

Complex Irregular Warfare: The Next Revolution in Military Affairs

by Frank G. Hoffman

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Abstract: At the time of the 9/11 attacks, Washington was embarking on a defense transformation emphasizing missile defense, space assets, precision weaponry, and information technology. This transformation proved irrelevant to the national security threats we now face, with the emergence of nontraditional adversaries pursuing "complex irregular warfare." U.S. forces will have to assume a much more expeditionary character to successfully deal with Islamists' complex irregular warfare. The March 2005 U.S. National Defense Strategy provides a balance to the longstanding American military emphasis on major-theater war, but it remains to be seen whether the military's new interest in operations other than conventional, major-combat operations will last or if it will diminish as soon as a new peer competitor rises, allowing the Pentagon to return to its more familiar paradigm.

Osama bin Laden broke a cardinal rule of strategy. Napoleon's famous dictum, "Never interrupt your opponent when he's making a mistake," is an ironclad law in the strategic canon. At the time of the 9/11 attacks, Washington was embarking on a major shift in defense priorities. The Bush administration was preparing to radically displace conventional forces and sharply shift investment priorities to transform American military capabilities, placing particular emphasis on missile defense, space assets, precision weaponry, and information technology.

In hindsight, bin Laden would have been wiser to let American military capabilities transform themselves into an irrelevant box. Both civilian and military officials were misreading what really constituted threats to American national security interests, oriented as they were to idealized and outdated versions of warfare. Had the United States achieved the transformation agenda being put forward, it would have been placed at a substantial disadvantage. Its

capacity to defend against ballistic missiles and to attack the space-based communications and intelligence assets of a mythical peer-competitor might have been superb. Its ability to dominate the electronic spectrum would have been unsurpassed, and nothing within a 200-square-mile box could have moved without being detected by some ubiquitous “unblinking eye” over the battlespace. The “fog of war”¹ would have magically been blown away by America’s information dominance, and potential conventional enemies, recognizing this fact, would have quietly acquiesced to the resulting *Pax Americana*.

This transformation has proven to be irrelevant to the national security threats we face for the foreseeable future. Instead, we now have the emergence of what the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London has recently named “complex irregular warfare”—nontraditional modes of warfare that are causing violent perturbations to the existing world order.²

The False Premise of the RMA

When it came into office, the Bush administration embraced the idea that America’s defense machinery needed to be transformed. It had a distinct bent towards precision technology against conventional, state-based threats. Building upon the claims of advocates of a Revolution in Military Affairs and recommendations of the National Defense Panel, the new administration urged substantial reforms for the Pentagon.

This agenda focused predominantly on the technological dimension of warfare, despite historical studies showing that RMAs and qualitative changes in military effectiveness are usually the product of new combinations of novel technologies, innovative concepts, and appropriate organizational frameworks. True military innovation is linked to the identification of a real operational challenge. “Military revolutions” are also historically related to strategic threats.

RMA proponents were enthusiastic about the new wave of information superiority and its presumed dominance for American arms. They called for sharply increased spending on a “system of systems” that would increase the United States’ capacity to employ information technology and precision weapons. Those with the most fully developed plans explicitly used cuts in ground forces, cutting at least two Army Divisions and one Marine Division as offsets for more computers, satellites, networked sensors, and precision munitions.³

¹ Adm. Bill Owens, with Ed Offley, *Lifting the Fog of War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).

² “Complex Irregular Warfare: The Face of Contemporary Conflict,” in *Military Balance 2005–06*, (London: IISS, 2005), pp. 411–20.

³ James Blaker, *Understanding the RMA: A Guide to America’s 21st Century Defense Military Affairs* (Washington, D.C.: Progressive Policy Institute, 1997).

This view suffers from a number of defects, including an underestimation of the political and social dynamics generated by the forces of globalization. Transformation overlooked what King's College professor Lawrence Freedman aptly called the Revolution in Strategic Affairs related to globalization.⁴ Similar arguments were also put forward by other analysts and military professionals who properly identified the truly revolutionary shifts that would characterize human conflict in this era. The 9/11 attacks punctured the illusions and misguided priorities inherent to the initial conception of transformation, and events in Afghanistan and Iraq have reinforced the military's turning away from the earlier, technocentric orientation.⁵

The March 2005 U.S. *National Defense Strategy* identified a range of emerging threats and irregular challengers.⁶ It provides a balance to the long-standing American military emphasis on major-theater war, which focuses on the illusions of short wars and precision-attack technology as the principal means of defeating challengers.⁷ But it remains to be seen whether the U.S. military's new interest in operations other than conventional, major-combat operations will last or if it will diminish with the first sign of a new peer competitor (e.g., China) that allows the Pentagon to stand pat with its more familiar paradigm.

The Rise of Irregular Warfare

"Irregular warfare" is inspired by the ideologies that spawned Islamist terrorism and Osama bin Laden, but it will not end with their defeat. Irregular warfare is a natural reaction to globalization and America's overwhelming military superiority. Having raised its own way of war to its apotheosis, the United States has turned future opponents to alternative means that are purposely designed and deployed to thwart conventionally oriented Western societies. The means needed to translate rage into catastrophic levels of violence are now more widely available, thanks to globalization.

