

Perspectives on Military Transformation: *Towards a Global Security Force*

Abstract: Transformation is the Defense World's vision of change, promising a new "American way of war." More deeply, however, the Transformation Story is a response to national mission dramatically changed and accelerated after 9-11. An American "crisis-ethos" has expanded the Military's mission to make it the world's security-management force. This expansion has the potential to change the Military in ways that are culturally uncomfortable and operationally risky. Thus Transformation is at its heart an effort to show that the Military can fulfill great national goals while at the same time ensuring an abiding continuity of its own identity. The vehicle of this reconciliation — on which it is now wholly dependent — is a technology paradigm that serves both as an enabler and a talisman, to deal with and protect against an unknowable future.

Michael Vlahos, the author, is a member of The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory senior staff. Formerly he directed the Security Studies Program at The Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and was Director of the State Department's Center for the Study of Foreign Affairs. He can be reached at michael.vlahos@jhuapl.edu.

Introduction

What does the Global War on Terrorism portend for the US Military? What changes will it bring to the Defense World and, ultimately, even to the profession of soldiering itself? An answer is suggested by how the Military thinks about change.

The Military calls today's changes "Transformation." Transformation was originally a Defense World response to the American *zeitgeist* of the 1990s. America said it was transforming. America's role in the world seemed to have changed after the Cold War, and the use of force and the future of war were also said to be transforming; hence the need for Military Transformation. Transformation, along with the "Transformation Story"¹ is the Defense World's official vision of

change, meaning programmatic and budgetary "roadmaps" to the future. Moreover this vision operates within its own world of change: new enemies + new technology = new war.

The attacks of 11 September 2001 transformed transformation. The War on Terrorism itself marked a shift in how America approaches the world, and elements in the national ethos that are called upon in times of great crisis have reemerged. This "crisis-ethos" in turn has reshaped the Transformation Story.² Now, rather than simply tuning its story to fit the national *zeitgeist*, the Military confronts a national agenda that promises to truly transform its Defense World. America's military societies must now deal with the harder implications of a

¹Thomas P. M. Barnett and Henry H. Gaffney, Jr., "The Global Transaction Strategy," *Transformation Trends*, Office of Force Transformation, Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), 16 December 2002.

²The author has written extensively on the American ethos, and on its driven and darker side. The interested reader can reach him at michael.vlahos@jhuapl.edu.

greatly expanded operational mission, and with the long-term consequences of becoming the world's security-management force.

How could this happen so suddenly? In some ways it has not been sudden at all. The way had been prepared for some time before 9-11. The War on Terrorism is an historical acceleration of a world mission growing since 1945 — the decade of the 1990s and its sunny *zeitgeist* just obscured the path for a while. Therefore a war driven by national crisis-ethos is only making visible an evolution set in train 5 or 6 decades ago. The greatly expanded operational mission the war demands is at last merely a realization of the military dimension to America's world "mission." The Transformation Story is about how the Military deals with this new/old reality.

Transformation and War

Transformation is about giving birth to a new "American way of war."³ The new war on terrorism is a big war, but bigger than the war itself is the mission it has ensured. A professional military force of limited manpower is being asked to fulfill a national strategic requirement of no less than total world security management — opened in terms of historical time, and proactive in terms of combat initiation.

"A new American way of war" is a phrase borrowed from the historian Russell Weigley,⁴ who deliberately used it to show how American culture — not technology — determined how this nation has chosen to make war. For example, the birth of the United States itself was also the birth of a new kind of war. The new nation was the first truly republican national system, and it was founded on the idea of "civic virtue," that is, the very authority of the state was vested in its armed citizenry. This fledgling United States

³Arthur K. Cebrowski and Thomas P. M. Barnett, "The American Way of War," *Transformation Trends*, Office of Force Transformation, OSD, 13 January 2003.

⁴Russell S. Weigley, *The American Way of War*, Indiana, 1978.

defined political liberty itself as "the nation in arms." This was the original, truly "American way of war." This cultural imperative, that the American Republic = the nation in arms, was reasserted in a great civil war and two world wars.

After World War II, two more "live fire" wars were fought in Korea and Vietnam. But something had changed. The nation had taken on the task of partial world leadership, and its military was charged with a kind of "system management." "The nation in arms" as America's civic-military paradigm was rejected in Vietnam. The result was the creation of a professional military without precedent in the American experience. The United States has always had a professional military, of course, but it was almost always small and dedicated to two propositions: defend American interests in time of peace, and serve as the cadre of military expertise for a mobilized citizenry in time of war. The new professional military — called, disingenuously, the "Volunteer Force" — was designed from the start for world system management, and to fight all of America's "wars," large and small.

