

Hard Realities in the War on Terror

How we Got to Where we Are

World War IV, the “Global War on Terror,” like World War II and World War III (the Cold War), is a struggle between competing worldviews which, like the Cold War, could last a long time. Furthermore, unless the United States re-structures its armed forces and intelligence services and devises doctrines and strategies appropriate to the war at hand, it could lose World War IV.

In the early 1990s, during the Bill Clinton administration, each service struggled to redefine itself amid seemingly constant commitments to various peacekeeping operations in places like Haiti, Rwanda and the Balkans while sustaining a continuing presence in the Persian Gulf. Massive cuts, already planned during the previous administration, when carried out in the 1990s slashed roughly 40-percent of the force structure from every service except the US Marine Corps, which expanded slightly.

While each service posited a future copasetic to their respective “core competencies” of air, land and sea power, the general consensus was that technologically-advanced weapons would provide “leverages” to offset fewer numbers of planes, ships, submarines and—above all—soldiers. The assumption was that future enemies would be nation states fielding militaries corresponding roughly to American forces in institutional structures, weapons, training and doctrine.

Although military futurists established 2025 as the timeframe when the totally transformed military would be fully operational, they also acknowledged that during the transition it would be necessary to rely on weapons, force structures and doctrines

designed, procured, instituted and devised during the post-Vietnam Cold War era... what military futurists dubbed “the legacy force.” For instance, the Navy would continue to focus on carrier battle groups and nuclear submarines. Manned aircraft capable of delivering precision strikes globally would constitute the centerpiece of the Air Force.

For the Army the basic force structure remained the divisional system instituted to fight World War I, used in World War II and Korea, abandoned briefly in the mid-to-late 1950s in an effort to attain viability on the atomic battlefield, but then re-established to fight a war of attrition in Vietnam.¹ The Army’s major modification took place in the immediate post-Vietnam era when Chief of Staff Creighton Abrams designed the all-volunteer force so that any long-term commitments would require massive call-ups of the National Guard and Reserves.² Meanwhile, Army weapons, appropriately upgraded, would consist of the “Big Five” procured during the Reagan administration: the M1A1/2 Abrams main battle tank, M24 Bradley fighting vehicles, the Multiple Launch Rocket System (MLRS), UH-60 transport helicopters and the AH64 Apache attack helicopters. While the services transitioned they still would rely on these “legacy” systems and established force structures until the consummation of transformation around 2025.

As each service envisioned twenty-first century conflicts accommodating its particular vision of the future, the assumption was that until 2025 no “peer competitor” would rise to challenge America’s global power.³ During this period of “strategic pause” if the nation went to war it would face one, or at most two, second-rate military powers. It was assumed that such foes could be dispatched easily by a vastly superior American military, even one in transition.

For the Army, the challenge was to modify the legacy force to increase its speed of deployment to potential future trouble spots. One of the major lessons of Operation Desert Shield/Storm was that in the future the United States might not have the luxury of half-a-year to move sufficient forces to a far flung theater.⁴ The emphasis was on devising highly-deployable, light and lethal forces to supplement air power which, in the 1990s, emerged as the weapon of choice in routine contingencies. A few overly enthusiastic air power advocates hinted the Army might become a backup force for an expanded Marine Corps.

National security planners and Department of Defense visionaries did not see—perhaps because they did not want to see—what was coming. The war that developed after September 11, 2001 manifested characteristics diametrically opposed to what the services envisioned in 1990s programs like the Army After Next, Air Force Next, and the Navy's From the Sea. The military futurists were wrong in two critical areas.

First, no one envisioned a world-wide total war absent a peer competitor. Perhaps after 2025 China, Russia, India or some other rising power might challenge the United States globally, but no one posited a world-wide war against a non-state entity committed to establishing a global Islamic caliphate.

Rather than fighting a traditional state-on-state conflict, US forces currently are engaged simultaneously in substantial and related combat operations in two theaters; Afghanistan in Southwest Asia and Iraq in the Persian Gulf. Meanwhile, American forces remain committed to peacekeeping in the Balkans, counter-drug operations in South America, and staying ready for war on the Korean peninsula.

