

EXAMINING CHANGES IN CHARACTER AND CONDUCT OF WAR AS A BASIS
FOR A SOF-CENTRIC STRATEGY

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During the critical period between World War I and World War II, Giulio Douhet noted, “Victory smiles upon those who anticipate the changes in the character of war, not upon those who wait to adapt themselves after the changes occur.”¹ Douhet’s observation holds true today, and should form the basis of military force structure and planning. This paper examines trends since the 1991 Gulf War that amount to a dramatic change in the character and conduct of war. Based on these changes, a proposed force strategy is presented. Special Operations Forces are revealed to be the component of existing forces best suited for the new face of war, and thus the linchpin to the nation’s future defense capabilities.

The first step in the analysis is to examine the technical and societal changes that have directly and indirectly contributed to the need for a transformation of U.S. military forces. An underlying change in both technology and society is the explosive growth of information technology. On the military side, information technology has led to unprecedented capability for precision strikes enabled by real-time comprehensive intelligence and supported by robust command, control, and communications networks. Together this allows for massed effects to replace the traditional need to mass forces and for refined targeting to the point where it can drive strategies. Perhaps more significantly, the impact of information technology on society has created a “global village.” With modern mobile telecommunications, there are few remaining places on the planet where something can happen without it being brought into our lives. Sometimes called the “CNN effect,” this phenomenon focuses media coverage anywhere on the globe on a moment’s notice and creates a national attention span which is often limited to sound bites. Another side effect of this technology is that we can now see the humanity of even

¹ Giulio Douhet, The Command of the Air (Washington DC: GPO, 1998), 30.

our worst enemies. Even as we mourn our losses, we are forced to recognize the impact of collateral damage inflicted on innocents caught up in conflict.

THE NEW CHARACTER OF WAR

Juxtaposed to these technological and societal changes, there have been five major conflicts involving U.S. forces since the 1991 Gulf War - Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. With the exception of Somalia, each resulted in the U.S. achieving its objective with relatively little effort applied to the task (compared to the potential level of force available) and minor costs incurred in terms of both blood and treasure lost. Each of these engagements included severe restrictions on our fighting forces. The conflicts with Serbia were characterized by limitations in rules of engagement to minimize the threat to our aircrews and the declaration that ground forces would not be introduced. The more recent campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq were fought under constant high-level political and public pressure to minimize the size of the deployment and subsequent employment of forces. In Somalia, the determination was made that the objective was so limited in value that it did not warrant the cost incurred and was thus abandoned rather than seeking additional means to achieve it.

Based on these cases, we observe that for the United States, war is greatly self-constrained. Only very small portions of the nation's resources are applied. While there is much talk of the immense size of the U.S. defense budget relative to the rest of the world, spending for the last decade has remained in the range of 3-4% of total GDP. During World War II, almost 40% of the GDP went to defense in an economy driven to support efforts that required the mobilization of all available resources for the cause. Over 16 million served in uniform and virtually the entire populace was energized to support the war. As a further sign of how much things have changed, in the past even a "limited war" like the Korean conflict saw defense

spending rise to approximately 15% of GDP.² In contrast, fighting the global war on terror while also defeating the “axis of evil” and maintaining a strategic nuclear deterrent is not likely to cause spending to rise beyond 4% of GDP. On the personnel side, there has been increased use of reservists, but the military significantly downsized since the 1991 Gulf War, and there are still tight constraints on its overall size. For the past decade and for the foreseeable future, war has been and will continue to be a niche activity that simply does not involve or impact (other than emotionally) the vast majority of the nation.

Some would argue that the September 11th attack is evidence against this trend. It was an unprecedented horrific attack on our homeland that killed thousands of innocent citizens and galvanized the entire nation to war. Yet in actuality it proves the case. Calls by many common men for the opportunity to contribute went unanswered by the U.S. government and, outside select military communities, life for America today goes on much as it did before – with the exception of minor inconveniences during airport travel. Even though the adversary openly threatens our very way of life, what we see today is far from the “total war” of the last century.