This has been the real military transformation: the creation of a professional, long-service military society, whose interest and allegiance is to the state that represents and supports it. There is indeed a new "American way of war," but it has been evolving for 60 years.

The Transformation Story and World Change

The language of the Transformation Story (reflected in a series of briefings and papers developed by the Defense Department's Office of Force Transformation⁵) shows how well the Defense World understands today's change-challenge: provide global security without becoming an old-style imperial police force. World change is defined broadly — in

⁵Thomas P. M. Barnett and Henry H. Gaffney, Jr., "The Global Transaction Strategy," *Transformation Trends*, Office of Force Transformation, OSD, 16 December 2002.

politically correct terms — as a process of “globalization.” But globalization as a historical good is not assured. If it is pursued with an enlightened understanding of what is at stake and what is needed, then humanity may achieve a happy historical outcome. But this outcome

- **Requires** American world management, which, if achieved
- **Brings** to everyone what America was destined by history to bring: democracy, security, and the good life. Finally, the world
- **Desires** these things just as much as any American would. At heart the world and America share the same goals.

This part of the Transformation Story is not its own. It is the Defense World’s attempt to give the Military a protected role in a national mission dramatically accelerated, if not wholly unleashed by, the War on Terrorism. The Defense World is attempting to fit Military Transformation into an American vision of world transformation informed by the national crisis-ethos. This is a culturally and politically astute move.

But is it strategically wise? The military vision of Transformation is tied to a world outcome predicated by national mission. This is not a problem if the future Americans want is the future they get. The difficulty is that realities may diverge from expectations. As it is currently configured the Transformation vision assumes that both war and the world are changing in ways that will help the Military fulfill the American mission. But the counterpoint to this assumption is that the War on Terrorism in fact represents

- **A very difficult world dynamic** — where the world is not a clinical graphic labeled as “core” and “gap.” The “non-integrating gap” is in fact several culture areas, each with different needs, different responses to America, and different conflicts.
- **A very different kind of war** — where it is the conflict within Islam that the United States is fighting — not integrating — and an insurgency that cannot be bribed or “liberated” into acquiescence. In this sense

“integrating” the gap means killing its inner insurgency.

- **A very different way of war** — where capabilities in the end are less important than behavior. The behavior required to kill the insurgency cannot be avoided or made easier by “superempowering” technology. Here “integrating” could mean highly unsavory operations of protracted duration and uncertain outcome.

So contrary to the Transformation Story, actual world change could end up transforming America and its Defense World in wholly unexpected and uncomfortable ways.

Waiting in the Wings?

Transformation’s assumptions, like everything “American,” are full of confidence and exuberance. They describe a rescued world, a better place for all. But these assumptions

- That everyone wants the American “good life”
- That material want is the prime cause of human conflict
- That American intervention can save those at risk
- That a military transformed can clear the way there

... may need to be revised as the War on Terrorism — already torquing the expectations of Military Transformation — takes its course. When and how might this happen?

This paper suggests, as hypothetical counterpoint, that what is called the Global War on Terrorism is merely the initial phase of a broader and longer struggle with Islamic insurgency.⁶ The magnitude of the struggle represents a world-historical dynamic which itself emerges as the primary agency of military and world transformation. And of course this counterpoint

⁶Michael Vlahos, *Terror’s Mask: Insurgency Within Islam*, The Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, May 2002.

has its own assumptions. These assumptions are here posited as alternative transformations “waiting in the wings” that could take us to a different place:

- American world leadership transformed
- An enemy transformed from insurgency to broad revival
- Alliance relationships transformed
- America’s way of life transformed, moving the Military
- Toward a global police ethos

In part this exercise could also serve as a cautionary tale, which is, *do not to officially enunciate the future before it has arrived*. But it shows also how cultural forces beyond its control shape Military Transformation.

American world leadership transformed

The change here is a subtle — and yet not-so-subtle — shift from an appearance of collegiality to an open acknowledgement of rule. Thus the transformation of American leadership is two-fold. Not only does the United States become a sort of world guardian, in assuming this role over the longer term America itself becomes a society of rule. Rulership is implied in “a security system we seek to administer like an empire, but one based on shared values rather than imposed order”;⁷ values shared by most, but imposed on some. And, the historical time required to successfully impose rule implies the emergence of persistent institutions of rule as well. Thus even the most positive basis for a US regional mandate would nonetheless create enormous and growing demands on the American Defense World. In turn, this would mean a growing national stake in global security. Military personnel needs could grow sharply, and the national defense economy would constitute an increasing share of American society’s interest and energy.