The nature of the new irregular warfare is not completely clear. It could take form as "fourth-generation warfare" (4GW), as described by William Lind or Thomas Hammes.⁸ Advocates of 4GW describe future conflicts as either

⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *The Revolution in Strategic Affairs* (London: IISS, 2001). See also Ralph Peters, "The Counter-Revolution in Military Affairs," *The Weekly Standard*, Feb. 6, 2006.

⁵ Vice Adm. Arthur Cebrowski, "The Transformation of Transformation," U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md., April 2004, at www.oft.osd.mil.

⁶ Donald Rumsfeld, *The National Defense Strategy*, March 2005, at www.defenselink.mil. This was the first ever issuance of a Departmental strategy in unclassified format.

⁷ Frederick Kagan, "War and Aftermath," *Policy Review*, No. 120, August 2003.

⁸ See William S. Lind, Keith Nightengale, John Schmitt, and Gary I. Wilson, "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation," *Marine Corps Gazette*, November 2001; Martin Van Creveld, *The Transformation in War* (New York: Free Press, 1991); and Thomas X. Hammes, "4th Generation Warfare: Our Enemy Plays to their Strengths," *Armed Forces Journal International*, November 2004, p. 40.

super insurgencies or a more blurred contest of wills in which political and moral factors implode a state from within. It could be General Krulak's "three-block war" construct, which predicted that U.S. forces would find themselves simultaneously fighting, peacekeeping, and handling humanitarian tasks in the same battlefield. It could evolve into "war beyond limits," as described by Chinese theorists in *Unrestricted Warfare*.⁹ This mode of conflict sanctions domestic terrorism, hacking against financial networks, using biological agents, and manipulating the media, as well as conventional war. Whatever form it takes, it probably will not occur in the manner described in the Pentagon's defense strategy, with enemies choosing discrete options among conventional, irregular, catastrophic, or disruptive strategies. More likely we will face hybrid capabilities custom-designed by our adversaries to thwart U.S. vulnerabilities. One of the few areas of consensus among military analysts is that we are sure to see the further blurring of warfare categories. This would include states' blending high-tech capabilities such as anti-satellite weapons with terrorism and cyber-warfare directed against financial targets. For the purposes of this article, I assume that the future will be "a world of asymmetric and ethno-political warfare—in which machetes and Microsoft merge, and apocalyptic millenarians wearing Reeboks and Ray Bans dream of acquiring WMD."¹⁰

Future adversaries will not remain low-tech. Instead, opponents will be capable of what could be called "advanced irregular warfare," with access to encrypted command systems, manportable air defense missiles (MANPADS), and other modern lethal systems.¹¹ Enemies will be protean in their structure and their tactics and may even be leaderless.¹² They may elect a more cellular structure, with greater autonomy and less connectivity than formal networks, as did the perpetrators of the March 2004 Madrid bombings and the July 2005 London bombings. They may employ hybrid structures where specific capabilities or financial support is provided to local cells to augment their functional capability for a single mission. Such hybrid structures will likely mix legitimate commercial work with criminal energy.¹³ Cunning savagery and organizational adaptation will be the only constant.

These adversaries will almost always play to their own strengths, certainly never ours. They will avoid predictability or linear operations. They

⁹ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, *Unrestricted Warfare: China's Master Plan to Destroy America* (Pan American, 2002).

¹⁰ Michael Evans, "From Kadesh to Kandahar: Military Theory and the Future of War," *Naval War College Review*, Summer 2003, p. 136.

¹¹ Andrew Krepinevich, *The Quadrennial Defense Review: Rethinking the U.S. Military Posture* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 2005), pp. 44–45.

¹² Jessica Stern, "The Protean Enemy," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2003; Chris Dishman, "The Leaderless Nexus: When Crime and Terror Converge," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, May/June 2005.

¹³ See Rollie Lal, "South Asia's Organized Crime and Terrorist Networks," *Orbis*, Spring 2005.

will seek to minimize risks to their forces, while seeking maximum impact on the target population or government. They appear to be increasingly adaptive and sophisticated, able to outpace state-based militaries in the dialectic and competitive learning cycle inherent to wars. Rather than short, decisive conflicts, future wars will involve protracted and extremely lethal conflicts of the most savage violence—in short, complex irregular warfare.

