

Editorial

At the time of writing, the Covid-19 pandemic is peaking in South Africa and around the world. Apart from the hardship and anxiety, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused communities and societies, it has also exposed the vulnerability with which contemporary societies around the globe are faced. Insufficient preparation and a lack of timely government planning and day-to-day good governance practices mean that health services around the globe – from Russia to the United States, Iran, Italy and, yes, to South Africa – have left states and their citizens exposed, and endangered the lives of the citizens. Two lessons from the pandemic so far have been that it is impossible to replace good and sustainable government planning, and that having the wrong people in central government positions will end up costing lives and destroying the livelihoods of the many. Despite the fact that a virus such as Covid-19 is ‘democratic’ in nature, i.e. it hits and infects across race and class, the reality is that the poorest and most vulnerable in society suffers most. That bad governance and corruption cost lives is well known and well documented, but the Covid-19 pandemic has laid bare the consequences of these policies or, more precisely, the lack of good government practices. In that respect, South Africa is not any different from a number of other hard-hit countries around the world. The question is how much damage has been done in process, how long time will it take to recover, whether the people in power have learned from their mistakes or from the mistakes and corrupt practices of their predecessors, and whether they are willing to address the causes of the weaknesses exposed by the crisis.

Another issue that has been highlighted by the crisis is the ‘securitisation’ of health, which is a widespread phenomenon around the world. This is seen through the implementation of emergency measures and laws, setting aside normal political principles. During a pandemic, this is what is to be expected from government in the attempts to curb the threats posed by the virus. The challenge and test of government intentions will be seen by how government asserts itself during these times of emergency, and especially how it constantly, ideally tries to de-securitise the situation as soon as possible and bring the situation back to ‘normal’ political dynamics. It is a delicate balance to strike for government, since securitising an issue – setting aside normal democratic principles and individual liberties – comes with a big responsibility, and time will tell whether governments in some instances went too far in their responses. Where is the reasonable balance between closing the economy to stop the spread of a virus, and then destroying people’s livelihoods in process, potentially causing a string of other health and social problems that we know follow with poverty. Time will make judgement on the political decision-makers.

In this issue of *Scientia Militaria*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2020, the articles draw on history to examine and consider contemporary issues around war and conflict, political oversight and liberal political ideals, or to focus on the interface between the military and civilian spheres. The articles individually and as a combined body provide an essential source of influence for all involved in military planning, education, operations and management.

Wilhelm Janse van Rensburg et al. in their article show how the South African liberal democracy from the late 1990s until 2013 was increasingly challenged and under pressure due to parliament finding it gradually more difficult to conduct effective parliamentary oversight in relation to South African foreign deployments. That this is still an issue and emphasising the importance of this contribution have recently been highlighted in parliament once again, when senior military officers failed to understand and accept this exact role of parliament.

Leopold Scholtz, in his article on the Suwalki Gap, illustrates another critical dimension of the current international political climate, and how the increased tension between the international powers, especially the United States and NATO, China and Russia, has all the potential of escalating into a full-scale war. The Baltic states have steadily felt the political pressure from an ever more assertive and aggressive Russian Federation, which – after the illegal annexation of the Crimea Peninsula and the covert military involvement in the separatist war in Eastern Ukraine – illustrates that Russia will not accept Western influence to expand further into its perceived sphere of interest, and is willing to use military power to stop this from happening. This article shows how the Suwalki Gap is one of the places where the increased political tension has the potential of turning into a full-scale war.

The article by Susan Henrico et al. focuses on the importance of GIS technology for the contemporary military commander on the battlefield. As the article on the Suwalki Gap illustrates, geography has always been important for the military planner. However, in a developing country, such as South Africa, there is a need of finding inexpensive software solutions, since the existing licensed products are financially out of reach of armies in the developing world. Henrico et al. show that existing freeware solutions offer the same functionalities as the licensed versions.

In their contribution, Roxanne DuVivier et al. show how focused self-defence training using the Gracie Defense Systems was an effective tool in preventing sexual abuse by empowering and increasing awareness amongst their research participants. This important finding illustrates that tools and techniques exist that could help curb the challenges stemming from sexual abuse and exploitation in the South African Defence Force.

In the article by Hennie Smit, the focus is on the importance of creating environmental literacy amongst deployed soldiers. The article shows that environmental literacy in the military consists of three components: military environmental attitude (i.e. the environment in which the military operates), military environmental knowledge, and military environmental behaviour. The article highlights how exposing soldiers to a dedicated military environmental management course influences their military environmental literacy positively.

In the article by Evert Kleynhans and Will Gordon, the focus is on the nature of oversight and secrecy in a modern liberal democratic state and how South Africa's illiberal past still makes research difficult. This review article focuses on the theoretical

implications of the Promotion of Access to Information Act, and uses an actual research example as a case study to illustrate the practical implications of conducting research at the Department of Defence (DoD) Archive in South Africa based on classified military documentation. The article shows that, in practical terms, it is very difficult to gain access to relevant declassified data. The authors conclude that there exists a disconnect between the applicable laws and the practical execution thereof. Both legislation and DoD Archive officials in theory appear geared towards assisting researchers and facilitating research on the War for Southern Africa, but in practice, the process is still convoluted, complicated and definitely not user-friendly.

The Editor

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