

Implications of the Future Military Environment

(Presented at the Principles of War Culminating Seminar, 13 April 2005)

**Williamson Murray
Professor Emeritus
The Ohio State University**

I am indeed honored to be numbered among such a distinguished set of panelists as those gathered here today. Both of us on this last panel have been provided a set of questions that we are supposed to answer in twenty minutes – questions which I believe would require a book to answer with any degree of rigor. So instead let me begin with the last question, dealing with the principles of war, and move from there to discuss the implications of the future strategic environment that the United States will confront in the twenty-first century. That strategic environment by its very nature will require significantly different approaches and thinking on the part of America's military institutions.

The mere fact that the Office of Force Transformation would have funded a contest as well as several conferences about whether the principles of war have changed now that we have entered the twenty-first century says much about the “American way of war” – and not necessarily in a positive vein. It is not that I am against the idea of conferences or intellectual argument. Indeed, the Office of Force Transformation should be praised for its effort to spark intellectual debate in this dismal town of contentless briefs and irrelevant joint concepts.

Let me begin with the question as to whether there is any validity to the remake or even

to the concept of what has traditionally been termed the “principles of war.” The “principles of war” have been around as a plaything for military academics and theorists for at least two hundred years. Every military organization has possessed its own slightly different set of principles. And not surprisingly, many generals have added their two cents to the discussion. That severe critic of military orthodoxy and iconoclast, the British general and pundit in the period between the wars, J.F.C. Fuller, came up with his own set. Even the great Napoleon Bonaparte, that great mis-leader of military thought, commented from exile at St. Helena that: “War should be made methodically, for it should have a definite object; and it should be conducted according to the principles and rules of the art.”¹ Yet, in looking at Napoleon’s spectacular career as a general, one is hard put to see where he ever waged war methodically or followed any set of principles except the one principle Nathan Bedford Forrest enunciated – to get there “fustest with the mostest.”²

The first years of the American Civil War saw the Union stumble as too many senior officers attempted to employ Jomini’s principles. Henry Halleck, the pedant turned soldier, who was to play such a negative role in U.S. Grant’s career, commented in 1846 in his treatise on war, itself largely a regurgitation of Jomini that:

¹ Quoted in Robert Debs Heinl, Jr., *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations* (Annapolis, MD, 1966), p. 249.

² For Napoleon’s career see particularly David Chandler’s monumental work *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (London, 1966). For the Forrest quotation see Heinl, *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations*, p. 63.

war is not, as some seem to suppose, a mere game of chance. Its principles constitute one of the most intricate of modern sciences; and the general who understands the art of rightly applying its rules, and possesses the means of carrying out its precepts, may be morally certain of success.³

But other commentators on human conflict have had less truck with the idea that there is any such thing as the “principles of war.” Not surprisingly, Grant himself – the author of one of the great works of American literature and one of the few honest memoirs by a general and the supreme realist – noted negatively on the influence of such theoretical constructs on the conduct of Union generals in the early years of the Civil War: “If men make war in slavish obedience to the rules of war, they will fail.”⁴

The Prussian thinker, Carl von Clausewitz was even more caustic about those attempting to boil the nature of war into neat aphorisms and theories:

Efforts were therefore made to equip the conduct of war with principles, rules, or even systems.... It is only analytically that these attempts at theory [and principles] can be called advances in the realm of truth; synthetically in the rules

³ Quoted in Heinl, *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations*, p. 249

⁴ U.S. Grant, *The Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (New York, 1885).

and regulations they offer, they are absolutely useless. They aim at fixed values, but in war everything is uncertain, and calculations have to be made with variable quantities. They direct the inquiry exclusively toward physical quantities, whereas all military action is intertwined with psychological forces and effects.⁵

As with most bad intellectual things in this world, the idea that there was any such thing as principles of war largely derive from the French military tradition – a derivative of the efforts by the French thinker Baron d' Jomini to simplify the complex and nightmarish processes involved in war and combat. As Jomini himself suggested: “There exist a small number of fundamental principles of war, which may not be deviated from without danger, and the application of which, on the contrary, has been in all times crowned with glory.”⁶ In short the principles of war represent an attempt to make simple for the soldier what is inherently the complex and opaque lessons of the past.⁷

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ, 1976), p. 136.