A Subtle and Flexible U.S. Military Posture

The U.S. military posture requires a less direct approach than it did during the twentieth-century, when the old, garrison-era military bases still sufficed. Instead of the visible and stationary use of forward-based forces, tomorrow's military deployments should be less direct and appear less intrusive. As Robert Kaplan has written, "The more subtle and cautious its application of power, the greater would be America's sustaining impact. The United States could hold sway over the world only quietly, off camera, so to speak."¹⁴

The Pentagon's recent *Global Posture Review* is a perfect example of an indirect strategy, trading off yesterday's small set of fixed Cold War bases for a set of more flexible arrangements in many distant lands. Regrettably, despite its careful deliberations with foreign governments, DoD has overestimated the value of fixed "lily pads" and underestimated their costs and political limitations. Maximum influence should be sought from a minimum footprint. The strategic and operational value of maritime platforms as fluid bases under U.S. sovereignty should come to the fore. This will require changes in the way we structure and view our staffs and bases. We have tended to bring America forward to our bases, making them little Americas, complete with McDonald's, McDonnell Douglas, Maytag, and Microsoft. Our bases end up as large monuments to our way of life, undercutting our hosts' culture. Another major requirement is minimizing direct applications of U.S. military power, instead working with local militaries to solve the problems at hand.

Military force design should stress greater responsiveness, strategic mobility, and tactical speed. Modularity, agility, and endurance should be built into the force. For early-entry forces, readiness, versatility, and credible military power are key. Special operations forces will be especially useful. Power projection and war-winning capabilities must be lethal and decisive, but some dedicated forces should be designed to provide responsive middle-weight forces that can be placed forward or rapidly deployed from afar. Such forces should be prepared to operate within an austere environment and to integrate seamlessly into a joint force.

In addition to the political costs of sustained access, there are growing operational risks to relying upon fixed ports and airfields. Future adversaries,

¹⁴ Robert Kaplan, *Imperial Grunts* (New York: Random House, 2005), p. 368.

recognizing the United States' superiority in conventional military terms, will seek techniques and technologies that will deflect American intervention. Instead of resigning themselves to U.S. attacks, they will try to mitigate U.S. strengths and exploit perceived weaknesses.¹⁵ Missiles capable of delivering WMD or conventional payloads with great precision against fixed targets will become increasingly available, and at lower costs. Key nodes within a theater for transportation and reception of U.S. forces will be put at greater risk, which will vastly complicate U.S. expeditionary operations. U.S. forces will have to assume a much more expeditionary character to successfully deal with complex irregular warfare.

The Army

Conceptually, the U.S. Army is beginning to shape itself for complex irregular warfare. The new Army vision calls for a "campaign-quality Army" that incorporates both joint and expeditionary capabilities. This includes the capacity not only to conduct decisive combat operations, but also to sustain operations indefinitely, as well as to adapt itself to the unexpected and unpredictable. As Army Chief of Staff General Schoomaker puts it, "The Army's preeminent challenge is to reconcile expeditionary agility and responsiveness with the staying power, durability, and adaptability to carry a conflict to a victorious conclusion no matter what form it eventually takes."¹⁶

This vision is oriented on the more asymmetric adversaries targeted in the war on terror. General Schoomaker focuses on the undeterrable and "morally unconstrained" adversaries who are opposed to the United States and its allies. The Army professes to recognize that its enemies will seek asymmetric approaches that provide shelter in those environments and methods for which we are least prepared.

Overcoming this adversary requires the adoption of a mindset that is both expeditionary and joint. This approach accepts uncertainty about location, the high probability of an austere environment, and the need to fight immediately upon arrival. It moves the Army from its current disposition toward predictable enemies to an understanding that the new enemies are elusive and will have to be engaged in the far corners of the world. Appropriately, the individual soldier is the centerpiece for the Army's transformation. The Army's pending transformation gives primacy to the warrior ethos, training, and education of "the ultimate combination of sensor and shooter," the individual soldier. Its education programs will focus on teaching soldiers

¹⁵ K. Frank McKenzie, *The Revenge of the Melians: Asymmetric Threats and the 2001 QDR* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2000).

¹⁶ Les Brownlee and Gen. Peter Schoomaker, "Serving a Nation at War: A Campaign Quality Army with Joint and Expeditionary Capabilities," *Parameters*, Summer 2004, p. 5.

Table 1. Current Army Plans for Transformed Force Structure

Brigades Combat Team Types	Active	Guard	Total
Heavy	19	10	29
Medium	6	1	7
Infantry	18	23	41
Total	43	34	77

how, rather than what, to think, since defeating adaptive enemies requires the Army to outthink the enemy. The vision statement aptly notes the need for greater agility and versatility, which it says will be gained by emphasizing modularity at the brigade level and combined arms at the lower levels.

Unfortunately, the Army's conceptual shift is not being matched by shifts in its major force structure (see Table 1) and Future Concept System (FCS) program, a collection of manned and unmanned vehicles linked by networks. The main feature of the transformation effort is the evolution of the division-based Army to one centered on Brigade combat teams (BCTs).¹⁷ It is said that this reorganization toward modularity, rather than ad-hoc task organization, will allow the Army to design units that are more self-contained, more cohesive within their separate brigades, and faster to deploy. The Army's intent was to reformulate the Army's ten Divisions, or 33 BCT equivalents, into 43 smaller BCTs. The BCTs are supported by an array of support brigades as well. The mix of heavy (armor), medium (based on the Stryker vehicle), and infantry brigades is shown in Table 1. The Army's original vision was to redesign the National Guard along the same lines, creating a total of 77 BCTs.

