On War by Lind

On War #322: What Is “Political Correctness?”

William S. Lind
18 November 2009

In response to the killing of 13 American soldiers at Ft. Hood by an Islamic U. S. Army major, a number of senior officials have expressed their fear, not of Islam, but of a possible threat to “diversity.” “Diversity” is one of the many false gods of “Political Correctness.” But what exactly is Political Correctness?

Political Correctness is cultural Marxism, Marxism translated from economic into cultural terms. Its history goes back not to the 1960s but to World War I. Before 1914, Marxist theory said that if a major war broke out in Europe, the workers of every country would join together in a revolution to overthrow capitalism and replace it with international socialism. But when war came, that did not happen. What had gone wrong?

Two Marxist theorists, Antonio Gramsci in Italy and Georg Lukacs in Hungary, independently came up with the same answer. They said that Western culture and the Christian religion had so “blinded” the working class to its true (Marxist) class interests that Communism was impossible in the West until traditional culture and Christianity were destroyed. When Lukacs became Deputy Commissar for Culture in the short-lived Bela Kun Bolshevik government in Hungary in 1919, one of his first acts was introducing sex education into the Hungarian schools. He knew that destroying traditional sexual morals would be a major step toward destroying Western culture itself.

Lukacs became a major influence on a Marxist think tank established in 1923 at Frankfurt University in Germany, the Institute for Social Research, commonly known as the Frankfurt School. When Max Horkheimer took over as director of the Frankfurt School in 1930, he set about in earnest to do Lukacs' bidding by translating Marxism from economic into cultural terms. Other Frankfurt School members devoted to this intellectually difficult task were Theodor Adorno, Eric Fromm, Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse. Theirs was not the Marxism of the Soviet Union – Moscow considered them heretics – but it was Marxism nonetheless.

The Frankfurt School’s key to success was crossing Marx with Freud. They argued that just as under capitalism everyone lived in a state of economic oppression, so under Western culture people lived under psychological repression. From psychology they also drew the technique of psychological
conditioning. Want to “normalize” homosexuality? Just show television program after television program where the only normal-seeming white male is homosexual.

In 1933 the Frankfurt School moved from Germany to New York City. There, its products included “critical theory,” which demands constant, destructive criticism of every traditional social institution, starting with the family. It also created a series of “studies in prejudice,” culminating in Adorno’s immensely influential book, The Authoritarian Personality, which argued that anyone who defends traditional culture is a “fascist” and also mentally ill. That is why anyone who now dares defy “PC” gets sent to “sensitivity training,” which is psychological conditioning designed to produce submission.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Herbert Marcuse translated the abstruse work of the other Frankfurt School thinkers into books college students could understand, such as Eros and Civilization, which became the Bible of the New Left in the 1960s. Marcuse injected the Frankfurt School’s cultural Marxism into the baby boom generation, to the point where it is now that generation’s ideology. We know it as “multiculturalism,” “diversity” or just Political Correctness.

That is the dirty little secret of Political Correctness, folks: it is a form of Marxism. If the average American knew that, I suspect Political Correctness would be in serious trouble.

The Ft. Hood killings raise an interesting question: why would Marxists of any variety come to the support of Islam? After all, if the Islamics took over, they would cut Marxists’ throats even before they cut the throats of Christians and Jews. The answer is that cultural Marxism will ally with any force that helps it to achieve its goals, destroying Western culture and Christianity.

Obviously, there is far more to the history of the Frankfurt School and its creation of Political Correctness than I can cover in a short column. This is just a bare-bones outline. For those who want to learn more (and I hope you do), you can find a short book on the subject, which I edited, on the website of the Free Congress Foundation. Free Congress also produced a short video documentary history of the Frankfurt School, which I’m told is available on Youtube (look under Frankfurt School or under my name). The video is especially valuable because we interviewed the principal American expert on the Frankfurt School, Martin Jay, who was then the chairman of the History Department at Berkeley (and obviously no conservative). He spills the beans.

Most people in the U. S. military hate Political Correctness, but they don't know how to fight it. The way to fight it is to find out what it really is, and make sure all your friends find out too. Political Correctness is cultural Marxism, which is to say intellectual Soylent Green. Here more than in anything else, knowledge is a weapon!
Last week’s shootings at Ft. Hood, in which thirteen U. S. Soldiers were killed and 30 people wounded, appear to be a classic example of Fourth Generation war. The shooter, U. S. Army Major Nidal Malik Hasan, was a practicing Muslim. He sometimes wore traditional Islamic dress and carried a Koran. He reportedly cried “Allahu Akbar” before he opened fire. Though American-born and a U.S. citizen (and army officer), Major Hasan appears to have transferred his primary loyalty away from the state to something else, Islam. For his new primary loyalty, he was willing to kill. That is what defines Fourth Generation war.

This incident should put an end to the misinterpretation of 4GW that defines it as “what Mao did.” Mao Tse-tung’s wars were not 4GW. They were fought within the framework of the state, for political control of a state. Mao had nothing to do with the “leaderless resistance” last week’s shootings represent. Major Hasan’s motives transcended the political. According to the November 9 Washington Post, a few hours before he opened fire, Major Hasan said to a neighbor, “I’m going to do good work for God.”

The Establishment, which continues to pretend the state (or Globalist super-state) has a monopoly on primary loyalty, predictably proclaimed the shootings the actions of “a madman.” That is what old and passing orders always say about the first avatars of the coming order (or disorder). It’s how the old order whistles past the graveyard – its own graveyard.

The cultural Marxists, leaping to the defense of “diversity,” their favorite poison for Western societies, claim Major Hasan’s massacre of his fellow soldiers does not represent Islam. Sorry, but it represents Islam all too well. Islam does not recognize any separation between church and state. States have no legitimacy in Islam; legitimacy adheres only to the Ummah, the community of all believers. The only legitimate law is Sharia. All Muslims are commanded to wage jihad against
all non-Islamics. Loyalty to Islam must be the believer’s primary loyalty.

Nightwatch for 5 November writes:

Two years ago, a devout Pakistani cabdriver told Nightwatch that if Allah called him or any devout Muslim to go on jihad and to kill his family and even the riders in his cab, he must do it immediately. He made that statement calmly as a matter of fact, while driving north on US 1.

This was not the statement of an insane man, but of an educated man with a degree in engineering who was making ends meet; a devoted family man and a good cab driver.

There are of course peaceful Islamics; peace be upon them. But peaceful Islamics are also lax Islamics. The ongoing Islamic revival is converting more and more Muslims, especially young men, to its purer version of Islam. That is happening everywhere, including among Islamics in Europe and America. As Islamic Puritanism spreads, violence will spread with it.