⁶ Heintz, *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations*, p, 249.

⁷ The Israeli historian of military thought Azar Gat has commented on Jomini in the following terms: “Jomini claimed that all military history from ‘Scipio and Caesar to Napoleon’ had had been guided by the principles he had extracted from Napoleonic warfare, and referred to all periods of history that clearly contradicted this claim as undeveloped or degenerate.... rather than understanding Frederick [the Great’s] strategy against the background of the political and military conditions of the time, Jomini maintained that Frederick had not been operating according to Napoleonic principles because military thought had not yet developed enough to recognize

Since Jomini first popularized the idea of principles, they have been popular among all too many in the military profession because they represent a simple guide – taught from the earliest days of an officer’s career in ROTC and service academy classrooms – that obviates the difficult task of really studying and understanding one’s profession in the midst of the demanding day-to day challenges of the military profession.⁸ How satisfactory they are for really being able to understand the dynamics of politics, operational concerns, the integration of technologies into tactical concepts, and the all pervasive nature of war – its ambiguities, uncertainties, and its psychological pressures at every level – is another question.

Britain’s prime minister and leader in the last two years of the First World War, David Lloyd George, best summed up the kind of officer to whom the principles of war appeal in an entry in the index of his memoirs entitled: “military mind.”

Military mind, narrowness of, 3051; stubbornness of, not peculiar to America,

these principles.” Azar Gat, *A History of Military Thought, From the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford, 2001), p. 124.

⁸ The British general Archibald Wavell, who commanded British forces in the western deserts of North Africa in 1940 and 1941, commented in a lecture in 1930: “I would give you a warning on the so-called principles of war, as laid down in the *Field Service Regulations*. For heaven’s sake, don’t treat those as holy writ, like the Ten Commandments, to be learned by heart, and as having by their repetition some magic, like the incantations of savage priests. They are merely a set of common-sense maxims, like ‘cut your coat according to your cloth,’ ‘honesty is the

3055; does not seem to understand arithmetic, 3077; its attitude in July 1918, represented by Sir Henry Wilson's fantastic memorandum of 25/7/18, 3109; obsessed with North-West Frontier of India, 3119; impossibility of trusting, 3124; regards thinking as a form of mutiny, 3422.⁹

Bernard Brodie was almost as cynical about the utility of the principles to the intellectual preparation of the military mind:

It may be that the consideration of a catalogue of numbered principles (usually fewer than a dozen) with the barest definition of each may be necessary to communicate to second-order minds... some conception of what the business is all about...

In short, the catalogue of principles must be recognized for what it is, which is a device intended to circumvent the need for months and years of study of and rumination on a very difficult subject, presented mostly in the form of military and political history and the 'lessons' that may be justly derived therefrom.¹⁰

In fact, the greatest of generals have forgotten the principles of war well before they have

best policy,' and so forth..." Heintz, *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations*, p. 249

⁹ David Lloyd George, *War Memoirs of David Lloyd George*, vol. 6 (London, 1936), p. 3497.

¹⁰ Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York, 1973).

commanded a company, while the worst never learned them to begin with.

What makes the principles of war relevant to a discussion of the “American way of war” – and here I am sure that Russell Weigley would be in complete agreement with me were he alive – is the fact that they fit within the American tradition of approaching war as an engineering problem. The belief that war is an engineering problem is particularly congenial to Americans because it suggests that one can break conflict down into its constituent parts, which then can be examined and then solved.