However, the modularity concept offers less than meets the eye. To increase the number of combat brigades, the Army has had to trade off maneuver units to create the overhead for the brigade headquarters and various supporting units. While the Army's civilian leadership claims that the planned transformation increases combat power by 30 percent, true combat power measured in either battalions or companies is actually reduced.¹⁸ Modularity provides more flexibility for deployment and sustaining adequate troop rotation, but it does not increase combat power. On the contrary, according to one Pentagon study, the plan actually weakens combat capability.¹⁹ In the active Army, more than 20,000 "trigger-pullers" have been sacrificed. Finally, the Army's force structure appears to focus almost exclusively on combat operations, offering insufficient assets to address

¹⁷ Katherine McIntire Peters, "Fighting Weight," *Government Executive*, Jan. 1, 2002; Grace Jean, "Army's Ghost Riders," *National Defense*, October 2005.

¹⁸ Francis J. Harvey, "Building the Future Force While Continuing to Fight the Global War on Terrorism," *Army*, October 2005.

¹⁹ Elaine Grossman, "Study Finds Army Transformation Plan Weakens Combat Capability," *Inside the Pentagon*, Jan. 26, 2006, p. 1.

full-spectrum operations or post-conflict stabilization requirements.²⁰ The Army is struggling to come to grips with both the fiscal cost of the \$160 billion FCS program and the balance between modernization and manpower.²¹

Air Force

The U.S. Air Force has materially contributed to America's military dominance over the past several decades by its relentless pursuit of airpower dominance. This dominance is vital in an era of irregular threats, and must be maintained. Airpower has made unique contributions to small wars in the past; in fact, several aerospace innovations, including close air support and medical evacuations, were spawned in irregular contexts.²²

However, recent combat case histories show that airpower is useful but not sufficient to achieve U.S. political objectives. While the Air Force will make material contributions to and perhaps even significantly shape operational success, its claims about the primacy of airpower, as in Kosovo, are overstated. Viewed objectively, Kosovo is a better case for the capacity of adaptive adversaries to negate our technological edge and preference for standoff warfare.²³

Afghanistan was another case where airpower made remarkable contributions. A combination of precision strike in Afghanistan, coupled with helpful target designation from a small contingent of U.S. Special Operations Forces, renewed claims about the breakthrough in "pinpoint" bombing.²⁴ But overall, this conflict reinforced the lessons from Kosovo. One cannot overlook the role of the Northern Alliance, which compelled the Taliban to mass or flee, or ignore the lost opportunity in the Tora Bora, where a lack of U.S.-led ground forces allowed hundreds of fleeing Al Qaeda members to escape.²⁵

The utility of airpower varies across different types of conflicts. The new character of conflict will limit the application of strategic bombing and operational interdiction. Strategic airpower is effective against states whose

²⁰ Brian G. Watson, *Reshaping the Expeditionary Army to Win Decisively: The Case for Greater Stabilization Capacity in the Modular Force* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, Army War College, 2005).

²¹ Greg Jaffe, "Army Weighs Slower Troop Growth To Keep Modernization on Track," *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 7, 2005, p. 3.

²² James S. Corum and Wray R. Johnson, *Airpower in Small Wars: Fighting Insurgents and Terrorists* (Lawrence, Kan.: University of Kansas Press, 2003).

²³ See Ivo H. Daalder and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *Winning Ugly: NATO's War to Save Kosovo* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 2000), pp. 202–3.

²⁴ See, e.g., Thomas E. Ricks, "Bull's-Eye War: Pinpoint Bombing Shifts Role of GI Joe," *Washington Post*, Dec. 2, 2001; Michael Kelly, "The Air-Power Revolution," *Atlantic Monthly*, April 2002, p. 18. For a balanced assessment, see Michael E. O'Hanlon, "A Flawed Masterpiece," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2002.

²⁵ Stephen D. Biddle, "Allies, Airpower, and Modern Warfare: The Afghan Model in Afghanistan and Iraq," *International Security*, Winter 2005/6.

infrastructures present numerous or complex command-and-control problems, but we are not going to be facing many of these adversaries in the foreseeable future. America's airpower dominance will have to be reshaped to provide significant results in a world in which warfare becomes more geographically diffuse. This will require the Air Force to continue to expand its missions in space and cyberspace.

Some capacity for strategic bombing will have to be maintained, including a new long-range bomber and an increase in unmanned systems. However, there is no need for the Air Force's currently planned—and exorbitantly expensive—F-22 Raptor, or for a large air-superiority fleet. The F-22 makes no contributions to ground attack and precision strike. The need for precision engagement, primarily in urban settings, will continue and may even increase, but airpower is only one tool. It is not a solution to every problem, and as formidable as it is, it produces a limited range of military results, especially in a world of irregular warfare.²⁶

The Air Force has made some adaptations already that prepare it for a true transformation. It has reorganized into Air Expeditionary Forces and is exploring mission-oriented task forces. It has continued to develop its unmanned vehicles. But it is still run by a fighter-jet elite that shortchanges the need for long-range precision strike in favor of continued investments in short-legged fighters. In a world of irregular warfare, U.S. air superiority will rarely be contested in any meaningful way, except by sophisticated air defense systems and even more often by MANPADS and attacks against airfields.

