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Thinking About Future Military Operations

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Before considering the sort of joint force our nation will need in the future we need to take stock of the concepts and processes the Pentagon and Joint Staff have put in place to guide development and employment of that force. We will not find a pretty picture. This is the bad news. Thankfully, there is good news, the best of which is that a flood of inane concepts has affected our operating forces very little since they are focused on the important business of winning a war. Second, there is more than a glimmer of hope that things will get better because of the corrections the new leaders in the Pentagon and U.S. Joint Forces Command have committed to bringing about.

First, let's look at the bad news. In the years immediately after Operation Desert Storm many members of the U.S. defense establishment declared that our nation had witnessed the beginnings of a "revolution in military affairs" that would both allow and require the U.S. military to change its operational methods. The goal of this so-called "revolution" was to enable American forces to fight the next Desert Storm even more effectively. Proponents focused on technical developments at the expense of the well-founded ideas drawn from the U.S. military's intellectual renaissance of the 1980s. Soon the Department of Defense, Joint Staff, Joint Forces Command, service force development commands, and research institutions began to supplant proven doctrine with a surplus of unsupported assertions and slogans. In the end the defense community found itself mired in a morass of nonsensical concepts.

The first victim of this onslaught of vacuous catchwords was a formerly crisp professional lexicon. Since 1991 PowerPoint "Rangers" and concept writers have changed the meanings of words at will, created new terms with abandon, and strung meaningless adjectives in front of nearly every noun they use. As a result military officers today find themselves mindlessly debating the definitions of simple words such as dominant, centric, effect, and numerous others. Many confuse these efforts with real intellectual activity. Often, contemporary professional conversations sound like a broken record as speakers parrot the term *de jure* with little real thought.

One contemporary sage notes, "Definitions can be a blight. They are an invitation to scholarly pedantry. Nonetheless, they are necessary. In the absence of definitions we may quite literally, not know exactly what is being talked about."ⁱ Today, because of the corrupted professional language, many in the defense community often do not know what they are talking about. It is past time to put our military thinking and writing back on firm ground.

The second victim of the decade-and-a-half long assault on the U.S. military's professional foundations was the services' force development processes. Rather than take effective service processes and modify them as necessary, the Pentagon introduced a "capabilities-based" procedure for the joint community, a procedure that has proven dysfunctional. The secret of the services' processes was the focus on a single operational concept. The Joint Staff's first attempt to write a joint operational concept produced the *Joint Operations Concepts* or JOpsC in 2003, a document fatally flawed by the absence of a central idea, poor writing, and the mixing of ideas and administrative instructions. Rather than fixing these shortcomings, the Joint Staff built a hierarchy of supporting concepts; below the *Joint Operations Concepts* it placed, in order, joint operating concepts (JOCs), joint functional concepts (JFCs), and joint integrating concepts (JICs)—the majority of which lack meaningful content in addition to being badly written. A second effort at writing an overarching concept produced the *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations* or CCJO in 2005, a somewhat better written document, but one still missing a truly meaningful central idea.

If the situation were not bad enough, the Department of Defense and Joint Staff have compounded the problem by sending the confusing products it produces through a dysfunctional staff process, a process that wastes vast resources while turning the little that is good into a pap that won't threaten service equities. The Joint Staff created this process—actually an overly detailed procedure—known as the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System or JCIDS to guide force development. In many ways this system serves only to keep contractors and bureaucrats occupied filling reams of paper with material of little use to war fighters. When they are not writing, these minions find themselves attending a seemingly unending series of less than useful conferences and workshops. Too many of these concept developers have come to confuse the "staffing" of vacuous documents with actual intellectual work.

At this point readers may find it useful to review how the Army and Marine Corps developed intellectually solid concepts that guided U.S. forces in Operation Desert Storm, for it can serve as a model to allow the Joint Staff to move beyond today's byzantine practices.