At the same time, it would be an error to think of 4GW threats within Western societies as confined to Islam. The U.S. military has already seen soldiers kill other soldiers as part of gang-related activities. Gangs may be as important an alternate primary loyalty as religion. As the state loses its legitimacy, the variety of new primary loyalties that arise to replace it will be limitless.

As this column has often warned, Fourth Generation war is not just something fought “over there.” It comes to a theater near you. That includes places like Ft. Hood. Many 4GW entities know that the best way to deal with hostile state security forces, police as well as military, is to take them from within. Last week also saw the killing of five British soldiers in Afghanistan by an Afghan policeman working with their unit. Many police departments along the southern U.S. border are owned by the drug traffickers.

The Establishment will attempt to label the massacre at Ft. Hood an “isolated incident.” On the contrary, it is just a foretaste of many more such actions to come. How might states reverse that trend? Three things might help:

1. Stay out of Fourth Generation wars overseas. Intervening in areas of stateless disorder imports their disorder.
2. Be prepared to outlaw violent alternative primary loyalties, including some religions (which in the case of the U. S. would require Constitutional amendments). To those who argue that religious tolerance must be unlimited, I ask, would we tolerate the re-establishment of the Aztec religion, with its demand for ceaseless human sacrifices, on American soil? Of course not.
3. Strengthen the legitimacy of the state, which in Western societies usually means reducing, not augmenting, the power and intrusiveness of the central government. Nothing undermines the legitimacy of a state more effectively than
attempts to “re-make” a society according to some ideology’s demands, as is now happening in the West in the name of cultural Marxism, aka “multiculturalism.” A legitimate government defends its society’s traditional culture, it does not assault that culture.

Ask not for whom the bells at Ft. Hood toll; they toll for the state.

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On War #320: Beware Charybdis!

William S. Lind
2 November 2009

My recent trip to the Baltic included a week with the Royal Swedish Navy and the Swedish Marines, the First Amphibious Regiment. The hospitality of both surpassed anything I could have expected, including a chance to conn one of the superb Class 90 patrol craft through the skerries. At 40 knots the boat rode like a Pullman car but also turned like a Fokker DR-1. Any navy interested in controlling green or brown water would be wise to take a look at the Class 90.

As my hosts stressed to me, the Swedish armed forces have a strong Third Generation heritage. Historically they had close ties with the German military. While Swedish armies often fought in Germany, Sweden never went to war against Germany. Kaiser Wilhelm II was an honorary admiral in the Royal Swedish Navy.

But Swedish officers also told me that their Third Generation heritage is under threat. In part the danger is inherent in any military. In peacetime, the drill field comes to predominate over the battlefield. Techniques, which are done by formula and can therefore seemingly be evaluated “objectively,” become the focus of training. Tactics, which should never be schematic and can only be analyzed subjectively, receive less and less training time until they are subsumed in techniques. In consequence, the Third Generation is reduced to maneuver
warfare buzzwords while the culture is lost. This happened more than once even in the Prussian/German army. The best counter to it is lots of free-play training.

But the Swedish Third Generation heritage faces another threat: us. Sweden is working more with NATO and the U.S. than it did in the past, and in each combined operation the Swedes are forced to conform to the Second Generation American model (which is also the NATO model). Gradually, that model is taking over, because it is the standard expected of everyone who works with the Americans. That is true all over the world. The great sucking sound heard by anyone who cooperates with the Americans or NATO comes from the drain that leads ever downwards, back into the Second Generation.

It is easy to counsel, Beware! But what can Third Generation armed services actually do to avoid this Charybdis? My advice to the Swedes and others who face the same danger is to learn how to operate the way the Second Generation demands, but laugh at it while you do it.

There is precedent for this. The Germans knew they could not operate with many of their allies the way they did at home. General Liman von Sanders did not imagine the Ottoman army could employ Auftragstaktik, nor did von Manstein expect it from the Romanians (nor anyone from the Italians). They adapted locally, but among themselves they kept their own superior tradition.

This is made all the easier by the fact that it is mostly staffs that must adopt the Second Generation when operating with NATO or the Americans. Swedish combat units can continue to operate as the Third Generation suggests, both tactically and culturally, while the staffs run interference for them. Staff officers can know both generations, and understand that they are slumming when they have to work with people who cannot do maneuver warfare. Again, some humor helps; just think of the Americans as today’s Ottomans. You can work with them without becoming them.

It is of course a pity that the U.S. armed forces are the Typhoid Mary of military models. Like that deadly Irish girl, we present an attractive appearance. Our vast resources and fancy gear overawe other countries and lead them to want to copy us. Regrettably, like Typhoid fever, the Second Generation culture embodied in the U.S. military is a fatal disease. It leaves its victims helpless against Third or Fourth Generation opponents.

As Americans, our seemingly hopeless task remains dragging the U.S. military out of the Second Generation mire it finds so comfortable. Swedes and others who have moved beyond us have the easier job of avoiding retrogression. Just being aware of the danger does much to avoid it. What good sailor, knowing the location of a whirlpool, sails into it? From what I saw, the Royal Swedish Navy has very good sailors.
A personal note: I spent much of my youth building models of 18th century Swedish warships. The models were scratch-built, not from kits, and they sailed. My visit with the Royal Swedish Navy allowed me to close a circle that dates back 50 years. Thank you, Sweden!

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On War #319: The First Front

William S. Lind
26 October 2009

An article in the October 23 Washington Times points to what I think may be the next important evolution in Fourth Generation war. The piece concerns Mexico’s third-largest drug gang, La Familia. La Familia is best known for beheading people it does not like. But according to the article, its real claim to fame may be as a pioneer in seizing the mantle of legitimacy previously worn by the state.

La Familia is based in a poor, remote Mexican province, Michoacan, where the Mexican state has long been little more than another gang. Unlike the state, La Familia actually provides services for the province’s people. According to the Washington Times,

The group has a strong religious background and proclaims it is doing God’s work, passing out money and Bibles to poor people.

A DEA agent…said cartel leader Nazario Moreno Gonzales sees his drug dealing as serving the best interests of the people of Michoacan.

The agent said Mr. Moreno doesn’t want meth users among his people (meth is La Familia’s specialty) and will take users off the street and pay for their rehabilitation…

La Familia has won the loyalty of the people of Michoacan. According to the DEA, the group…now gives some of the proceeds of its drug trafficking to schools and local officials.
All of this has made it very difficult for authorities to go to Michoacan to arrest members of La Familia.