The Air Force's current and long-range-plan aviation assets are depicted in Table 2.²⁷ The plan reflects the fighter myopia of the current Air Force leadership and its orientation toward an expensive fleet of modern fighters. It needs to be modified to extend the Air Force's unique contributions in space and cyberspace, while at the same time bringing its efforts down to the ground with even greater precision and more discrimination than ever before.²⁸ Increased investments in a modified A-10 and long-loiter aerial vehicle appear warranted.

The Marines

In the mid-1990s, then-commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps General Charles Krulak set out to refocus the Marines toward a new era marked by

²⁶ Eliot A. Cohen, "Kosovo and the New American Way of War," in Andrew J. Bacevich and Eliot A. Cohen, eds., *War Over Kosovo: Politics and Strategy in a Global Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

²⁷ Steven M. Kosiak, *Matching Resources With Requirements: Options for Modernizing the U.S. Air Force* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2005).

²⁸ U.S. Air Force, *Transformation Flight Plan 07, Fiscal 03–07*, February 2004, available at the Air Force's website, www.af.mil or the Office of Force Transformation website, www.oft.osd.mil.

Table 2. Air Force's Current and Long-Range Plans Assets

Type of Aircraft	Current	Long-Range Plan
A-10	245	100
F-16	1360	250
F-15 A/D	535	0
F-15 E	220	170
F-117	55	0
F-22	0	260
F-35	0	1370
B52	92	76
B-1B	58	60
B-2	21	21
Future Bomber-X	0	?
UCAV (Unmanned Combat Air Vehicle)	0	250
Long-loiter Aerial Vehicle	0	0

chaos and irregular warfare. In numerous speeches, he prophetically laid out the need for reframing a service that was too comfortable with linear formations and conventional conflict. He told the story of how the vaunted Roman legions of Varus were bested by the Gauls led by Herminius in the Teutoburger Wald in 9 CE.²⁹ The parable was that clear, dominant first-class imperial powers can be defeated by adaptive adversaries. An intense but short-lived renaissance occurred within the Marine Corps, which established a Warfighting Laboratory (MCWL) and promulgated “Operational Maneuver from the Sea,” along with a dozen supporting concepts. It took the lead in developing new concepts and tactics for urban warfare.³⁰

It is now eight years since General Krulak’s first articulation of “Chaos in the Littorals” and the resulting “strategic-corporal” and “three-block war” constructs, and since his prescient October 1997 “*Ne Cras, Ne Cras*” (“not like yesterday”) speech foretelling a world of more complex contingencies and more adaptive enemies. Aside from innovative work inside the MCWL, these constructs were not pursued. Instead, the Marine Corps has continued apace with concepts and programs that date from the late 1980s for over-the-horizon amphibious assaults. The focus has centered on amphibious shipping and sea-basing concepts that would preserve and enhance the Corps’ ability to bring large forces to bear in major combat operations. The Corps’ conceptual and analytical machinery has massed its effects on amphibious and maritime prepositioning programs critical to deploying rapidly to crises large and small.

²⁹ Peter S. Wells, *The Battle That Stopped Rome: Emperor Augustus, Arminius, and The Slaughter of The Legions in the Teutoburg Forest* (New York: Norton, 2004).

³⁰ *Operational Maneuver From the Sea* was signed by General Charles C. Krulak in 1996. See U.S. Marine Corps, *Warfighting Concepts for the 21st Century* (Quantico, Va.: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1998).

Adaptation came to a halt, and new initiatives in urban warfighting were curtailed. The Marines took the stance that it was the other services that needed transformation; they themselves were not broken or in need of revolutionary change since they were never designed as a Cold War force.

The Marines have indeed been a constant force in readiness since the beginning of the Cold War, comfortably shifting between amphibious deployments and patrols or warfighting like 1991's Operation Desert Storm and 2003's Operation Iraqi Freedom. They are a hybrid force, fairly comfortable with hybrid forms of warfare and multidimensional operations. But they continue to define themselves as naval shock troops. This siphons off significant resources that may be better employed to sharpen their utility in small wars. Too many Marines believe that everything they need to know can be found in their *Maneuver Warfare* handbook or the 65-year-old *Small Wars* manual.³¹ The Marines need to look back into their history and reframe themselves for the current, second small-wars era, but they need to comprehend the distinction between earlier eras of counterinsurgency and constabulary missions and today's complex irregular wars.

The Corps' true cultural strength is its expeditionary mindset and its adaptive organizational system, known as the Marine Air Ground Task Force. These cultural factors, as well as its small-wars legacy, are very relevant to confronting irregular warfare, but they can be sharpened.

A second major shift needed for the second small-wars era involves the training and manpower paradigms that drive the daily operations of the Marine Corps.³² Despite professing that the individual Marine is the world's most potent warrior and the most important and precise contributor in small wars, the Marines significantly under-invest in the training and education of the Marine enlisted force. While conceding that small wars are won by small unit leaders, the Corps has not yet changed how they select, train, educate, and reward the NCOs who become squad leaders and professionals in close-quarter battle. Most units in Iraq were led not by mature sergeants but by young corporals on their first enlistment. Very little progress has been made on turning the strategic corporal concept into a reality.