In the early and mid-1980s a handful of serious thinkers led by visionary leaders like Army General Donn Starry and Marine General Al Gray sought to return their services to an understanding of war through the study of history and the eyes of classical military theorists. These leaders recognized the value of putting new ideas into a crucible of debate, a debate that extended across their respective services, the larger defense community and even beyond to Congress, think tanks, and academic circles. They knew that the merit of an idea is always more important than its author. Through an open

discourse they drew thoughts from many fertile minds and then assembled a very small group of writers to synthesize the best ideas and put them into papers that were themselves distributed and debated. The final concepts forged by this process found their way into each service's principal doctrinal manual.

Writers of these manuals understood that humans think in terms of images and communicate their thoughts through shared mental models or schema. Words are written to describe and explain these models, but the images or models come first. As one contemporary scholar observes:

A conceptual schema is a mediating representation that links a concept with an image. Clausewitz provides such a schema by defining war as an 'extended dual.' Through this metaphor he reduces the social complexity of war to a violent contest between two collective actors. . . . If we add the two actors from the initial situation, we arrive at the five elements that constitute the conceptual schema of war Clausewitz had in mind: the attacker, the defender, violent means, military aims, and political ends. With this schema, diverse forms of political violence can be described and compared without need to draw conceptual boundaries or to identify conceptual cores.ⁱⁱ

Not surprisingly, Clausewitzian theory provided the foundation for the two most influential operational concepts written by the American military in the past sixty years, the Army's air-land battle and the Marine Corps' maneuver warfare.ⁱⁱⁱ These two concepts fundamentally changed the Army and Marine Corps' approach to war, guided the development of doctrine, the structure and composition of organizations, and the acquisition of weapons. The essence of the concepts formed the basis for the ideas on joint war fighting employed so successfully in Operation Desert Storm.

The senior leaders who sought to have the U.S. military walk away from its intellectual foundations—through the revolution in military affairs and transformation nonsense—were, for the most part, unschooled in the art of war. Their focus was the science of war, especially technology. Not surprisingly, many of these officers came from the military communities where technology is preeminent. They knew virtually nothing of the schema nor the historical foundations used to explain the services' demonstratively successful concepts.

The case these self-styled reformers presented for change was supported by numerous civilian pundits who appeared equally ignorant of the art of war. To the professionally inexperienced and ill-informed, however, the purported reformers' argument appeared

sensible, thus they “won” their case in the court of public opinion. The real war fighters who challenged these professed modernizers were frequently billed as luddites.

Over time these so-called “forward thinkers” offered “Dominant Maneuver,” “Information Superiority,” Network-Centric Operations,” “Effects-Based Operations” and other allegedly innovative notions as the concepts for the future. Literally millions of dollars were expended in experiments that were often manipulated to show the “value” of these empty ideas. Untold pages were written to explain what in reality were little more than bumper-sticker ideas, ideas without real substance. Most of these concepts were so unworkable or shallow that they never made their way to the operating forces. However, a few, like a virus, “infected” and confused the headquarters of major commands, effects-based operations being the most notable.^{iv}

Let’s now turn to the good news. First, and foremost, is the fact a number of real war-fighters—who are equally serious students of war—have replaced the “innovators” in the military’s most important senior billets. Heartening is the fact these leaders are by-in-large Clausewitzian in their outlook on war. Hence, it is through the “eyes” of the master that they contemplate the character and form of future military operations.^v Their view is summed up in the words of noted strategists and theorist, Colin Gray:

Future war can be approached in the light of the vital distinction drawn by Clausewitz between war’s ‘grammar’ and its policy ‘logic.’ . . . Future warfare viewed as grammar requires us to probe probable and possible developments in military science, with reference to how war actually could be waged. From the perspective of policy logic we need to explore official motivations to fight, though the richness of that subject has to discourage the well-meaning optimist. Violence without political context can be many things (crime, banditry, sport), cultural expression even, but it cannot be war as we have known it and chosen to define it. Future warfare cannot be discussed intelligently when innocent of political, social, and cultural contexts. But neither can it be considered prudently as an option of policy undisciplined by recognition of military constraints. War’s grammar and its policy logic must be approached as mutual dependents. Strategy is a practical business. If the troops cannot do it, policy is mere vanity.^{vi}

This understanding of war puts to rest the specious thoughts that war is anything but war! Moreover, it shelves the idea that there are new and unique forms or types of war.^{vii}