⁷Arthur K. Cebrowski and Thomas P. M. Barnett, “The American Way of War,” *Transformation Trends*, Office of Force Transformation, OSD, 13 January 2003.

An enemy transformed

Nowhere is “imposed order” more plainly visible than in American interventions. Some indeed are urging that intervention be followed by reconstruction in the manner of America’s postwar rehabilitation of Germany and Japan. But remember that then, the *force majeure* came first, and was sternly demonstrated. Success stories with Germany and Japan followed the grim wrath of total war, which laid utter waste to their cities, almost to the point of ending civilized life in both societies. The national *zeitgeist* today is the polar opposite of the American spirit of World War II. Americans want to rescue the rest of the world with an efficient spareness of pain and effort. But what makes for an efficient take-over of Afghanistan or Iraq (or Syria or Arabia) also has big downsides, such as failing to overawe the enemy for more than an instant, and through the dramaturgy of wider and longer interventions eventually inspiring and strengthening the insurgency. This transformation prospect suggests that American occupations in Islamic lands might achieve the opposite of what they seek. It is a picture not unlike the Israeli riding herd in the West Bank and Gaza, save that the theater of operations is a hundred times its size. Imagination suggests several historical narratives: one in which old regimes collapse in Egypt, Pakistan, and Arabia; another in which new Islamic regimes emerge; still another in which these regimes are elected, overturning American occupation by voting it out. Thus pursuing an imposed order creates its own ongoing historical dynamic, a permanent conflict relationship. It could be a relationship, moreover, that reshapes our own identity. The transformation here is in the mind, and it takes place the moment Americans see that the enemy is not terrorism, but something much bigger.

Alliance relationships transformed

American rule based on imposed order — rather than on shared values — can be seen in America’s changing historical relationship with its colleagues and former peers. Europeans are generally unwilling to participate in active war operations. A protracted conflict within

Islam is not merely frightening to Europeans, but degrading. It is degrading to offer military contingents for America's wars as though they were vassal states — and these feelings are just as much about a declining European self-esteem as they are a response to US "arrogance." Another possibly grim issue facing Europe is its own growing Muslim minorities. There are many indications that these minorities are not assimilating well into Western society: they accept modernity only selectively, and they overwhelmingly support Islam . . . and the insurgency. European ruling establishments must now actively court Arab electoral support to stay in power. Europe becomes ever weaker and more dependent on the United States for protection. The transformation here: the former symbolism of NATO, and of security based on a coalition of equals, is replaced by the reality of a single power — with selective partners and clients — taking care of an extended family of dependents.

America's way of life transformed

War that began, like Pearl Harbor, with a "sneak attack" on America did not lead to anything like the same kind of war effort. The United States did not mobilize its economy or call a nation to arms. And there was no enemy, except for an extremely nebulous "terrorism." Furthermore, the nation was asked to passively stand by and watch a government-only prosecution of the war. In this environment of anxiety without emotional participation, new strikes could devastate American society. Renewed homeland attacks would sharpen the picture of a war in which violent and unresolved American military activity occurs abroad but primary American casualties occur at home. Political talk could move from "victory" to "exit strategy." An alienated public might also feel increasingly separated from the Defense World and its military societies. Over time this might become a cultural separation that could change the inner character — even the very identity — of military societies.

Toward a global police ethos

Histories of what were once called small wars often borrowed their titles from law enforcement, as in "policing," or a "police action." For example, the US Navy has been referred to as the "naval cop on the beat," or "Global 911."⁸ But the alternative transformations that a Global War on Terrorism might bring do not threaten simply to turn America's military societies into history's most heavily armed cops. Even so, the change potential is truly transformational — and not transformation as preferred by today's Defense World. War drives alternative military transformation like this:

- *The United States is directly involved in stabilizing Arab Islam.* The mission environment (right now!) is about pacifying, stabilizing, and administering. Thus the original Transformation mantra of RDO (Rapid Decisive Operations) no longer defines simply defeating an enemy quickly, but rather a series of SWAT episodes. This sets up a police world of normative process (as in *fighting crime*) not outcome (as in *victory*).⁹
- *The enemy is no longer asymmetrical, we are.* Asymmetrical assumes an enemy of "rogue individuals," which the "transformed force" counters by "morphing into a military of superempowered individuals." But an insurgency, especially a movement that our actions help to grow, is a strategic problem of a higher order. A major insurgency has the power to define the war, and we must be prepared to fight it on their terms, not ours. We are determined to have it our way, by insisting that the enemy is rogue individuals, while ignoring the bigger movement they defend.