Perhaps even more significant than the limitation on overall resources committed to the cause, is the apparent limit on the level of acceptable violence when the United States is at war. Where the U.S. once fought wars that cost tens of thousands of our young men’s lives, we now truly agonize over each and every casualty. The Kosovo conflict represented the culmination of this trend, being fought in such a way as to achieve over 30,000 sorties flown without a single pilot being lost.³ Our nation tolerates the loss of over 40,000 lives in traffic accidents each year

² Defense and the National Interest, <http://www.d-n-i.net/top_level/charts_and_data.htm> (18 Oct 2003)

³ Lambeth, Benjamin S., NATO’s Air War For Kosovo, (Santa Monica CA: RAND, 2001), 246.

but to suffer anywhere near that number of military casualties would be considered disastrous beyond all reason.⁴

A second trend line can also be drawn showing a decline in casualties inflicted. The days of fire bombing cities and killing 40,000 – 80,000 men, women, and children in a single attack are long gone. In their place we see detailed planning to avoid collateral damage and media frenzy if even a single bomb goes astray. While passions remain high for some, bloodlust seems to die out quickly in other elements of American society. Even while continuing to retrieve remains from the World Trade Center, we faced cries to practice restraint in our handling of captured terrorists.

There are three reasons behind this specific constraint. First, because technology allows us to refine our efforts and still achieve objectives. Second, civil society has “matured” to the point it finds it very difficult to condone violence. Both of these are closely intertwined with the advances in information technology noted earlier. Lastly, despite recent terrorist rhetoric, the U.S. has not actually confronted a threat of sufficient magnitude to overcome the first two tendencies. If the nation faced such a challenge, as it did during the Cold War with the threat of nuclear annihilation, then the calculus for inflicting and incurring casualties would be radically altered.

Absent the re-emergence of a peer competitor, the statistical trend in casualty figures can be expected to continue. Thus, the U.S. not only takes significant efforts to limit its losses, but also to greatly restrain damage wrought upon the enemy – because the American public cannot tolerate much exposure to either. A key example was the “highway of death” that helped precipitate the end of the first Gulf War.” Miles of vehicles destroyed by airstrikes on the road

⁴ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, <<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/>>, (18 Oct 2203)

out of Kuwait left the impression of a massacre that caused concern over public will to continue the fight and contributed to premature termination of the conflict.

The limited character of war as described above causes a distinct shift in critical centers of gravity. In previous eras, conflicts have targeted fielded forces, industrial capacity, and the will of the people. Today, the most effective target for U.S. forces is adversary leadership. Focusing efforts against adversary leadership allows us to take advantage of our technological advances to avoid unnecessary contact with enemy forces and minimize wider damage against the target country. A decapitation strategy offers the ultimate goal in limited war, where a particularly evil individual or small group of uncooperative actors can be singled out for elimination while the rest of the nation is not engaged. The opening strike of Operation Iraqi Freedom was a hallmark of this new trend, but it was also seen in the attempts to bring pressure on Milosevic by targeting his crony support structure during the Kosovo conflict.

Our ability to hold the adversary leadership at risk leads them to perceive an entirely different character of war. Knowing that any strike against the U.S. could result in retaliation that seeks their own death, they see war as total. The distinction between combatants and non-combatants is non-existent in the eyes of our adversaries. Yet, since the only center of gravity potentially vulnerable to their attacks is the will of the American people, there are some restraints on their conduct. Their objective is to cause enough pain to change our perceived cost benefit calculation and abandon the fight, but not too much pain to enrage us to the point where we insist on victory at any cost. Again, 9/11 can be used to illustrate this trend. Usama Bin Ladin struck against what he saw as a valid target, but some argue he miscalculated by generating such a massive counter-attack. On the other hand, the nation has yet to mobilize sufficient resources to finish the job.

The final descriptor for the new character of war is that it is global. Whereas geography has long been a predominating factor from the strategic to tactical scale of war, it now matters less. As noted earlier, information technology has broadened our focus to encompass regions beyond traditional geopolitical concern. Other advances in technology have made it possible for U.S. forces to engage anywhere on the planet within hours. On the opposite side of the equation, adversaries recognize the relative strength of our fielded forces and seek opportunities elsewhere – in the continental United States or even previously uninvolved third party states. It is no longer meaningful to think of conflicts as contained to a particular region in the face of growing concern over vulnerability in the homeland, missile proliferation, WMD proliferation, and cyber-threats to our globally integrated and networked society. We have lost the sanctuary of our oceans, but at the same time can move and supply our forces over desert, mountain, and jungle with unparalleled ability.