The additional good news is that many present-day admirals and generals have relegated systems analysis and engineering methodologies to their proper realms and again are emphasizing the central role of professional judgment. As military scholars they understand that reductionism has no place in the study of war. They take to heart Clausewitz's admonition that "in war more than in any other subject we must begin by looking at the nature of the whole for here more than elsewhere the part and the whole must always be thought of together."^{viii} At the same time they recognize that, "War is more than a true Chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case."^{ix}

Today many high-ranking officers appreciate that the U.S. is the master of joint operations that are centered on the fire and maneuver of large units, often called force-on-force operations. They know that the U.S. military—guided by air-land battle doctrine writ large—demonstrated this mastery in Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and again in the march on Baghdad in 2003.^x While these officers are intent on learning from such recent operations and updating doctrine, they acknowledge that any advances will be on the margin, thus they correctly see little need to invest significant resources in the effort. Conversely, and again correctly, they realize that the U.S. military's operational concept for wars of insurgency is deficient.^{xi} They couple this knowledge with an appreciation of the wisdom of Clausewitz's observation that, "We can thus say that the aims a belligerent adopts, and the resources he employs, must be governed by the particular characteristics of his own position; but will also conform to the spirit of the age and to its general character."^{xii} In other words, leaders such as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, service chiefs, and the Commander of Joint Forces Command expect belligerents today and tomorrow—in the "spirit of the age"—to resort to insurgency to counter the U.S. military's demonstrated strengths. Thus, they are investing resources—especially intellectual resources—to developing concepts for countering insurgencies.

Some observers argue that the Clausewitzian theory of war does not address insurgencies or the methods used to wage it such as terror or guerrilla warfare. Those who have actually read the Prussian general's opus *on War* know that he in fact did consider this form of war. One authority writes that the master:

. . . also believed that states as well as non-states arrived at policy decisions in similar ways, even if those ways varied significantly in terms of details; his example of the Tarter tribes . . . illustrates the case for non-states, and puts paid to the view that Clausewitz thought only in terms of the nation-state model.^{xiii}

Another authority notes that, "War is a relationship between belligerents, not necessarily states."^{xiv} For this reason, contemporary military thinkers are well advised if they follow

in the footsteps of their predecessors twenty-years ago who built a concept for “wars of fire and maneuver” based on Clausewitzian theory and build a concept for “wars of insurgency” based on that same theory.

Another item of favorable news is that the military’s new senior leaders have taken note of the fact that our understanding of the complexities of a war with nuclear weapons has diminished at the same time as the likelihood of such a tragic event has increased with the continuing proliferation of nuclear weapons. They understand that as distressing as it is to consider such an occurrence, not to consider it and to prepare countermeasures would make the consequences of such a calamity even more horrifying.

The final piece of good news concerns changes to the procedurally focused decision-making and planning methodology used in the past. The U.S. military is exceptionally proficient at employing its military decision-making process to solve military problems, especially when those problems are well-structured. It has shown far less proficiency in finding answers to ill-structured or poorly framed problems. Insurgencies certainly fall into this latter class of problems as do all wars that demand a whole of government approach. In short, the U.S. finds itself adept at problem solving, but deficient at problem setting or problem framing. Being well-grounded in military art, many of our present-day generals and admirals have realized this shortcoming and taken steps to introduce a new process of operational design.^{xv} Design is a function that precedes planning. By way of analogy, we can think of the design an architect produces for a new building that enables engineers to draw blueprints. This new process of operational design requires commanders and their planning teams to engage authorities from a variety of relevant fields in a wide-ranging discourse that helps provide insights on what are seemingly intractable problems. Experiments emphasizing the new approach to design have shown the methodology to have much promise.

In summary, we find as we near the mid-point of 2008, that a military that was rapidly becoming intellectually bankrupt, is now taking steps to rebuild its solvency. Among several current projects meant to advance our understanding of the various types of operations, one of particular note is the Joint Forces Command’s venture to revise the *Capstone Concept for Joint Operations*. The goal of this project is to produce a well-written and compelling document describing how joint forces are to think about as well as prepare for operations.^{xvi} If the project is successful, the document it produces may well serve as a catalyst for changes as fundamental to the joint force as air-land battle was to the Army and maneuver warfare to the Marine Corps some twenty-years ago. Moreover, such a strongly argued document would eliminate the need for the current plethora of supporting concepts; it would stand on its own merits! And as a side benefit

the Joint Staff could allow the current joint concept development bureaucracy to fade away, freeing scarce resources for more productive work.