Second, assumptions that any future war would be decided quickly and decisively also were wrong. While the Taliban's forces were quickly defeated and the main units of the Iraqi army collapsed rapidly, fighting against irregular forces in Afghanistan and Iraq has devolved into a protracted guerrilla insurgency. The best units in Saddam's army, the Saddam Fedayeen and the Republican Guard, avoided engagement and melted away to implement the current insurgency. In both Afghanistan and Iraq the US military faces long-term occupational and counter-insurgency situations. The problem is US military force structures, doctrines and the established relationship between the active and reserve components are inappropriate for the war at hand.

The Nature of the War at Hand

Something Old and Something New

Carl von Clausewitz, the nineteenth century Prussian soldier-scholar whose 1832 tome, *On War* remains essential to understanding the nature of war, noted that most state-on-state conflicts evolve through three phases.⁵ In the first phase, after proper political authority selects the military option, forces are readied and then deployed. In Clausewitz's day this meant mustering the army and marching toward the enemy. As the Industrial Age progressed and armies became larger and more complex, this phase took longer. In World War I, for instance, it took the United States a year to increase the size of the US Army from about 210,000 in April, 1917 to a force of 4,000,000 trained soldiers and to deploy 2,000,000 of them to Europe where approximately half saw action in 1918.⁶ During World War II, the US Army and Navy were not ready for deployment to the European Theater until eleven months after Pearl Harbor, with Operation Torch,

the invasion of North Africa, in November 1942.⁷ A half century later it took from the end of August 1990 until January 1991 to move enough forces into the Persian Gulf area to undertake Operation Desert Storm. It might have taken longer if the Cold War era military had not been in place with four US Army divisions and a number of fighter wings deployed in not-so-far away Europe. In phase two, forces clash. Typically the first engagements are to halt aggression or dislodge an entrenched enemy. After that is done, it is time to go over to the offensive to decisively defeat the enemy. The third phase, especially in total war, involves invading the enemy's homeland to install a new political paradigm. Almost 175 years ago Clausewitz wrote, "The moment an invader enters enemy territory, the nature of the operational theater changes. It becomes hostile."⁸

As World War IV unfolded, the first two phases in both Afghanistan and Iraq went very well. It is the third phase that has turned into a bloody war of attrition...what some characterize as a quagmire. As currently structured, American forces are ill-prepared for this kind of war. Pacification, counter-insurgency and controlling territory in long-term, attritional guerrilla warfare poses unique problems. Two areas are of immediate concern.

First, there is heightened sensitivity to casualties. Since the Vietnam War, Americans have become acutely aware of the ravages of war. In part this is because television brings combat into our homes live and in color. Also, given advances in medical technology, many soldiers survive the most grievous wounds to return home, in some cases, as multiple amputees. Television gravitates toward human interest stories about men and women coping with the debilitating wounds of war. Additionally,

casualty numbers have decreased dramatically since Vietnam where 48,000 service personnel were killed in combat to 142 combat deaths in Operation Desert Storm to 18 in Somalia and zero in Operation Allied Force—the mostly air war against Serbia in 1999.⁹ The numbers for World War IV are already ten times greater than those of Operation Desert Storm.

Second, there are differences in who suffers the casualties. In Vietnam, the typical soldier killed in combat was a 20 year old, single volunteer or draftee.¹⁰ In today's all-volunteer Army soldiers are older and most are married. The ripple effect of these deaths extends beyond parents, siblings and grandparents to include spouses and children with their spouses' families also affected.

Furthermore, many of today's casualties are among members of the reserve components. Fathers (in some cases mothers) in various stages of middle-age are being killed. These people led productive lives in their home communities and leave behind maturing families, often with children nearing college age. The media seems drawn to the drama of lives wrenched apart by the untimely deaths of not only young soldiers, but also people who were community stalwarts.¹¹ Casualty aversion can have a strategic effect since war is an act of force aimed at the will, and the American corporate will is particularly vulnerable along this axis. If America's will breaks in World War IV, as it did in the Vietnam War, the result could be catastrophic.