In effect, it appears La Familia has replaced the Mexican state in Michoacan. The gang provides an export-based economy where locals actually receive the profits. It tries to protect the local population from the negative environmental effects of its industry, i.e., addiction. It offers a range of social services.

Importantly, it deploys one of the most powerful claims to legitimacy, religion. The fact that the Mexican state is rigidly secular makes the Christian identity La Familia seeks all the more effective. Very few peasants are agnostics.

La Familia’s brutal violence may work against or for its quest for legitimacy. If it uses violence carelessly so that the local population must fear being random victims, it will undermine its own legitimacy and push people back toward the state as a source of order. However, if its violence is carefully targeted so as to promote local order and enforce what may be perceived as justice, then even brutality may work in its favor.

Other gangs will undoubtedly figure out what La Familia seems to have grasped, namely that money spent to benefit the surrounding population can buy the best kind of protection, protection by the local people. What has always been true for guerrillas fighting for political goals is true for 4GW entities as well: once the government has to face a population united in support of its enemies, it has already lost.

This model – an illegal but widely profitable local economy + social services + religion – will, I think, spread widely. To succeed, it needs a weak state, one that takes from the local population but provides little or nothing in return. That kind of state is already common in much of the world and will become more so.

The Washington Times ran a header above this story that said “Second Front.” In fact, gangs such as La Familia are the first front. What is coming over our southern border is far more important to America’s future security that any of our wars in sandboxes half a world away. The story quotes Attorney General Eric Holder as saying, “Indeed, while this cartel may operate from Mexico, the toxic reach of its operations extends to nearly every state within our own country.”

Real national security is security in our homes, neighborhoods and cities. Unfortunately, the Washington Establishment continues to define “national security” as attaining world dominion. So long as it does so, it will continue to prop open the door for La Familia and other gangs, both imported and home-grown, which understand that what is real is local.

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Comments are welcome; please observe our comment policy.

[CR: Friends who were recently in Michoacan report that Bill may be exaggerating La Familia’s influence, but not by a lot. Certainly the situation represents the replacement of Mexican governmental influence in at least part of that state and demonstrates the ability of non-state armed groups to evolve in response to changes in the security environment, both in Mexico and in the US.

It’s also worth noting that La Familia’s goal does not appear to be to replace the government of either Michoacan or Mexico with its own cadres. That is, it represents something other than an insurgency, thereby meeting one of the criteria I’ve suggested for a “fourth generation” entity. In other words, we may be witnessing 4GW as the evolution of crime more than it is the evolution of war (=armed conflict among nations, something that Clausewitz and Sun Tzu agreed upon).]

On War #318: Operation Albion

William S. Lind
19 October 2009

Last week I had the pleasure of helping lead a staff ride of Operation Albion for the Baltic Defence College. Especially for people with an interest in amphibious operations, Albion is one of the best case studies history offers.

In Operation Albion, which was carried out in early October, 1917 – our staff ride duplicated its timing – Germany took three large Baltic islands, now Estonian, from the Russians. In effect, it was Germany’s Gallipoli, though with very different results.

As a case study, Albion offers lessons on many levels. Two are of special importance. First, Albion illustrates a marriage of amphibious operations with the new German stormtroop tactics of late World War I, tactics that when combined with Panzer divisions created the Blitzkrieg. Instead of doing what the U. S.
Marine Corps still does and send in landing waves that take a beachhead, then stop and build up combat power for a further advance – the Somme from the sea – the Germans landed multiple thrusts which immediately advanced as far and as fast as they could, without regard for open flanks. Speed was their main weapon, speed made possible because part of the force was equipped with bicycles.

Operation Albion was genuine Operational Maneuver from the Sea, a term U. S. Marines use but seldom understand. While the American model for amphibious operations remains Second Generation, Albion, carried out almost 100 years ago, was Third Generation.

Second, Operation Albion illustrates a Third Generation military’s ability to adapt to new situations quickly. The Imperial German Army and Navy put Albion together in a few weeks. They did so despite having no amphibious doctrine, no amphibious experience and no amphibious Marine Corps (Imperial German Marines were primarily colonial troops). How did they do it? Through the lateral communication and strong spirit of cooperation that characterize Third Generation forces.

That lesson is a timely one. In Iraq, the U.S. military took years to adapt to fighting an insurgency. Second Generation forces adapt to new situations slowly because most communication is hierarchical and cooperation is nullified by centrally-controlled synchronization. As John Boyd often said, you synchronize watches, not people.

Our two-day staff ride of Albion, on Oesel and Moon islands, benefitted greatly from having Dr. Bruce Gudmundsson along. The author of Stormtroop Tactics, the best book on the development of Third Generation tactics in the German Army in World War I, Bruce is also a specialist in the case study method of instruction. The Baltic Defence College students appeared new to the case study method, but like all students, they seemed to find it preferable to the usual classroom lectures. With one exception, they seemed to “get it.”

That exception was operational art. Regrettably, they had been taught a mechanical method for determining an operational center of gravity. Like all such methods, it was misleading. No art can be done by set method; the result is paint-by-numbers art, which is to say junk. However, once students have been taught a method, they are loath to give it up. They have “checked the box,” and they do not want to revisit the matter, especially when the (valid) alternative is a way of thinking that cannot be reduced to a formula.

Again, Operation Albion proved the perfect case study. Why? Because for both the Germans and the Russians, the operational center of gravity was not in the area of operations. It lay instead to the north and east, in the Gulf of Finland and the approaches to Kronstadt and Petrograd. The German success in Operation
Albion sent powerful messages to the Russian government as to the safety of their capital, messages on the physical, mental and moral levels.

No method could reveal that central fact to the students, which hopefully debunked all methodical approaches to operational art. As General Hermann Balck said, only a few can do it, most can never learn. The world is not full of Raphael's either.

As the Central Powers' representative to the U.S. Marine Corps, I took great pleasure in proving that Stolz weht die Flagge Schwarz-Weiss-Rot!

[CR: Boyd interviewed Gen Balck in the late 1970s, and chart 118 of Patterns of Conflict was one of the results. He was considered one of Germany's finest operational commanders and figures heavily in von Mellenthin's book, Panzer Battles.]

