradigm shift regarding military counter-insurgency (COIN) doctrine and operations. As a result, Nagl is somewhat of a celebrity in certain (military) policy

circles. "Knife Fights" is presented as a memoir of the author's career and a behind-the-scenes peek at the evolution of Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam and its effect on operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan. "Knife Fights" - as a memoir - is okay at best. Nagl would have you believe he led a remarkable life, but truth be told his story is pretty much the story of any military officer of any era. When his career does differ it is due to the networking and connections afforded him by West Point (U.S. Military Academy); most officers do not have (or ruthlessly exploit) the connections given to Nagl as a result of West Point. "Knife Fights" - as a book that explains the importance of "Learning to Eat Soup..." - is less than satisfactory. First of all, "Learning to eat Soup..." is not nearly as important as Nagl (or his supporters) would have you believe. When he is addressing COIN Nagl expends significant effort getting the reader to believe how complex COIN ops are. But truth be told, COIN ops are not really "rocket science" (either as a concept or in execution). COIN ops are nothing more than providing a safe environment so that "the locals" feel safer dealing with the so-called legitimate government than they do dealing with the so-called insurgent movement.

This is part memoir of John Nagl's army career that began with Operation Desert Storm, to his 2008 retirement. As a young tank commander in 1991 through two decades, Nagl has seen the US Army transform from a post Cold War mindset to an army fraught with fighting Middle Eastern extremist insurgencies. The memoir part is typical in scope of most military officers I have read over the years: congratulatory and typical of the US military viewpoint. But what gives this memoir credence is Nagl's critical analyses of how the Iraqi War from 2003 was managed. He's quick to pass blame to the leaders in the administration, most noticeably Donald Rumsfeld and his cronies, who fought a very visible personal war against Secretary of State Colin Powell. Like many officers at the time, there were questions about how a post-war Iraq would fare; there were no plans in the books for that. Thus the Iraqi insurgency was born. The three mistakes that Nagl mentions that the administration did wrong have been repeated by many other military personnel since 2003: there were not enough US troops to secure the conventional weapons after the war, preventing Iraqi troops to assist in securing the population, and placing everyone in a subordinate position under Rumsfeld. "If the Department of Defense had been trying to set conditions for irregular war, it could hardly have done better" (65) states Nagl. He now found himself fighting an irregular war with conventional equipment such as the Abrams M1A1 tank that was not meant to sustain combat in desert conditions. Nagl's tour in Iraq in the early part of the war (2003-2004) are the most interesting parts of his memoir.

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