⁸Thomas P. M. Barnett and Linda D. Lancaster, LCdr. USN, *Answering the 9-1-1 Call: U.S. Military and Naval Crisis Response Activity, 1977-1991*, Center for Naval Analyses, CIM 229 (Revised), August 1992.

⁹Hence the desire to identify residual Arab militaries whose rapid and decisive excision ratifies both expectation and doctrine, even as we seamlessly transition to militarized law enforcement operations.

- *Operations are defensive and reactive and the enemy has the initiative.* Another favorite of the original Transformation mantra is EBO (Effects-Based Operations). But increasingly it is the enemy whose attacks have the potential to undermine the US position. The United States is occupying what will be a strategically passive position, leaving to the enemy creative opportunities to change our own expectations of outcome through a surprise chemical, biological, nuclear, or radiological attack; through the overthrow of a US client regime; or simply through successful survival over time.
- *Command and control are outside of and above the Pentagon.* The expanded charter of the US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), the burgeoning Unified Command System, and the Department of Homeland Security all point the way to a command and control world that manages world security, and where political and law enforcement issues predominate. It is the historical prospect of a Military no longer master even of its most intimate domain of battle. There is no “pure” war anymore. In the “network-centric” and fully “joint” world all decisions — all activity even — are removed from the original military milieu. “Command and control” itself no longer suggests a distinct military milieu. This transformation hardly excludes the Military; rather it absorbs wholesale the old world of command and control within a Borg-like networked bureaucratic culture. This is the world of total security management.
- *Military ethos reshapes itself to fit the new environment.* The new “American way of war” may suggest a godlike race of soldiers, but the reality of change will flow from a new military lifestyle. The capabilities of some (like Special Operations Forces/SWAT) may indeed seem “superempowered,” but enhanced capabilities will be less important than the cultural implications of a new way of life. It is said now that the new “American Way of War moves the military toward an embrace of a more sharply focused global

cop role.”¹⁰ But the role reshapes the soldier. In their training, institutions, habits of thought, and deepest sense of identity, police are not soldiers.

- *War’s roles permanently change identities.* If this war becomes institutionalized, and continues through historical time, a symbiotic relationship will inevitably develop between the American Military and its enemy. Having transformed itself for the larger purposes of the war, it will then come to build its own sense of inner purpose and identity around this relationship’s landscape and its experience, and eventually begin to make its reality permanent.

Talking about things “waiting in the wings” is not meant to suggest that Transformation is a bad idea. Rather as an idea Transformation today merely masks a broader and deeper evolution in the American Defense World, one that has been proceeding for some time. The alternative paths show a larger Defense World with bigger responsibilities and a permanent worldwide deployment of *the majority of its personnel*. This prospect also suggests that the ethos of America’s military societies could continue to diverge from the rest of American society.

Transformation and Technology

The lesson that this war should be teaching is that the practice of “the transformed force” will in fact be the practice of global counter-insurgency — of wars whose nature is defined not by us, but by tenacious and passionate enemies.

But we continue to define war to fit our desires and needs, leaving only leftover energy and intellectual effort for the war the enemy will actually force us to fight. We still want the pristine War of Technology, and we reassure

¹⁰Arthur K. Cebrowski and Thomas P. M. Barnett, “The American Way of War,” *Transformation Trends*, Office of Force Transformation, OSD, 13 January 2003.

ourselves that, because we are so technologically superior, “low-tech” enemies cannot touch us. But according to Martin van Creveld, technology’s value must be assessed in terms of how it meshes with the enemy’s way of war:

Since technology and war operate on a logic that is not only different but actually opposed, the very concept of “technological superiority” is somewhat misleading when applied within the context of the war. It was not the technical sophistication of the Swiss pike that defeated the Burgundian knights, but rather the way it meshed with the weapons used by the knights at Laupen, Sempach, and Granson. It was not the intrinsic superiority of the longbow that won the battle of Crecy, but rather the way in which it interacted with the equipment employed by the French on that day and at that place. Using technology to acquire greater range, greater firepower, greater mobility, greater protection, greater whatever, is very important and may be critical. Ultimately, however, it is less critical and less important than achieving a close “fit” between one’s own technology and that which is fielded by the enemy.¹¹

What the enemy is doing is fitting their way of war to ours, so that we are the ones who end up as the Burgundian knights at Sempach or the French at Crecy. Instead, we should be fitting our way of war to the enemy — on our terms, not theirs.¹²

Conclusions

There is in the wings a new American way of war, but it is not one we should be eager to

¹¹Martin van Creveld, *Technology and War*, Free Press, 1989, 319-320.