Over the past two years we have seen the Iraq War nice and neatly divided into phases. Thus, with a clear separation between Phase 3 and Phase 4, the Pentagon could first solve the operational, campaign part of defeating the Iraqi Army and removing Saddam from power, before turning to the “post-conflict” situation. With a clear break the Pentagon was in the position to turn CFLCC into CJTF7, which became V Corps’ responsibility instead of Third Army’s, while at the same time replacing the V Corps commander and allowing General Tommy Franks to head off into the sunset of retirement. Were the American military Clausewitzian in its culture, there would have been no separation in thinking and planning between Phases 3 and 4, in thinking, because commanders and planners alike would have recognized that the goal – a stable, more democratic Iraq demanded a coherent focus from onset of operations to achieve the *political* goals.

But then the American military, with a few exceptions, have never been Clausewitzian in

outlook. Rather by education and culture they have been students of the Baron d' Jomini, since the earliest days. West Point was founded as an engineering school as well as a military academy to provide the United States with not only soldiers but the engineers needed to provide the technical help in the taming of a continent. An engineering mentality has dominated the curriculum at USMA right through to the present day. Significantly, until the 1960s even military history remained the preserve of the topography department and a real history department was not established at West Point until the late 1960s. Right through to the present, the Naval Academy has remained the preserve of engineers.

But in fairness to the academies, American culture has had an even greater role in molding a military where the “principles of war” would be regarded as something significant. In many ways Henry Ford summed up the American attitude towards history with his comment that “history is bunk.” Thus, the U.S. military finds itself confronting a world in which by its extraordinary virtuosity – and the extraordinary stupidity of most of its opponents – it has eliminated virtually all of the conventional threats on land, at sea, and in the air.¹¹

One might suggest that in effect the success of America’s military over the course of the twentieth century has made the study of conventional military history an arcane art – especially

¹¹ For the less than impressive strategic approach of the Axis Powers during the Second World War that maximized the potential of their opponents see Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War to Be Won, Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge, MA, 2000); and Gerhard L. Weinberg, *A World at Arms, A Global History of World War II* (Cambridge, 1994)..

since the appearance of a peer competitor is simply not in the cards, unless American policy makers make monumental strategic mistakes over the coming decades. Quite simply, the appearance of a peer competitor in military terms will require extraordinary strategic incompetence not only on the part of American statesmen, but those in the People's Republic of China as well.¹²

The real problem is that the search for a new set of principles to address the huge technological changes that are taking place in the world reflects a military culture at odds with everything that history has suggested about the fundamental nature of war. And military cultures are extraordinarily difficult to change; usually only war itself brings reality to military cultures that have failed to study the past..

The confusion and uncertainty that marked much of the 1990s reflected a recognition on the part of the American military that there just was not anyone left on the playing fields, at least in terms of conventional war.¹³ That same situation obtains today. The real strategic issue that

¹² That is not to suggest that such incompetence might not be possible in the coming decades of the century. The case of Great Britain and Imperial Germany between 1871 and 1914 is a case in point. On the emergence of the disastrous Anglo-German rivalry see particularly Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise of Anglo-German Antagonism, 1860-1914* (London, 1980).

¹³ Of course, time had washed out the experiences of the Vietnam War almost entirely except for the senior officers, while the study of the war's lessons had not occurred, much less been inculcated into the system of professional military education in the efforts to deter the Soviets from using their immense conventional strength on

confronts the United States at present is the problem of how to hold together what some call globalization, what others call the ‘American Empire,’ and others the First World¹⁴ The fact that China and India are rapidly joining the older industrialized world suggests opportunities for a more peaceful world than was the case with the twentieth century.

The great danger to the First World – a world that the United States has played *the* key role in constructing since 1945 – lies in the gap between the cultures of its various diverse parts and the cultures and values of the rest of the world, most particularly that of the Islamic World. History has condemned the Islamic world to adapting to a world that it has taken the West 600 years and innumerable world wars to create.¹⁵ Thus, the United States will find itself the spectator and participant in innumerable ways in the troubles that will accompany the Islamic world in its adjustment to a world of globalization that challenges so many of its cultural norms. Consequently, more often than not the military forces of the United States will find themselves pulled into the messy business of nation building and stability operations that have involved them over the past two years in Iraq. How well they do in such environments will play a major

the plains of Europe.