THE NEW CONDUCT OF WAR

From the end of the 1991 Gulf War through today, the best overall descriptor is that war is being conducted asymmetrically. For the most part, we have not seen and should not expect to see major force-on-force engagements. The demise of the Soviet Union means there are virtually no capital ships to challenge our navy, our fighter pilots fly practically unopposed over enemy skies, and there will be no clash of armor in the Fulda Gap. Adversaries have come to realize the bold USAF challenge of “You Fly, You Die” is not hype, as evidenced by the absence of even a single sortie flown by the Iraqi Air Force in the latest conflict.

The superior equipment and training of U.S. forces assures it is almost impossible for adversaries to challenge them in a symmetric manner. The imbalance in resources reinforces

this point as the U.S. accounts for 43% of the total global military expenditure.⁵ Yet as the attack on the USS Cole proved, there are alternative approaches to counter the U.S. Navy rather than building comparable vessels that cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Asymmetry is the natural result of a clash between strong and weak, and thus it recently has been and will continue to be the prevailing attribute in the conduct of war with the United States.

Another attribute of today's war is the importance of deception, surprise, and intelligence. These concepts, which were downplayed by Clausewitz but portrayed as paramount by Sun Tzu, have once again come to the fore. Factors such as ensuring proper force ratios, alignment and positioning of troop formations are now far outweighed by the ability to catch the enemy off guard. This is a natural side effect of asymmetric battle, as a series of limited but intense engagements replace extended maneuvers played out over the course of long days and months of fighting.

Having dominated the realm of conventional forces and tactics, whenever U.S. forces are employed they achieve decisive results in relatively short duration high-intensity engagements. The combination of precision, intelligence, and strategic agility allows the U.S. military to rapidly overcome adversary forces when they present themselves for battle. However, recognizing their shortfall in this capacity, our adversaries continue to seek alternative methods to fight. Long drawn out conflicts between large field armies is an anachronism of past centuries, while unconventional conflicts such as insurgencies and the global war on terror are the wave of the future. As seen by continued fighting in both Iraq and Afghanistan today, our adversaries will melt away only to come back as insurgent elements and present an enduring

⁵ "Worldwide Military Spending Jumps", [CBS News Online](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/06/17/attack/main559060.shtml), 17 June 2003, <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/06/17/attack/main559060.shtml>> (19 Oct 2003).

hazard. Even as it becomes easier for us to achieve quick tactical successes, complete victory in conflict seems to be a more and more elusive goal.

FROM TRENDS TO TRANSFORMATION

It is now evident that the 1991 Gulf War was the start of a turning point in the history of war. A U.S. military force of almost a half-million faced a veteran force of defending Iraqis of roughly equal number. Iraq attempted to engage in a traditional conflict based on their long experience at war with Iran – but after a debilitating air campaign and 100 hours of ground fighting, the U.S. decisively defeated what had been one of the world's largest armies. Our ability to dramatically outmaneuver and outfight a well-prepared and equipped adversary was a lesson learned by the United States and the entire world audience. As a result of that experience and the continued technological and societal changes detailed in this paper, the character and conduct of war has changed.

To date, the U.S. has continued to enjoy victories in the face of these changing conditions. Yet it remains essential that these changes should be fully understood in order to make the proper adjustments in force structure and strategy that are being described as transformation. For while it is still possible to win wars without optimizing forces strategies, it is clearly not the preferred method. The optimal force mix must always maintain an ability to meet a spectrum of challenges, but it must also be continuously be re-balanced to adapt to new environments.

True transformation requires adjusting force structure and operations to meet what we expect future war to be like. Such a prediction can be made by examining current trends that have already begun to impact the character and conduct of war. What those trends portray is a limited war of asymmetric forces with short sporadic engagements, often drawn out over long

periods of time. It is a struggle where we try to leverage our superior technology to defeat adversary leadership before the enemy can overcome our public will to fight.

