
The 1996 RMA Essay Contest

Introduced by WILLIAMSON MURRAY

The following articles represent the best of the 1996 *JFQ* “Essay Contest on the Revolution in Military Affairs” which was sponsored by the National Defense University Foundation. The six contributions—four prize winners plus two additional essays “short listed” by the judges as worthy of publication—suggest that enormous technological changes are underway and will continue for the foreseeable future. At the same time, it is difficult to understand exactly how such change will play out on the battlefield. That is true in part because we do not know either when or where our soldiers, sailors, marines, and airmen will be called upon to fight and kill, nor can we possibly know the conditions under which the next war will take place, nor even the simplest element of the equation: who will be the enemy. Will the next major war occur ten years from now or twenty years as was the case for our military after World War I, or even ninety-nine years like the British experienced after Napoleon’s defeat in 1815?

What is clear is that there is a looming debate both within and among the services on what the revolution in military affairs

(RMA) represents and what its implications are. This suggests that no one has a handle on what the face of battle will look like in the next century. Consequently, the worst path that the Armed Forces could take would be to believe that they know what is meant by RMA and embark on tailoring forces and acquiring weapons without experimentation and serious public debate on the future of national defense. Publication of a range of views such as those advanced by the authors of the articles found in this issue of *JFQ*, each singing from a different sheet of music, will stimulate that debate. We need more exchange of ideas, not less. There is no school solution on RMA, and those who think they possess *the* answers constitute a danger to realizing its actual as opposed to its imagined potential.

The very disparities raised by this debate suggest several other points. First, they underscore that we may not be reaching closure on what RMA epitomizes. There may in effect be a number of emerging RMAs. None of this is clear. My own prediction—from an historian’s perspective—is that we will confront multiple RMAs over the coming decades, a state of affairs somewhat analogous to events during the last significant interwar period: the 1920s and 1930s. At that time various RMAs evolved from the conceptual to reality: combined arms, exploitation warfare, strategic bombing, carrier operations, and submarine warfare. These developments greatly changed the way war was waged in the first major conflict of this century. Thus to conclude that RMA comes from one source may deny other equally important possibilities. Moreover, as Andrew



Williamson Murray, professor of history emeritus at The Ohio State University, will contribute an article entitled “Thinking about Revolutions in Military Affairs” in the next issue of *JFQ*.

Marshall, director of net assessment within the Office of the Secretary of Defense—and the motivating force behind the *JFQ* RMA essay contest—has suggested, we might con-

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sider our current situation as being approximately what the military of the interwar years faced in 1923. In other words, there is a long way to go to work out the real possibilities and potential of coming RMAs.

We should not forget that the future is capable of throwing us curve balls. We are at the beginning of an interwar period of indeterminate length. It may last another decade; it is just as likely to last fifty years. And if we have forty-five years of sustained peace, the Armed Forces will face the most difficult of military problems: keeping prepared for the harsh Clausewitzian world of friction, ambiguity, and fog in a time of peace. The longer the peace the more unrealistic our concepts may become. Above all, we may well forget the fundamental nature of war.

That Clausewitzian world, which has endured for three thousand years of recorded military history, will also hold sway in the next century. It is not that the entire weight of the past says so: everything we know about the nonlinear, incalculable world indicates that we will not ever achieve predictability given natural phenomena. As Barry Watts suggested in a recent essay, to believe we will achieve predictability, “one

would need to overthrow nonlinear dynamics, the second law of thermodynamics, the fundamental tenets of neo-Darwinian evolutionary biology, and all the limiting metatheorems of mathematical logic. . . . No small task indeed!”

It is likely that in the next century our enemies—both large and small—will study us carefully. They will think long and hard about developing asymmetrical approaches to thwart our capabilities on the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. As we congratulate ourselves on the extraordinary possibilities of technology, we must not forget the lessons of Vietnam, when enormous advantages counted for very little in the final analysis. Above all it was hubris that led to that catastrophe; and since we will always be up against human beings, we cannot assume that they will act as we expect. “Big Blue” may have beaten a chess master, but that computer would have gone down to defeat if Kasparov had announced that he was going to play checkers instead.

Finally, remember that we live in a democracy based on individual liberties and the pursuit of happiness. Accordingly, it is extremely doubtful whether the American people will continue to fund the Armed Forces at present levels. Some believe that military spending has bottomed out. But considering the pressure exerted by an aging population and the indeterminate nature of threats on the international scene, we may well see defense budgets fall to the level of the late 1920s. With less money we must think strategically; and we are not doing enough of that today.

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