¹⁴ For a superficial examination of the current strategic environment see Thomas Barnett, Unfortunately, Barnett is almost entirely ignorant of history and foreign cultures. Thus his arguments entirely miss the depth of rejection of Western values throughout the Islamic world, particularly in the Middle East.

¹⁵ In addition to World War I and World War II, the historian must add The War of Spanish Succession, The war of Austrian Succession, The Seven Years’ War, the Wars of the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars to his or her list of world wars.

role in the stability of the region and the world.

Thus in answering what kind of military forces the United States will need for much of the twenty-first century, one might begin by suggesting that not only air and sea control, but logistical capabilities will be the *sine qua non* for projecting much of America's military power from North America to the trouble spots of the world. The logistical capabilities will be crucial because America's military forces have increasingly been coming home from the foreign deployments that marked the Cold War. In thinking about air and sea control, it is doubtful that future opponents of the United States will dare to challenge America directly, given the kinds of capabilities that America already enjoys. Instead, if challenged at all in those environments, it will be by opponents who will attempt to deny the use of those commons to forces deploying from the United States.

In the end, as has been the case throughout history, what will matter are the boots that the United States is able to put on the ground. The bloodless wars by long distance air power and technology that so many defense experts in this town predicted during the Clinton administration will rarely, if ever, happen. What will matter will be the ability of the United States to execute its political and strategic designs and aims within and among cultures and historical frameworks that are by and large foreign to the education and thinking of Americans and their representatives in uniform. As my esteemed and wise friend Bob Scales has suggested, the wars the United States will fight in the twenty-first century will be wars, where an understanding of the cultural environment will be essential to the achievement of political success.

Americans have fought such wars in the past. In some, such as in the Philippine insurrection in the early twentieth century, U.S. military forces have done very well.¹⁶ But the Vietnam War was a disaster, largely because of an almost willing ignorance of the local culture and conditions that senior American military leaders displayed from 1965 through 1968. The current troubles in Iraq suggest many of the same difficulties that beset U.S. forces in Vietnam. Almost from the moment of the toppling of Saddam's statues in Baghdad, Coalition forces have had to play catch up in a political and cultural world of which few at any rank had any understanding.¹⁷

The issue then is how to prevent the repetition of such mistakes in the future. Here

¹⁶ In a conversation with this author in late March 2005, Colonel Greg Fontenot, U.S. army retired), suggested that a major factor in the American success in the Philippines resulted from two factors: the soldiers, mostly farm boys from a nation that was still largely agricultural in its makeup could understand and communicate relatively easily with the locals. Second, the officer corps had been involved in stability operation on the Western frontier and hence, supported by the progressive ethos of the time, were far better able to deal with the problems that confronted them during the course of the insurgency. For a discussion of the war see Brian Linn,

¹⁷ There were ironically first rate books about the nature of Saddam's tyranny that certainly would have suggested the difficulties that were going to occur in the post-conflict phase once Saddam's tyranny and dysfunctional regime was overthrown. Unfortunately, there is not much evidence that they exercised much influence over thinking in the U.S. government. The best of these was the 1989 book by Kayam Mikaya published at the time under a pseudonym. See Samir al-Khalil, *The Republic of Fear, The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley, 1989).

technology provides few answers. Technological capabilities have played an important, but not decisive role in the wars of the past century. Admittedly, no one in the last century armed with stone-age weapons has managed to win against technologically sophisticated opponents. But technological superiority by itself has never guaranteed success. The Germans had technologically inferior tanks and artillery in 1940; nevertheless, they won one of the greatest operational victories in the history of the twentieth century. In the 1944-1945 campaigns, the Germans possessed by far and away the most sophisticated fighter aircraft, the most sophisticated heavy tank, the most sophisticated tank, the most sophisticated submarine, and the best machine gun. *And they went down to catastrophic defeat.*