Senior Marines admit that processes and priorities of peacetime do not necessarily optimize the Marine Corps for the war on terror. Increased educational and training requirements for NCOs need to be established. Incentives to attract and retain high quality Marines for squad leadership positions are needed to ensure that more experience is placed at the tip of the spear. New training systems need to be implemented to prepare young squad leaders for the no-nonsense decision-making that occurs at the squad level in irregular warfare. Current manpower and training systems will not ensure

³¹ Major Adam Strickland, "MCDP 1, Warfighting, Revisited," *Marine Corps Gazette*, August 2005.

³² Thomas X. Hammes, "Dealing with Uncertainty," *Marine Corps Gazette*, November 2005.

success on today's battlefield.³³ The Corps current leadership has recognized this and initiated a series of initiatives to enhance NCOs' education and to provide the modern training and equipment to make today's small units into the world's premier infantrymen. The Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory is at the forefront of these efforts, coordinating the combined input of the procurement, manpower, and training communities at Quantico, Virginia.

Programmatic offsets to pay for the manpower and training investments to shape the Corps for its second small-wars era would include termination, or very sharp reduction of procurement, of the V-22 Osprey and the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle (EFV).³⁴ The tilt-rotor Osprey is too expensive and too fragile for expeditionary employment. Its unsurpassed reach and speed are no longer prized operational characteristics. The speed and self-deployability of the Osprey make it a superb platform for special operations, but not long-term expeditionary missions. The EFV affords seamless, high-speed transition from sea to deep inland objectives. Its water-crossing capability is useful, but is too optimized for ship-to-shore maneuvers, which will be rare, and it is not adequate for tactical maneuver of Marines during small wars. The bulk of the resources allocated to the V-22 and EFV programs should be retained by the Corps to apply to simpler, less vulnerable, and more rugged modes of air and ground mobility.

The Navy

The Navy's fleet plans have been dogged by a lack of vision and a distinct unwillingness to challenge its own conventional thinking or introduce any new ideas. Many in industry and Congress have complained about the Navy's marked inability to articulate a consistent shipbuilding plan to recapitalize today's dwindling fleet. Many analysts and Congressional members continue to express dismay at the Navy's shifting concepts and rising ship costs, which exacerbate the slowly shrinking Navy battle fleet.

The Navy's conceptual approach has been built around *Sea Power 21*, developed by the recently retired chief of naval operations, Admiral Vernon Clark. Despite the extensive investment in and documentation of the concept, the Navy's programmers had difficulty defining the specific fleet architecture that would bring *Sea Power 21* to fruition. Critics argued that the concept offered little to the war on terror, while proponents argued that the Navy should continue to focus on its traditional missions, especially sea control,

³³ Robert Scales, testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, July 15, 2004; Robert Kaplan, comments at Marine Corps University, Sept. 7, 2005.

³⁴ Max Boot, remarks at American Enterprise Institute's "The Future of the United States Marine Corps," Aug. 18, 2005.

despite the lack of any threat to America's current dominance on the high seas.³⁵ Ultimately, Admiral Clark was forced to admit that the current Navy fleet is neither balanced nor optimal for making substantial contributions to the war on terror.

The main complaint about the Navy's shipbuilding plans is its emphasis on sea-control operations, instead of littoral and riverine operations. The Navy does not seem to appreciate its revolutionary increase in striking power, continuing to under-invest in key networks, flexible expeditionary platforms, and anti-access capabilities.

Numbers do count, but it is capabilities that ultimately matter, and the capabilities found in today's 316-ship fleet makes it "the most powerful ever put to sea."³⁶ The evidence for this claim is impressive. Despite a decrease in total surface combatants since 1989, the striking power of today's fleet is overwhelming. Although the number of aircraft carriers declined, today's air wing can threaten four times as many deep-strike aim points, and the sustained strike potential of the total fleet, its "fleet-pulse firepower," has increased three times over. By 2011, the carrier fleet will be able to strike over 10,000 targets a day. The battle line will grow to 84 ships, carrying nearly 9,000 battle force missiles. The SSN (nuclear-powered attack submarine) force will be joined by four capacious SSGNs (nuclear-powered guided-missile submarines); when they do, the battle force will have 1,000 covert vertical-launch system cells capable of firing a land-attack missile. If anything, the fleet has *too much* usable strike capacity, paid for at the expense of other important capabilities, such as expeditionary maneuver and combat logistics.