Operational Impact of Attritional Warfare

At the operational and tactical levels, high-tech weapons are less decisive in counter-insurgency and guerrilla warfare where quantity can be as important as quality, if not more so. While well-led and well-trained numerically inferior forces armed with

high-tech weapons can defeat larger forces (the Coalition went into Iraq in March 2003 outnumbered four-to-one by the Iraqi army), it takes a ratio of ten-to-one for conventional forces to suppress an insurgency. Additionally, large, conventional armies are much more logistically dependent than guerrilla forces. In Iraq, long Coalition supply lines across open desert from the ports in the south to the units stationed around Baghdad and throughout the north are especially vulnerable to attack. Not only must relatively secure areas like the so-called Green Zone in Baghdad be defended but supply lines and outlying strong points also must be protected. These tasks require large numbers of troops; which also provides a “target rich environment” for an enemy intent on inflicting as many casualties as possible on the invaders.

The active component of the US Army numbered about 485,000 at the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). During the 1990s, long before OIF, numerous Guard and Reserve units were called up for service in Bosnia, Rwanda and elsewhere. The problem is many reservists signed up in the 1980s and 1990s thinking they would be activated in times of national emergency, and while the global war on terror qualifies, this was not the war they had in mind. Rather, they expected to fight forces structured similarly to theirs and therefore vulnerable to the superior firepower the reserve components, along with their regular comrades, wield so effectively. They were confident that a quick victory would have them “Home by Christmas.”

Furthermore, the reserve components in all the services consist of experienced soldiers, sailors, and airmen who, in addition to being older than most of their active duty counterparts, also tend to be heads of families with farms, jobs, business or professional responsibilities back home that inevitably suffer during extended periods of service.

Many reservists, especially women, signed up to supplement their incomes. No small number of women reservists head up single-parent households. It was one thing to give up a weekend a month and two weeks every summer to earn extra income, it is quite another to serve for periods of a year or more.

The Army's recruitment quota for 2004 was 77,000 which it exceeded by 532 recruits. Nevertheless, the Army and the other services have instituted "stop loss" measures to keep at least some personnel from exiting upon completion of their tours. The reserve components also are losing members so that shortages, just now becoming annoying, may soon become acute.

What might be done?

Some have called for re-instituting a draft. That will not work and should not be attempted unless war breaks out in Korea or the fighting in Iraq widens to include Iran and or Syria. Even then, there still might be extensive social and political consequences.

Culturally, the American people are not ready for renewed conscription. The draft age cohort grew up in a post-Cold War era with no expectation of military service. So far, although some radical professors have attempted to reignite the campus unrest of the 1960s, absent a draft their efforts gained little traction. That likely would change if a draft were reinstated. Furthermore, there also are constituencies within Congress sure to use the draft issue to advance causes like gays and women in the military.

Second, relatively high pay and creature comforts like two-person dorm rooms rather than open bay barracks were instituted to attract recruits to the all-volunteer Army. It would be quite costly to increase the number of soldiers by say 50,000 to 100,000 and furnish them similar accommodations. The expense of adding facilities for

them...everything from housing to hospitals to cafeterias...would add to the already burgeoning cost of the war. On the other hand, a two-tiered military with lower paid draftees living in substandard conditions in one part and higher-paid volunteers in the other almost certainly would foster severe morale problems.

Third, any sizable expansion of the military would require larger military appropriations. This would mean higher taxes with attendant economic risks and potential political consequences. Additionally, it is likely current procurement programs like the acquisition of \$100 million-dollars-a-copy F-22 Raptor super fighter planes would have to be curtailed, an eventuality the Air Force is not likely to accept gracefully. Given the increasing military cooperation between China and Russia, the unique capabilities of the Raptor make it essential to the nation's future security.

In the short term, Special Operations Forces can and should be expanded almost immediately. These are the units best-suited to counter-insurgency and urban warfare. Qualified and experienced members from both the active and reserve components should be offered compensation incentives to cross-train into Special Ops. A concerted effort might be made to re-recruit former soldiers by offering attractive re-enlistment bonuses.

The 9/11 Report recommended needed changes in the intelligence community. Intelligence is fundamental to putting the right force at the right place at the right time. That is the best way to kill or capture insurgency and terrorist leaders.

The Army cannot continue to rely on reservists. Therefore it must increase its regular troop strength by at least two divisions: 40,000 to 50,000 soldiers. These divisions should be designed for this particular war, specifically for fighting insurgent forces in the Middle East and Southwest Asia. These forces need those high-tech

weapons that provide an asymmetric advantage in guerrilla war along with heavy armor, including those much needed and hopefully soon to be acquired armored Humvees.