¹²Again from *Transformation Trends*, this notion of a “fit” is presented as something straightforward and structural, with almost Dewey-like pragmatism. The threat is posed by individuals, therefore we respond with incomparably superior individuals: “As network-centric warfare empowers individual servicemen and women, and as we increasingly face an international security environment where rogue individuals, be they leaders of ‘evil states’ or ‘evil networks,’ pose the toughest challenges, eventually the application of our military power will mirror the dominant threat to a significant degree. In other words, we morph into a military of superempowered individuals (e.g., special operations-like forces) fighting wars against superempowered individuals (e.g., transnational actors).”

fight. We are about to fight the enemy’s war, just as Israel has been forced to do these past 5 years. As van Creveld — an Israeli himself — reminds us, in a war defined by this enemy the strong may be weak, and the weak, paradoxically strong.¹³ The transformation required of the US Military to effectively fight the new war will be all about what we do and not about what we do it with.

Actual transformation grows out of and addresses world change sought by Americans. Americans expressed a desire for a new world order after the second collapse of the old order in 1939. In the years following World War II, and in pursuit of that prospect, a global network of security institutions and military commitments have created the working infrastructure of future American world management. The 9-11 attacks brought forth powerful embedded elements in American culture — its crisis-ethos — reinforced perhaps by the personal worldview of the president. The original Transformation canon in the late 1990s assumed only a loose world security framework under American leadership, perhaps permitting the emergence of competing military powers. The War on Terrorism, in contrast, almost immediately began to imply much greater and more intimate American global military management. Now the explicit objective is to make the United States and its allies safe from future attack. Thus a global pacification and control are actively implied, and the Defense World is expected to play a decisive role.

The Transformation Story’s emphasis on technology and operational art masks an actual military transformation. **Actual transformation has been happening for decades, and marks**

¹³“If you are strong, and you are fighting the weak for any period of time, you are going to become weak yourself . . . it’s only a question of time. . . . The problem is that you cannot prove yourself against someone who is much weaker than yourself. . . . No [the Israeli forces] have not yet lost, but they are as far as I can see, well on the way to losing.” *World In Focus*, Interview with Martin van Creveld, March 20, 2002, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, <http://www.abc.net.au/foreign/stories/s511530.htm>.

an historical shift of American military societies from national defense to global security management. This is a shift of identity as well as mission, and thus represents a change of culture and of practice.

Technology's role in Transformation, as portrayed in the Transformation Story, is to help enable this cultural change, a vital role with three aspects:

- The first is to create operational efficiencies that permit American security forces to do their job with a minimum of manpower.
- The second is to make classical military capability an unproductive venue for other states, a world state of mind already arguably achieved.
- The third is providing US world security forces with an "equalizer" in the prosecution of "asymmetrical warfare."

But technology in the end becomes more than an enabler. If as a technology story, Transformation enables the American Military to manage world security, it also becomes its indispensable protector in the performance of a grand mission. Technology thus takes on a talismanic role, where the absence of its protective aura is unimaginable. In its triumph then, Transformation also creates a waiting risk: that if its technology shield should ever break down it will leave the American Military intellectually and emotionally unprepared to do battle without it.

The War on Terrorism will complete the long actual transformation of the American Military. What will emerge into view will be a stern, highly professional instrument of the state that will assert and sustain an American concept of world security. Within this concept, moreover, the administration of internal US security will become indistinguishable from that of international security. Military, law enforcement, and intelligence sub-cultures will experience a joint

forces integration not unlike that imposed on the armed services after 1985. Its many branches and agencies may remain, but they will share a strengthened identity built on their special relationship with the state. Status and hierarchies within the US world security community will be resorted. New elite security services will emerge whose cultures retain only symbolic links to parent organizations. The US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) is an example of this aspect of transformation.

In this culminating period of actual military transformation, the canon of the Transformation Story serves a crucial symbolic role. But a vision that sustains the morale of military culture can achieve the opposite if it tells a story that is no longer true. The danger of the Transformation vision is that its message will become irrelevant as America moves ever deeper into the War on Terrorism. American forces will need all their energy to deal with the challenges of new war. If actual military transformation is the maturing of a world security order, then its counterpart in terms of war is the new war-by-other-means. Not only are Americans disinclined to fight such a war, they have yet to show themselves as effective combatants in one. Americans seem disinclined to acknowledge that they even know what this kind of war is all about.

America's military should know. But Transformation tells a very different story. That story needs to be revised. American military societies and their Defense World need to be aware of the full dimensions of the war and its synergy with the maturation of American global management. Furthermore the Military needs to think through the full implications of an impending cultural change that transforms — and perhaps erases — the traditions of an American army, navy, and air force, turning them into a global security force whose future institutions, ethos, and reputation are yet unknown.