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On War #317: Keeping Our Infantry Alive

William S. Lind  
29 September 2009

The headline of the September 23 Washington Post read, “Less Peril for Civilians, but More for Troops.” The theme of the article was that restrictions General Stanley McChrystal has imposed on the use of supporting arms in Afghanistan, with the objective of reducing Afghan civilian casualties, have increased American casualties. The Post reported that since General McChrystal issued his directive on July 2, the number of Afghan civilians killed by coalition forces dropped to 19, from 151 for the same period last year. At the same time, U.S. troop deaths rose from 42 to 96. Not surprisingly, Congress is interested: the Post quotes Senator Susan Collins of Maine as saying, “I am troubled if we are putting our troops at greater risk in order to go to such extremes to avoid Afghan casualties.”

Congress is unlikely to understand what General McChrystal knows very well, namely that firepower-intensive American tactics, especially heavy use of artillery and airstrikes, will lose us the war. For state armed forces, Fourth Generation
wars are easy to win tactically and lose strategically. That is, in fact, their normal course.

But what about the question the Post and Congress have raised: are the new restrictions on fire support causing more American casualties in Afghanistan? In a word, yes. But that does not have to be the case.

The problem is that virtually all American infantry are trained in Second Generation tactics. The Second Generation reduces all tactics to one tactic: bump into the enemy and call for fire. The French, who invented the Second Generation, summarize it as, “Firepower conquers, the infantry occupies.” The supporting firepower, originally artillery, now most often airstrikes, must be massive. If it is not – as is now the case in Afghanistan, under General McChrystal’s directive – the infantry is in trouble. Everything it has been taught depends on fire support it no longer has. Inevitably, its casualties will rise, and it will often lose engagements.

Fortunately, the answer to this problem has been known for a long time – several centuries, in fact. It is true light infantry or Jaeger tactics. True light infantry has a broad and varied tactical repertoire. It depends only on its own (modest) firepower. Jaeger tactics were an influence on the development of Third Generation tactics, but Jaeger tactics remain a more sophisticated version of those (infiltration) tactics. They are ideally suited to Fourth Generation wars, especially in mountain country like Afghanistan’s.

If we are to reduce American casualties in the Afghan war while sustaining General McChrystal’s absolutely necessary restrictions on supporting arms, we need a crash program to teach U. S. Army and Marine Corps infantry Jaeger tactics. The Marine Corps, which as usual is somewhat ahead of the game, has began such a program, called “Combat Hunter” (Jaeger is the German word for hunter).

This is not a case where we need to invent anything. The literature on true light infantry tactics is extensive. Works on 18th century light infantry remain instructive; I would recommend Johan Ewald’s diary of the American Revolution (Ewald was a Hessian Jaeger company commander) and J.F.C. Fuller’s British Light Infantry in the 18th Century. More recent works of value include the light infantry field manuals published by the K.u.K. Marine Corps (available here on d.n.i. and on the Marine Corps’ Expeditionary Warfare School website); Dr. Steven Canby’s superb Modern Light Infantry and New Technology (1983 – done under DOD contract); and John Poole’s books. Some of our NATO allies also have Jaeger units from which we could learn.

About twenty years ago, a commander of the Army Infantry School at Ft. Benning, General Burba, attempted to shift the school to teaching light infantry instead of Second Generation tactics. He formed a Light Infantry Task Force,
which I visited and which was doing excellent work. The effort died when General Burba left, but some of the officers who participated in it should still be available. The Army could and should find them and their work and put them in charge of an emergency training program.

The Advanced Warfighting Seminar at EWS, which I lead, is continuing to work on this suddenly critical issue. One product in progress is a simple how-to manual showing a company commander how to convert his company to light infantry. Platoon, company and battalion commanders, as well as schools, are welcome to contact the seminar through Major Greg Thiele USMC at gregory.thiele@usmc.mil.

Retraining American infantry in true light infantry tactics is not something that can wait. It is the only escape from the dilemma of loosing troops and engagements for lack of supporting fires or losing the Afghan war by calling those fires in. The usual DOD years-long, hyper-expensive “program” with its cast of thousands (of contractors) is unacceptable. Commanders of platoons, companies, battalions and schools have a moral obligation to do this now, bottom-up, without waiting for approval from Gosplan. Not a moment must be lost.

Note: There will be no On War column for the next two weeks, as I will be in Greater Sweden (Sweden plus the Balticum), first with Mr. Chapman’s Skargardsflottan, then revisiting Operation Albion.

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On War #316: Last exit before Quagmire

William S. Lind
22 September 2009

The Washington Post yesterday made available an unclassified version of General Stanley McChrystal’s long-awaited report on the war in Afghanistan. Politically, the report is bold, in that it acknowledges the enemy has the initiative and we have been fighting the war – for eight years – in counterproductive ways. But intellectually, both as analysis and as prescription, it is five pounds of substance in a 50 pound bag.
The report’s message can be summarized in one sentence: we need to start doing classic counterinsurgency, and to do so, we need more “resources,” i.e. troops. In a narrow, technical sense, that statement is valid. Classic counterinsurgency doctrine says we need hundreds of thousands more troops in Afghanistan.

Past that syllogism, the report’s validity becomes questionable. Defects begin with the study’s failure to address Fourth Generation war’s first and most important question: Is there a state in Afghanistan? At times, the report appears to assume a state; elsewhere, it speaks of the Afghan state’s weaknesses. It never addresses the main fact, namely that at present there is no state, and under the current Afghan government there is no prospect of creating one.

The failure to acknowledge the absence of a state leads the rest of the report through the looking glass. For example, it puts great emphasis on expanding the Afghan National Security Forces (army and police). But absent a state, there are no state armed forces. The ANSF are militiamen who take a salary paid, through intermediaries, by foreign governments. How many Pashtun do you find in the ANSF?

Similarly, the report laments that Afghanistan’s prisons have become recruiting centers for the Taliban. It calls for getting the U.S. out of the prison business and turning it all over to the Afghan government. But who will then run those “state” prisons? The Taliban, of course, just as they do now.

In a curious passage, the report says, on page 2-20,

The greater resources (ISAF requires) will not be sufficient to achieve success, but will enable implementation of the new strategy. Conversely, inadequate resources will likely result in failure. However, without a new strategy, the mission should not be resourced.

Here we encounter the report’s most dangerous failing. It confuses the strategic and the operational levels of war. In fact, the report does not offer a new strategy, but a new operational-level plan. How the war is fought, i.e. by following classic counter-insurgency doctrine, is operational, not strategic.

America must find a new strategy, since the current strategy depends on an Afghan state that does not exist. But the report offers no new strategy. The passage on page 2-20 thus ends up saying, “If you don’t give us more troops, we will fail. But you shouldn’t give us more troops unless we adopt a new strategy, which we don’t have. And even if you do give us the troops we want for the new strategy we haven’t got, they will not be enough to achieve success.” This reveals utter intellectual confusion.
The proper response of the White House, the Pentagon, and Congress to General McChrystal’s report is, “Back to the drawing board, fellas.”