The increased precision of aviation ordnance, the larger missile-carrying capacity of today's vertical-launch system equipped fleet, and the larger number of strike-capable combatants indicate that the Navy has already achieved the transformational type of change that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld is calling for. This strike capability will be further increased as four *Ohio* class Trident submarines are converted to the SSGN configuration. Unfortunately, this impressive capability has not been matched with innovative organizational designs, nor has it broken the mold for new operational patterns. Thus, one can legitimately claim that the Navy/Marine Corps team remains mired in "Garrison Era operational patterns and held back by Cold War organizational structures."³⁷

The new chief of naval operations, Admiral Mike Mullen, has taken steps to reframe the Navy's ship-buying plans. This plan does accord increased priority to irregular warfare, but not enough to support persistent presence for

³⁵ Admiral William J. Holland, U.S. Navy (ret.), "The Navy is More than Hauling Marines," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, May 2004.

³⁶ Col. Robert O. Work, USMC (ret.), *The Challenge of Maritime Transformation: Is Bigger Better? Maritime Transformation* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, 2002).

³⁷ *Ibid.*

expeditionary forces. Moreover, it is already drawing criticism as wildly unaffordable.

Special Operations

One can no longer explore military strategy or force structure merely through the lens of the four standard military services created by the National Security Act of 1947. The apex of efforts to ensure the integration of our collective military capabilities occurred twenty years ago with the passing of the 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Act and the related initiative to establish U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM).³⁸ Embedded within the congressional legislation was the express expectation that the services achieve a higher order of joint cooperation. Additionally, Congress mandated a particular “service-like” status for Special Forces to preclude longstanding prejudices against the elite, unconventional, and secretive component of America’s arsenal.

Congress’s insights in this regard have paid significant dividends in the past few years. Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) revealed a remarkable renaissance in operational capability. Small teams of agile warriors quickly established relationships with the leadership of Afghanistan’s Northern Alliance and ably applied America’s firepower against the Taliban. Subsequently, numerous examples of valor and improvisation on the fly in Iraq and elsewhere are testimony to the need for and utility of Special Forces. In a world of anarchy, the “masters of chaos” provide sophisticated and discriminate means.³⁹

The Department of Defense has recognized the importance of this unique arm in the war on terror and assigned SOCOM with a lead role in combating transnational terrorist networks. SOCOM’s end strength has been increased since 9/11, with more than 4,150 billets added in FY04 and FY05, and it will grow another 1,405 members in FY06, to nearly 53,000 personnel.⁴⁰ Army special forces, SEAL teams, and aviation support have all been increased.

In a world of persistent conflict, it is time to consider further institutionalizing SOCOM not as a separate joint command, but as a distinct service—the Special Operations Force (SOF). It would not require any additional bureaucratic overhead, as SOCOM oversight billets already exist, and they exercise service-like programming and budget authority. Creating a distinctive

³⁸ James Locher, *Victory on the Potomac* (Texas A&M, 2004); see also Gordon Nathaniel Ledersman, *Reorganizing the Joint Chiefs of Staff: The Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999).

³⁹ Linda Robinson, *Masters of Chaos: The Secret History of the Special Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

⁴⁰ U.S. Special Operations Command, 2005 Annual Report, at www.socom.mil.

service, to include representation on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, would further strengthen SOF representation within key Washington planning circles. It would also allow SOF to continue its efforts to formulate its own education and training facilities. Most importantly, it would give SOF complete ownership of the personnel policies over its members—the chance to shape unique career paths and develop other incentives within its own service. This would allow the SOF chief the means of shaping and sustaining the unique culture that SOF needs to continue to develop.

The SOF will need additional resources to fulfill this envisioned strategy. SOF is especially useful for enhancing partnership capacity, for conducting preemptive operations in complex terrain, and for conducting persistent surveillance in environments where local government doesn't explicitly authorize this. While some missions, such as helping train foreign conventional military forces, can be conducted by the other services, the SOF is now inadequately structured for the irregular world. Its current op-tempo is too high for sustained performance. More than 80 percent of our assets are currently in two countries, Iraq and Afghanistan, which, in the words of one expert, is “a two-country solution to a 60-country problem.”⁴¹

The National Guard

The 2001 *Roadmap for National Security* summarizing the findings of the U.S. National Security (or Hart-Rudman) Commission proposed a clear demarcation in the roles and missions of the National Guard.⁴² Echoing the sentiments and conclusions of many Americans and national security policy centers, it started with the proposition that “the primary but not exclusive mission of the National Guard is homeland defense.” It follows that the Guard Bureau and the bulk of the National Guard should be shifted from DoD to DHS, given the urgency of the threat, the Guard's “deep knowledge of emergency response systems, crisis management needs and law enforcement concerns,” its linkage to state and local governments in emergency and crisis response, and its distributed location near many potential attacks.⁴³ We must continue to rely upon the Minuteman ethos of the Guard and to organize and resource the Guard for this function as its primary role.⁴⁴ For both natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina and future acts of complex irregular warfare, the National Guard is miscast within DoD.

⁴¹ Michael G. Vickers, “Special Operations Force Capability, Capacity and Posture Gaps for the Global War on Terrorism,” testimony before the House Armed Services Committee panel on Gaps-Terrorism and Radical Islam, Oct. 26, 2005.

⁴² Hart-Rudman Commission, *Road Map for National Security*, p. 25.

⁴³ See Steven J. Nider, “Guarding the Homeland,” Democratic Leadership Council's *Blueprint* Magazine, July 29, 2002.