What will matter to the military forces of the United States in the twenty-first century is how well they *understand* their opponents: their history, their culture, their political framework, their religion, and even their languages. Thus, to an extent that has never been true in the past, the American military is going to have to place education at the center of how it prepares its officers to confront an uncertain and ambiguous world. History is crucial to the intellectual preparation of officers because immersion in its lessons is the only way not only to build an understanding of the larger issues involved in conflict, but because it represents the only way to understand foreign cultures without living in them. Similarly the study of language provides a crucial path to understanding how different and complex the thinking framework of other nations is – at least from the vantage point of Americans.

No matter how complex and ambiguous the study of history may be, it is unfortunately

the only means available – except, of course, actual participation in combat – to reach some glimmering of what war actually involves. One of the foremost combat leaders in the American military today, Lieutenant General James Mattis, commented in the following terms about the prevailing belief among students at the National War College that history had little relevance to their careers and their profession:

Ultimately, a real understanding of history means that we face nothing under the sun. For all the ‘Fourth Generation of War’ intellectuals running around today saying that the nature of war has fundamentally changed, the tactics are wholly new, etc., I must respectfully say: ‘Not really.’ Alex the Great would not be in the least perplexed by the enemy that we face right now in Iraq, and our leaders going into this fight do their troops a disservice by not studying (studying, vice just reading) the men who have gone before us. We have been fighting on this planet for 5000 years and we should take advantage of their experience. ‘Winging’ it and filling body bags as we sort out what works reminds us of the moral dictates and the cost of competence in our profession.¹⁸

Yet the study of military history, or history in general, has only been the preserve of a few exceptional officers in the American military. Unfortunately, the general ahistoricism of American culture is deeply imbedded within the services, with the possible exception of the

¹⁸ Unpublished email, quoted by permission of General Mattis.

marine corps. But there is a large problem here, because the pervasive ahistoricism is only a symptom of the large contempt for serious professional military education that marks the services and the joint world – a contempt reinforced by the current civilian leadership in the Department of Defense. If, as a number of prestigious government panels have suggested, America needs more flexible and intellectually adaptable officers in its military services, then someone at the senior level is going to have to address the wider personnel systems that play such a crucial role in careers. The reality is that one can only create intellectually adaptable officers through serious education.

Providing officers a rest in their busy careers, providing them a single hour to mull over Clausewitz at the war college, asking them to read materials chosen at the lowest common denominator will not provide any significant cultural change. Nor will it prepare them to deal with the challenges of the twenty-first century. The current approach to professional military education – with few exceptions – is not serious education at all.

Already the myth makers are at work in blaming the troubles over the past two years on the Pentagon's senior leadership. In reality, the senior military leadership deserves a substantial share of the blame. Too many officers at senior levels in 2005 lacked the educational background to challenge the facile assumptions that issued from the Pentagon's E ring. And given the similar experiences in stability operations of U.S. military operations in Vietnam, Panama, Haiti, Bosnia, the United States deserved better advice from its senior military leaders.

Conclusion

I am afraid that the contest to come up a new set of the principles of war sets all too comfortably in the current intellectual milieu of service cultures as well as that of the emerging joint culture. At the highest levels profoundly ahistorical concepts and doctrine march in mad array across a barren landscape – developed by officers and contractors supposedly versed in the nature of war. The words Clausewitz used to describe the theories and doctrines of his own time are equally applicable to current efforts to define war into nice, neat categories that have little to do with the ugly street brawl that recently took place in Fallujah:

A... serious menace is the retinue of *jargon, technicalities, and metaphors* that attends these systems. The swarm everywhere – a lawless rabble of camp followers. Any critic who has not seen fit to adopt a system – either because he has not found one that he likes or because he has not yet got that far – will still apply a scrap of one as if it were a ruler...¹⁹

(Presented at the Principles of War Culminating Seminar, 13 April 2005)

<http://www.jhuapl.edu/POW>

¹⁹ Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 168-169.