How might Fourth Generation theory help us re-write the report? At the operational level, most of what it recommends under the rubric of counterinsurgency is sound. Drawing on the report’s concept of “proper resourcing” that allows for “appropriate and acceptable risk,” we would concentrate our counterinsurgency efforts in a few provinces, such as Helmand, to show the Taliban we can fight it to a stalemate. We would endeavor to do so while gradually drawing troop levels down, not sending in more troops. The goal of these actions on the operational level would be to buy time both in Afghanistan and on the home front.

We would use that time to implement a genuine new strategy. It would proceed from these facts:

- There is no state in Afghanistan, and none can be created by or for the current Afghan government.
- Our strategic goal, as General McChrystal’s report states in its first paragraph, is to prevent al Qaeda’s return to Afghanistan.
- There is currently no evidence of al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan. One of the best open sources of intelligence, Nightwatch, recently stated this directly, and General McChrystal’s report hints at it.

Our strategic goal would be to see the creation of a state in Afghanistan that can and will prevent al Qaeda’s return. Who can do that? The Taliban. We would use the time bought by counterinsurgency operations to negotiate with the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, the Hezb-e Islami Gulbuddin and other Afghan leaders, including some in the current Afghan government, toward a power-sharing arrangement. A government that includes the Taliban can create a state.

The risk is the Taliban’s willingness to keep al Qaeda out. Why should Mullah Omar agree to that? Because al Qaeda no longer needs Afghan bases. It has far more useful ones in Pakistan. That is why it is not in Afghanistan now.

If President Obama and Congress accept General McChrystal’s report and adopt a new operational plan in support of the current strategy, building an Afghan state around the regime now in Kabul, they will guarantee an American defeat. Sending more American troops to Afghanistan will only magnify the defeat. Ironically, what Washington needs to do is follow General McChrystal’s own recommendation and refuse more resources without a new strategy.

Let’s hope the politicians realize this is their last exit before a bottomless quagmire.
On War #315: The Taliban’s Air Force

William S. Lind
14 September 2009

The Taliban’s air force recently delivered another devastating strike, hitting two fuel tanker trucks that had been captured by local Taliban-affiliated forces in northern Afghanistan. As usual, many civilians were killed, inflaming the local population against NATO forces in an area that had been relatively quiet. The air strike was thus not merely tactical but operational in its effects.

As is always the case with the Taliban’s air force, the air strike was a “pseudo-op.” A pseudo-op is where one side dresses up in the other side’s uniforms or otherwise duplicates his signatures, then does something that works against the goals of the simulated party.

You say you did not know the Taliban had an air force? It has a very powerful air force, not restricted to traditional flying carpets but employing all the latest combat aircraft: F-15s, F-16s, F-18s, Harriers, Tornados, the works. That air force has been one of the main factors in the Taliban’s resurgence. Many of the strike missions it has carried out have had positive results (for the Talibs) at the operational and moral levels, if not always at the tactical and physical levels of war.

What has confused many observers is that the Taliban has taken pseudo-ops to a new level in its air operations. It does not merely paint American or NATO symbols on its aircraft for a specific mission. Its aircraft are permanently disguised, not only with appropriate insignia, but with American or NATO pilots, command and control and maintenance. Across the gulf of war, one has to say the Talibs have been brilliant in the air, if not always in other respects. They have actually managed to get their opponents to provide and pay for the air force that is defeating them!

Pseudo-ops can be difficult to detect. However, close analysis usually reveals a small flaw that, to knowing observers, gives the game away. The flaw in the case of the attack on the two fuel tankers is visible to anyone who knows the NATO mission approval process. For U.S. or other NATO aircraft to launch an air strike
in support of European ground forces (German in this case), approvals must be obtained from many levels.

In fact, just one requirement for approval would almost certainly have stopped any genuine NATO airstrike. Everyone in the command chain must know that whenever an accident to a fuel tanker or a pipeline makes free fuel available in a third or Fourth World country, the locals come out with pots and pans and jars to scavenge whatever they can. For most of them, scavenged fuel is the only alternate to no fuel. How often do we read about a leaking pipeline in West Africa killing hundreds of people when it explodes, because it was surrounded by people scavenging fuel?

It is thus impossible that NATO could have launched the strike that destroyed the two fuel tankers, killing dozens of scavenging Afghan civilians in the process. This is the tiny flaw that reveals the Taliban pseudo-op.

The question bedeviling senior NATO and American commanders in Afghanistan is how to stop the Taliban’s air force before it wins the war for Mullah Omar. My sources inform me that serious consideration is being given to assigning U.S. or other NATO fighter CAP to all Taliban operations, with orders to shoot down any aircraft launching strikes that would hit Afghan civilians. Marine Air is reportedly comfortable with the idea, but the U.S. Air Force is resisting strongly for fear of fratricide.

Should that option not prove viable, some senior American officials think it may be necessary simply to end all U.S. and NATO air strike missions in Afghanistan. That would shut down the Taliban’s air force as well, because pseudo-ops would no longer be possible. Any air strikes launched by Taliban aircraft would be attributed to their real source.

Meanwhile, the example set by the Taliban’s pseudo-ops may be spreading. Some reports suggest the Pakistani Taliban (a separate organization) is now employing its own Predators, carrying out “hits” in internal feuds that get blamed on the Americans. The current leadership thus wins a double victory.

Clearly, the aviation pseudo-op genie is now out of the bottle. It will be interesting to see how the American and NATO leadership in Afghanistan try to tempt it back inside.

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Mr. William S. Lind
An article in the August 28 New York Times described a recent epiphany on the part of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen. It seems that Admiral Mullen now “gets” a point Fourth Generation war theorists have made for years, namely that Information Operations are less what you say that what you do. The Times reported that

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has written a searing critique of government efforts at “strategic communications” with the Muslim world, saying that no amount of public relations will establish credibility if American behavior overseas is perceived as arrogant, uncaring or insulting…

“To put it simply, we need to worry a lot less about how to communicate our actions and much more about what our actions communicate,” Admiral Mullen wrote in the critique…

“I would argue that most strategic communication problems are not communication problems at all,” he wrote. “They are policy and execution problems…”

Right on. Given Admiral Mullen’s position, this could represent important progress – or not. Its significance depends on whether the JCS Chairman can think big, as should be the case at his level of command. Will the Admiral restrict his thinking to execution problems, or will he have the wisdom and the moral courage to tackle policy problems?