⁴⁴ For more details see Frank G. Hoffman, “The Guard and Reserve in America's New Missions,” *Orbis*, Spring 2005.

Coast Guard

One of the few bright spots in the fledgling homeland security effort has been the sustained performance of the U.S. Coast Guard. Blessed with strong leadership, a unique multidimensional character, and a “can-do” culture, the Coast Guard is something that needs to be further nurtured. Today’s Coast Guard, the tenth largest naval force in the world in terms of its tonnage, has a substantial capability, but its size is offset by the dated nature of its major platforms. It stands roughly 37th in the world fleet in terms of its average ship age. Despite its laudable response to Hurricane Katrina, the Coast Guard needs substantial investments in new ships appropriate for coastal homeland defense.

Preventing Proliferation

The United States has spent at least \$10.3 billion in the former Soviet Union in assisting in the dismantling of their nuclear weaponry and enhancing the control of their nuclear facilities.⁴⁵ Thousands of warheads, silos, and delivery systems have been destroyed, and tons of highly enriched uranium and other dangerous materials have been placed in more secure sites with stricter controls. The G8 has pledged a total of \$10 billion to further increasing cooperative threat-reduction programs in Russia. This pledge matches the U.S. commitment to spend \$1 billion a year for the next decade. Yet our efforts to date have only solved between 25 to 40 percent of the identified problems. It will be at least a decade before current deficiencies are resolved and all the known vulnerabilities are rectified. Funding for threat-reduction efforts has been stagnant, despite strong support on the Hill for initiatives begun by former senator Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.) years ago.

The Bush administration, aware of the loopholes that exist in the current arms control and nonproliferation agreements and wary of new treaties, has established a web of bilateral agreements to prevent the movement of WMD on the high seas. Instigated by the U.S. government in May 2003, the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) was designed to deter or intercept traffic in WMD or their components. Traffic in these technologies generally moves by seaborne means, and thus PSI centers on maritime interdiction. The PSI is dependent on excellent intelligence but further reinforces norms against illicit transfers and raises the bar for illegal exporters.⁴⁶ This and other

⁴⁵ Joseph Cirincione, Jon B. Wolfsthal, and Miriam Rajkumar, *Deadly Arsenals: Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Threats*, 2d ed. (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), p. 121.

⁴⁶ Andrew C. Winner, “The Proliferation Security Initiative: The New Face of Interdiction,” *Washington Quarterly*, Spring 2005.

programs do little to reduce the motivation to proliferate WMD or the availability of dangerous materials in poorly secured facilities. Several years ago, a bipartisan panel recommended a ten-year, \$30 billion program to accelerate global threat reduction efforts, a three fold increase in funding to minimize the potential loss of nuclear material to theft or accident.⁴⁷ U.S. presidential statements aside, American policy gives Al Qaeda and other ultra-terrorists more than a decade to get lucky and acquire fissile material from scores of weakly guarded labs and storage facilities.

Conclusion

Bin Laden would have been better off had he left well enough alone and targeted his “near enemies” in the Middle East. America was arming itself for the wrong kinds of war. The military bureaucracies were prepared to defend their Cold War–era programs to the last lobbyist, based on speculative peer competitors. Not surprisingly, the Pentagon plays the China card in its new *Quadrennial Defense Review*. This perpetuates Cold War thinking and programs, and blithely assumes that interstate warfare remains conventional in nature, and that irregular warfare does not pose high costs or strategic defeat.

These are erroneous assumptions. The next RMA, complex irregular warfare, presents a mode of warfare that contests America’s overwhelming conventional military capability. It effectively dissipates the hubris behind the concept that we could “redefine war on our own terms” with our technology.⁴⁸ This form of conflict challenges cherished but false American conceptions about warfighting, and will continue to thwart America’s core interests and world order over the next generation. The *QDR* released this past February was a start, but it failed to match its rhetoric about tomorrow’s protean enemies with clear direction or resources.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, the impact of the 9/11, 3/11, and 7/7 attacks have not gone unnoticed by tomorrow’s enemy. Nor has our bloody experience in Iraq, which offered a rich laboratory for their education. Because of the success of these attacks and the costs imposed in Iraq, protracted irregular conflicts will not be a passing fad, nor will they remain low-tech wars. Our opponents eagerly learn and adapt rapidly to more efficient modes of killing. We cannot continue to overlook our own vulnerabilities or underestimate the imaginations of our enemies. In a world of complex irregular wars, the price for complacency only grows steeper.



⁴⁷ Baker-Cutler Report, Russia Task Force, Secretary of Energy Advisory Board (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Energy, Jan. 10, 2001).

⁴⁸ White House Press Release, Remarks by the President to the Troops and Personnel, Norfolk, Va., Feb. 13, 2001, at www.whitehouse.gov.

⁴⁹ Ralph Peters, “Betraying our Troops,” *New York Post*, Feb. 2, 2006; Frederick W. Kagan, “A Strategy for Heroes,” *Weekly Standard*, Feb. 20, 2006.