In conclusion, a fifteen-year hiatus in the genuine study of war and military operations at the highest levels caused considerable harm to the American Armed Forces as they endeavored to operate in the absence of good joint doctrine. Under new leadership the joint community is again moving in the right direction, but it will take some time to recover. Recover we must, however, for: “We know with a sad certainty that war has a healthy future. What we do not know with confidence are the forms that warfare will take.”^{xvii} Therefore, we must have sound operational concepts to guide our military forces as they prepare for the several forms war is likely to take in the years ahead.

ⁱ Colin S. Gray, *Another Bloody Century: Future Warfare* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005) p. 37.

ⁱⁱ Christopher Daase, “Clausewitz and Small Wars,” in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, ed. *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 186.

ⁱⁱⁱ U.S. Army Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, 1986 described air-land battle and U.S. Marine Corps Fleet Marine Force Manual 1, *Warfighting*, 1988 described maneuver warfare.

^{iv} The U.S. defense establishment had a long-standing naming convention for the “ends” of policy, strategy, campaigns, and operations that nested *goals*, *objectives*, and *missions* (*tasks* and associated *intents*) in succession. In truth, the titles for these “ends” are immaterial, but wide-spread agreement on their meaning and use aided discussions and development of plans and orders. Proponents of effects-based operations never were able to explain what benefit they imagined the military would gain by altering one of the existing names for “ends” to “effects.” The U.S. Joint Forces Command’s original version of effects-based operations was even more egregious as it mandated systems analysis of operations, a rerun of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara’s muddled approach to planning during the Vietnam War.

^v Those who speak of the changing nature of war fail to grasp that war’s nature is immutable. If war’s nature were able to change war would be a totally different phenomenon. By way of analogy, we can say that if human nature were to change we would not be the beings we now recognize.

^{vi} Gray, p. 37.

^{vii} Among the many suspect “new” forms or types are 4th generation war, asymmetric war, complex war, and hybrid war. As Colin Gray writes, “War is organized violence threatened or waged for political purposes. That is its nature. If the behavior under scrutiny is other than that defined, it is not war.” (Gray, p. 39.)

^{viii} Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 75.

^{ix} Clausewitz, p. 89.

^x During Operation Desert Storm joint doctrine was not fully codified; as a result U.S. Central Command used an expanded form of air-land battle to guide its planning and operations. The Joint Staff did not produce a fully coherent body of joint doctrine until the late 1990s. For the most part, this corpus of thought was based on Army air-land battle and Marine Corps maneuver warfare doctrine. However, the generation of joint doctrine that followed this initial body of work either abandoned previous thinking or corrupted it by mixing in “effects thinking.”

^{xi} Though the new Army (FM 3-24) and Marine Corps (MCWP 3-33.5), *Counterinsurgency* manual mainly focuses on the tactics, techniques, and procedures of counterinsurgency, it does contain conceptual elements that will aid concept developers as they explore the character of insurgencies.

^{xii} Clausewitz, p. 594.

^{xiii} Antulio J. Echevarria II, “Clausewitz and the Nature of War on Terror,” in Hew Strachan and Andreas Herberg-Rothe, ed. *Clausewitz in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 206.

^{xiv} Gray, p.37.

^{xv} Many of the generation of recently retired senior officers approached problems with an engineering mindset. Their “tool set” contained only analytical tools, that is to say tools ideally suited for quantitative problems. Faced with qualitative problems they often sought to solve them analytically, an impossible task. Today’s senior officers also seem comfortable with these analytical tools, but they are equally comfortable with heuristic tools that allow them to approach very complex and dynamic problems holistically.

^{xvi} The author of this paper is as one of several retired military officers serving as senior mentors assisting with this project.

^{xvii} Gray, p. 37.