Execution problems are what the current American commander in Afghanistan, General Stanley McChrystal, is focused on. He recognizes that American troops in Afghanistan must protect the population, not “kill bad guys.” We need to be in the village instead of attacking the village. Fourth Generation doctrine suggests that the key to success (where it is possible at all) is de-escalation. I have not seen General McChrystal use that term, but it seems to be his intent.

However, if execution at the battalion and company level becomes the focus for Admiral Mullen, he will have missed his chance to make a difference. As JCS
Chairman, his focus should be grand strategy. For future American success in a Fourth Generation world, it is at that level that his new understanding of “strategic communications” needs to be applied.

What it means is that America should adopt a defensive rather than an offensive grand strategy. At present, American grand strategy is offensive, or even aggressive. In effect, America says to the rest of the world, “You are going to abandon your traditional culture and embrace our new, “liberated” culture – Feminism, consumerism, hedonism, all labeled “democracy” – whether you want to or not. If we cannot make you do so with ‘soft power,’ then you will face our ‘hard power,’ our bombs, cruise missiles and Predators.” From the jungles of the Amazon to the Hindu Kush, everyone is to become a subject of Brave New World.

As the conservative political philosopher Russell Kirk wrote, the surest way to make someone your enemy is to tell him you are going to remake him in your image for his own good. So long as that is America’s grand strategy, as it now seems to be, we are doomed to defeat at the grand strategic level. That is true no matter how our troops execute a fatally flawed policy.

The policy we need instead, one that communicates a very different message, is a defensive grand strategy. The message a defensive grand strategy sends is simple: If you leave us alone, we will leave you alone. We will not seek to “remake” you in any image. How you live is your business, and yours only.

In the November 22, 2004 issue of The American Conservative, I laid out in some detail what a defensive grand strategy for America might look like in a Fourth Generation world. It is impossible to summarize that lengthy piece in a column.

My point here is simply that this is the central question – offensive or defensive grand strategy? – a JCS Chairman who “gets it” should focus on. His concern should be policy, not execution. If Admiral Mullen thinks he should now duplicate what General McChrystal is doing, he will effectively leave the office of JCS Chairman vacant.

The Times quoted Admiral Mullen as saying, “That’s the essence of good communication: having the right intent up front and letting our actions speak for themselves.” The question you have raised for yourself, Admiral, is what intent is right at the level of grand strategy? The world awaits an answer.

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On War # 313: War of Exhaustion or War of Maneuver?

William S. Lind
25 August 2009

The war in Afghanistan appears to have settled into the category Delbrueck called “wars of exhaustion.” If it remains there, the U.S. cannot win. The American people will become exhausted long before the Pashtun do.

In this respect America’s situation is similar to that Germany faced in World War I. Germany knew she could not win a war of exhaustion. She therefore sought to turn it into a war of maneuver, successfully on the eastern front and almost successfully in the west in the spring of 1918 and also at sea with the U-boat campaign. The ultimate failure of the latter two efforts, an operational failure on land and, worse, a grand strategic failure at sea, meant the war of exhaustion continued. Exhaustion finally caused the home front to collapse in November, 1918.

Past is probably prologue for the U.S. in Afghanistan unless it can succeed where Germany failed. The U.S. must turn a war of exhaustion into a war of maneuver.

At first sight, such a prescription appears pointless. The granular nature of a Fourth Generation battlefield, a granularity that encompasses not only the military but also the political and moral aspects of the conflict, would appear to render any military maneuvers above the tactical level irrelevant. Great operational encirclements like those in which the German Army specialized become swords cutting through the air.

The fact that we cannot turn the Afghan war into a war of maneuver on the military level need not, however, be the end of the matter. Instead, it poses a new question: how might we turn this war of exhaustion into a war of maneuver on the political or moral levels? If we can succeed in doing either, or better both, we may still escape the certainty of defeat a continued war of exhaustion promises.

A short column cannot answer this new question; my purpose here is mainly to pose it. If, as I think it ought, it becomes the intellectual Schwerpunkt of the American high command, then I will have done my duty for one week, anyway.

But to explore a bit further, the very granularity of a Fourth Generation conflict that largely precludes maneuver on the military level may open the door to it on
other levels. To see what opportunities may exist for maneuver on the political and moral levels, I think we must start by ceasing to define the enemy as “the Taliban.” That definition, while convenient for labeling Afghans we have killed or captured, may lead us astray by causing us to think of our opponents as a single, centrally-controlled entity. In a Fourth Generation conflict, the real picture is far more complex. Many Afghans who are fighting us are not doing so because of orders from Mullah Omar.

To draw a military analogy, this is not a war of continuous fronts. There are many gaps on the political and moral levels, gaps through which we may be able to maneuver if we can first identify them. Doing so may require a recasting of the questions the American leadership presents to its intelligence services.

Possibly of equal importance is a reconceptualization of our own “front.” We now appear to define that “front” on both the political and moral levels as the Afghan government. This is a fiction politically because there is a government but no state. Morally it is disastrous because the Afghan government is awash in corruption. The recent election will not affect either reality, regardless of its outcome. We seem unable to grasp the fact that in Afghanistan as in much of the world, election outcomes do not confer legitimacy.

The American senior leadership thus needs to undertake a serious and competent analysis of political and moral surfaces and gaps both in our opponent’s positions and in our own. Neither can be accomplished with blinders on. Both must be brutally honest.

It is just possible that such an analysis might offer a roadmap for political and moral maneuver, which is what we require if we are to escape the war of exhaustion. There is, of course, no guarantee; the complexity of a Fourth Generation environment may mean the task is beyond our ability. We may also discover that we can identify some surfaces and gaps yet lack the capability to exploit the gaps. This occurs not infrequently in purely military wars of maneuver.

I think nonetheless that this may be the most promising way forward. If it fails to identify political and moral gaps we can exploit with some hope of success, then logically it leads to the conclusion that we cannot escape a war of exhaustion and its inevitable outcome, our defeat. That too is useful, in that it should lead us to cut our losses and withdraw as soon as possible.

Is the American senior leadership, military and political, capable of undertaking an analysis of the Afghan war along these lines? I do not know. But I suspect that offering such a framework for analysis may be the most military theory can do for our forces now fighting a hopeless war of exhaustion.