Major universities that have pushed the Reserve Officer Training Corps off campus should reconsider. The nation needs its best and brightest in uniform. Banning recruiters from campus indeed might result in a military peopled by the Neanderthal “knuckle draggers” envisioned by narrow-mined academics.

The most difficult challenge is to effect radical change from within an institution. Current structures are maintained by constituencies with entrenched institutional interests. Within the Army, few high-ranking armor officers are likely to embrace any transformation that abjures tanks. Fighter pilots dominate the commanding heights of the Air Force and many of them are resistant to the potential offered by unmanned aerial vehicles. Conservative by nature, military institutions are reluctant to undertake precipitous change for good reasons. Avoiding defeat is a good reason.

It also is highly unlikely that change can be compelled from without. Few civilians know enough about war or how the military functions to restructure the force in a coherent way. Furthermore, military bureaucracies are adept at stonewalling outsiders knowing that political appointees come and go at regular intervals. Furthermore, they know most are reluctant to take steps that might prompt a perceived “revolt” from the ranks.¹²

The American military remains the world’s best, which only complicates transformation. Indeed, it took defeat in Vietnam to move the Army to the reforms that bore fruit in Desert Storm and the initial stages of Operation Iraqi Freedom¹³. Currently, while victory is not at hand, defeat may involve a long, painful, and barely

comprehensible death by a thousand cuts. But the long term strategic implications of losing World War IV will be far more encompassing and could be a lot more painful than what will be incurred with the changes needed to win.

Endnotes

¹ “Over Where? The AEF and American Strategy for Victory, 1917-1918,” Allan R. Millett in *Against all Enemies: Interpretations of American Military History from Colonial Times to the Present*, Kenneth J. Hagan and William R. Roberts, eds. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), pp.325-40; and James M. Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), pp. 160-61; A.J. Bacevich, *The Pentomic Era: The U.S. Army Between Korea and Vietnam* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1986), pp. 49-70.

² Lewis Sorley, *Thunderbolt: General Creighton Abrams and the Army of his Times* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), pp. 363-64.

³ The Report of the United States Commission on National Security in the 21st Century, chaired by former Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman, warned that not only was a major terrorist strike on the US homeland inevitable, but that an overly assertive America might prompt the rise of coalitions devised to counter US global hegemony. See: *Roadmap for National Security: Imperative for Change, The Phase III Report of the U.S. Commission on National Security/21st Century*, March 15, 2001, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2001), pp. 7-9. China and Russia have solidified military ties with Moscow supplying China the Sukhoi SU-27 fighter plane and other top-of-the-line military items, see: “China and Russia to Hold First Joint Military Exercises,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 13, 2004.

⁴ Brig. Gen. Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War* (Washington: Brassey’s, 1994), pp. 385-390.

⁵ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, edition (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984), Chapters 15-22, pp. 545-573.

⁶ See: Maurice Matloff, *American Military History* (Washington: U.S. Army Office of the Chief of Military History, 1969). pp. 372-73.

⁷ See: Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett, *A War to be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 530-44; and B.H. Liddell Hart, *History of the Second World War* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1970), pp. 310-12.

⁸ Clausewitz, *On War*, Book Seven, Chapter 22, p. 567.

⁹ For comparative casualty rates see: Thomas C. Thayer, *War Without Fronts: The American Experience in Vietnam*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1986), pp. 109-22; and U.S. Department of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress*, 3 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1992), vol. 1, p. 399; vol 2, tables A-1 thru A-13.

¹⁰ Thayer, *Ibid*, p. 110.

¹¹ On a personal note, my remarks are not meant to diminish the loss felt by anyone, especially the parents of a fallen soldier. Having lost a teenager who had only begun to live, I understand that devastation without respite.

¹² One result of the Vietnam War was that all the military services underwent a renaissance in the study of military history and related academic disciplines. Bright junior officers were selected for graduate programs in history, political science and international relations and sent to obtain doctorates at some of the nation’s premier institutions. Many were then assigned to their service headquarters staffs in the Pentagon and retained there. Over the years these officers have gained experience in operational and strategic planning but they also know how Washington works. They are not only intellectually comparable to any civilian appointees they are also politically savvy. They, along with career government employees in the Pentagon, hold the keys to any success in military transformation.

¹³ James S. Corum’s *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform*, (Manhattan, KS: Kansas University Press, 1992), chapter 1.