A FUTURE FORCE STRATEGY

The first conclusion that can be drawn from the analysis is that the U.S. must approach national security in a holistic manner. It is no longer possible for us to expect the military alone to achieve complete victory against our adversaries. The public will not tolerate the amount of death and destruction that such a strategy entails. Instead of expecting to overwhelm our opponents and force them into total submission in a manner similar to World War II, military force must be applied as part of an orchestrated approach to resolve crises.

In order to lay the groundwork for effective use of military power, it is necessary to build up our capability to apply diplomatic, economic, and information power. In the last few years, the defense budget rose from approximately \$250 billion to \$400 billion. During the same period, the U.S. budget for international affairs rose from approximately \$10 billion dollars to almost \$30 billion. While the percentage increases are similar, the total dollar figures reveal a significant imbalance in our investment among the various elements of national power. The question we must answer is whether or not the money is being spent in the most effective manner, given the expectations regarding the character and conduct of war we will fight.

An alternative approach would begin by reallocating a sizable portion of the recent increase, away from defense to the equally critical areas of international affairs, intelligence, and homeland security. The DoD budget would still be quite healthy, while the tens of billions added to these other functions would facilitate truly transformational change. Our Foreign Service corps could be tripled in size from five to fifteen thousand. Public Diplomacy programs that have been struggling and largely ineffective in the global war of ideas could be completely

reinvented with a ten-fold increase in resources. Our ability to sway hearts and minds could be complimented with billions of dollars more foreign economic and military aid. In the realm of homeland security, the nation's critical infrastructure could be protected, while we develop a robust cyber defense capability. Lastly, significant increases in human intelligence and analytical capabilities could be made to better match the challenges we now face.

After shifting these resources the DoD would be part of a strong team rather than the sole effective player in national security. Even so, significant internal changes would be needed to strengthen DoD's ability to adapt to the environment as laid out earlier. There is one component of the DoD that currently aligns very closely with the expected needs. Special Operations Forces (SOF) exist to conduct the types of missions that have now become the mainstay of war. Their ability to move quickly and undetected behind enemy lines to overcome discreet targets with precision is unmatched. As Operation Iraqi Freedom revealed, this capability is a true force multiplier and can directly offset the need to deploy additional forces. Similarly, SOF specialties in areas such as civil affairs and psychological operations are essential to the persistent challenges of peacekeeping, nation building, and counter-insurgency. When core competencies in foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare, and special reconnaissance are added to the mix, it becomes clear that the road to transformation leads to right to SOF. These forces should become the centerpiece of the DoD.

With approximately 46,000 personnel and \$6 billion in resources, Special Operations represents less than 2% of the DoD. Yet, it is clear that these forces have been, and will continue to be, the first to get the call. Making an appropriate investment in SOF will likely require draw downs in other areas. Again, the key to making these tradeoffs is to examine the actual and expected combat requirements. As the earlier analysis reveals, conventional capabilities such as

fighter aircraft, surface ships, submarines, field artillery and tanks are simply not in demand to the degree they once were. It is hard to argue that our dominant position cannot be maintained even if these weapon systems were cut by 20-30% from their current levels. Resources of this magnitude would permit dramatic increases in SOF, doubling or tripling currently available forces.

Expansion even beyond that level may be ideal in theory, but impossible in practice. Increases to SOF must be approached carefully to avoid the point of diminishing returns and ensure their unique training and exceptional character is not diluted. Other forces must be built-up where they have a comparative advantage. For example, military police strength needs to be increased significantly and a constabulary force established to relieve over-taxed units performing occupation duties. Together, with continuing existing emphasis on precision bombing and strategic airlift, we can have a military force that is more truly matched to the strategic environment.

CONCLUSION

While it is impossible to be certain what future conflict will entail, we can make reasonable predictions based upon evident trends. In doing so, this paper has demonstrated a need to re-evaluate our investment towards national security. If the character and conduct of war is to continue in the manner predicted in this paper, then much of our investment is misplaced. At the core of national security is risk management, and since even we cannot afford to do everything, it is imperative that alternatives be considered.

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