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On War #312: The Silence of the Sheep

William S. Lind
4 August 2009

In early July, U.S. Army Colonel Timothy Reese committed truth. According to a story by Michael Gordon in the New York Times (reprinted in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, where I saw it), Colonel Reese wrote

… an unusually blunt memo (concluding) that Iraqi forces suffer from entrenched deficiencies but are now able to protect the Iraqi government and that it is time “for the U.S. to declare victory and go home.”

As the old saying goes, ‘Guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days,’” Reese wrote. “Since the signing of the 2009 Security Agreement, we are guests in Iraq, and after six years in Iraq, we now smell bad to the Iraqi nose.”

As usual, committing truth horrified Reese’s superiors. Michael Gordon reported:

Those (Reese’s) conclusions are not shared by the senior U.S. Commander in Iraq, Gen. Ray Odierno …

A spokeswoman for Odierno said that the memo did not reflect the official stance of the U.S. military and was not intended for a broad audience.

Truth never is. On the situation in Iraq as on everything else, the American people get the mushroom treatment. That is how Brave New World works.

In fact, Colonel Reese’s conclusion, that we should leave Iraq as quickly as we can, is so obvious it raises some second-order questions. First, exactly why are we keeping 130,000 men in a horribly exposed position, their main LOC running parallel to a potential enemy’s front for 1000 miles, surrounded by a slowly accelerating civil war?

The official answer, that “we are there to back up the Iraqi government,” doesn’t wash. The Iraqi government and its security forces represent the currently dominant Shiite faction, nothing more. There is no state. There won’t be one until
the Iraqis settle their own differences, by fighting. Our presence may delay that conflict, but cannot prevent it.

So, Mr. Obama, what’s the real agenda? Under Bush, we knew: an Iraq that had been reduced to an American client state was to provide us with military bases from which we could dominate the region and an unlimited supply of oil. Is the Bush administration’s agenda now the Obama administration’s agenda? If not, what is? Exactly why are 130,000 U.S. troops hanging out in a bad part of town with a “kick me” sign taped to their backs? Inertia? Indecision? What?

That’s one second-order question. Another one is, why is no one in Congress asking the first question? Iraq seems to have vanished off Washington’s radar screen, despite the fact that so long as we’re there, we are smoking in the powder magazine.

It seems that whatever the Obama administration’s agenda in Iraq is, it has gathered virtually unanimous support in Congress. Having worked on the Hill, I know some institutional reasons for that. Congress focuses on whatever the voters are focused on, which at the moment means the economy. But even there, Iraq raises one of its hydra heads. The American occupation of Iraq continues to burn through money at the cyclic rate. So why aren’t the Blue Dog Democrats and other deficit hawks howling about our continued stay? All we hear is the silence of the sheep.

There are two possible explanations for the Obama administration’s remarkable failure to use its mandate to get out of Iraq while we still can. The first suggests some deep, dark plot, involving money, oil, the SMEC and the SMEC’s Washington’s agents in the White House. During the Bush administration, this explanation was plausible. It is still possible, but I think less likely true.

The more likely truth is that the Obama administration is a mile wide and an inch deep. The public is beginning to sense this, as President Obama’s falling approval ratings show. But within the Establishment, which includes Congress and most of the press, America’s first black President remains immune to criticism because he is America’s first black President. Were the current President, say, a Georgia cracker, the Establishment would already have him in the stocks, subject to a barrage of rotten fruit.

But even if President Obama were himself a man of depth and wisdom, an administration is much more than one man. Most of the Obama administration’s leading figures are merely second and third-stringers from the Clinton administration, resurrected as zombies (starting with Hillary herself). I don’t know of a single strategist among the lot. Most are playing at government, just as little girls play house.
If there is one among the lot who can think beyond the end of his nose – Jim Jones, has the cat got your tongue? – he would do well to quote Colonel Reese’s words to the President:

We now have an Iraqi government that has gained its balance and thinks it knows how to ride the bike in the race… Our hand on the back of the seat is holding them back and causing resentment. We need to let go before we both tumble to the ground.

With a thud that will be heard around the world.

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July 31, 2009
Text of Colonel Reese’s Memo


It’s Time for the US to Declare Victory and Go Home

As the old saying goes, “guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days.” Since the signing of the 2009 Security Agreement, we are guests in Iraq, and after six years in Iraq, we now smell bad to the Iraqi nose. Today the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are good enough to keep the Government of Iraq (GOI) from being overthrown by the actions of Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), the Baathists, and the Shia violent extremists that might have toppled it a year or two ago. Iraq may well collapse into chaos of other causes, but we have made the ISF strong enough for the internal security mission. Perhaps it is one of those infamous paradoxes of counterinsurgency that while the ISF is not good in any objective sense, it is good enough for Iraq in 2009. Despite this foreboding disclaimer about an unstable future for Iraq, the United States has achieved our objectives in Iraq. Prime Minister (PM) Maliki hailed June 30th as a “great victory,” implying the victory was over the US. Leaving aside his childish chest pounding, he was more right than he knew. We too ought to declare victory and bring our combat forces home. Due to our tendency to look after the tactical details and miss the proverbial forest for the trees, this critically important strategic realization is in danger of being missed.
Equally important to realize is that we aren’t making the GOI and the ISF better in any significant ways with our current approach. Remaining in Iraq through the end of December 2011 will yield little in the way of improving the abilities of the ISF or the functioning of the GOI. Furthermore, in light of the GOI’s current interpretation of the limitations imposed by the 30 June milestones of the 2008 Security Agreement, the security of US forces are at risk. Iraq is not a country with a history of treating even its welcomed guests well. This is not to say we can be defeated, only that the danger of a violent incident that will rupture the current partnership has greatly increased since 30 June. Such a rupture would force an unplanned early departure that would harm our long term interests in Iraq and potentially unraveling the great good that has been done since 2003. The use of the military instrument of national power in its current form has accomplished all that can be expected. In the next section I will present and admittedly one sided view of the evidence in support of this view. This information is drawn solely from the MND-B area of operations in Baghdad Province. My reading of reports from the other provinces suggests the same situation exists there.

The general lack of progress in essential services and good governance is now so broad that it ought to be clear that we no longer are moving the Iraqis “forward.” Below is an outline of the information on which I base this assessment:

1. The ineffectiveness and corruption of GOI Ministries is the stuff of legend.

2. The anti-corruption drive is little more than a campaign tool for Maliki

3. The GOI is failing to take rational steps to improve its electrical infrastructure and to improve their oil exploration, production and exports.

4. There is no progress towards resolving the Kirkuk situation.

5. Sunni Reconciliation is at best at a standstill and probably going backwards.

6. Sons of Iraq (SOI) or Sahwa transition to ISF and GOI civil service is not happening, and SOI monthly paydays continue to fall further behind.

7. The Kurdish situation continues to fester.

8. Political violence and intimidation is rampant in the civilian community as well as military and legal institutions.

9. The Vice President received a rather cool reception this past weekend and was publicly told that the internal affairs of Iraq are none of the US’s business.

The rate of improvement of the ISF is far slower than it should be given the amount of effort and resources being provided by the US. The US has made tremendous progress in building the ISF. Our initial efforts in 2003 to mid-2004
were only marginally successful. From 2004 to 2006 the US built the ISF into a fighting force. Since the start of the surge in 2007 we have again expanded and improved the ISF. They are now at the point where they have defeated the organized insurgency against the GOI and are marginally self-sustaining. This is a remarkable tale for which many can be justifiably proud. We have reached the point of diminishing returns, however, and need to find a new set of tools. The massive partnering efforts of US combat forces with ISF isn’t yielding benefits commensurate with the effort and is now generating its own opposition. Again, some touch points for this assessment are:

1. If there ever was a window where the seeds of a professional military culture could have been implanted, it is now long past. US combat forces will not be here long enough or with sufficient influence to change it.

2. The military culture of the Baathist-Soviet model under Saddam Hussein remains entrenched and will not change. The senior leadership of the ISF is incapable of change in the current environment.

   a) Corruption among officers is widespread
   b) Neglect and mistreatment of enlisted men is the norm
   c) The unwillingness to accept a role for the NCO corps continues
   d) Cronyism and nepotism are rampant in the assignment and promotion system
   e) Laziness is endemic
   f) Extreme centralization of C2 is the norm
   g) Lack of initiative is legion
   h) Unwillingness to change, do anything new blocks progress
   i) Near total ineffectiveness of the Iraq Army and National Police institutional organizations and systems prevents the ISF from becoming self-sustaining
   j) For every positive story about a good ISF junior officer with initiative, or an ISF commander who conducts a rehearsal or an after action review or some individual MOS training event, there are ten examples of the most basic lack of military understanding despite the massive partnership efforts by our combat forces and advisory efforts by MiTT and NPTT teams.

3. For all the fawning praise we bestow on the Baghdad Operations Command (BOC) and Ministry of Defense (MoD) leadership for their effectiveness since the
start of the surge, they are flawed in serious ways. Below are some salient examples:

a) They are unable to plan ahead, unable to secure the PM’s approval for their actions

b) They are unable to stand up to Shiite political parties

c) They were and are unable to conduct an public relations effort in support of the SA and now they are afraid of the ignorant masses as a result

d) They unable to instill discipline among their officers and units for the most basic military standards

e) They are unable to stop the nepotism and cronyism

f) They are unable to take basic steps to manage the force development process

g) They are unable to stick to their deals with US leaders

It is clear that the 30 Jun milestone does not represent one small step in a long series of gradual steps on the path the US withdrawal, but as Maliki has termed it, a “great victory” over the Americans and fundamental change in our relationship. The recent impact of this mentality on military operations is evident:

1. Iraqi Ground Forces Command (IGFC) unilateral restrictions on US forces that violate the most basic aspects of the SA

2. BOC unilateral restrictions that violate the most basic aspects of the SA

3. International Zone incidents in the last week where ISF forces have resorted to shows of force to get their way at Entry Control Points (ECP) including the forcible takeover of ECP 1 on 4 July

4. Sudden coolness to advisors and CDRs, lack of invitations to meetings,

5. Widespread partnership problems reported in other areas such as ISF confronting US forces at TCPs in the city of Baghdad and other major cities in Iraq.

6. ISF units are far less likely to want to conduct combined combat operations with US forces, to go after targets the US considers high value, etc.

7. The Iraqi legal system in the Rusafa side of Baghdad has demonstrated a recent willingness to release individuals originally detained by the US for attacks on the US.
Yet despite all their grievous shortcomings noted above, ISF military capability is sufficient to handle the current level of threats from Sunni and Shiite violent groups. Our combat forces’ presence here on the streets and in the rural areas adds only marginally to their capability while exposing us to attacks to which we cannot effectively respond.

The GOI and the ISF will not be toppled by the violence as they might have been between 2006 and 2008. Though two weeks does not make a trend, the near cessation of attacks since 30 June speaks volumes about how easily Shiite violence can be controlled and speaks to the utter weakness of AQI. The extent of AQ influence in Iraq is so limited as to be insignificant, only when they get lucky with a mass casualty attack are they relevant. Shiite groups are working with the PM and his political allies, or plotting to work against him in the upcoming elections. We are merely convenient targets for delivering a message against Maliki by certain groups, and perhaps by Maliki when he wants us to be targeted. Extremist violence from all groups is directed towards affecting their political standing within the existing power structures of Iraq. There is no longer any coherent insurgency or serious threat to the stability of the GOI posed by violent groups.

Our combat operations are currently the victim of circular logic. We conduct operations to kill or capture violent extremists of all types to protect the Iraqi people and support the GOI. The violent extremists attack us because we are still here conducting military operations. Furthermore, their attacks on us are no longer an organized campaign to defeat our will to stay: the attacks which kill and maim US combat troops are signals or messages sent by various groups as part of the political struggle for power in Iraq. The exception to this is AQI which continues is globalist terror campaign. Our operations are in support of an Iraqi government that no longer relishes our help while at the same time our operations generate the extremist opposition to us as various groups jockey for power in post-occupation Iraq.

The GOI and ISF will continue to squeeze the US for all the “goodies” that we can provide between now and December 2011, while eliminating our role in providing security and resisting our efforts to change the institutional problems prevent the ISF from getting better. They will tolerate us as long as they can suckle at Uncle Sam’s bounteous mammary glands. Meanwhile the level of resistance to US freedom of movement and operations will grow. The potential for Iraqi on US violence is high now and will grow by the day. Resentment on both sides will build and reinforce itself until a violent incident break outs into the open. If that were to happen the violence will remain tactically isolated, but it will wreck our strategic relationships and force our withdrawal under very unfavorable circumstances.
For a long time the preferred US approach has been to “work it at the lowest level of partnership” as a means to stay out of the political fray and with the hope that good work at the tactical level will compensate for and slowly improve the strategic picture. From platoon to brigade, US Soldiers and Marines continue to work incredibly hard and in almost all cases they achieve positive results. This approach has achieved impressive results in the past, but today it is failing. The strategic dysfunctions of the GOI and ISF have now reached down to the tactical level degrading good work there and sundering hitherto strong partnerships. As one astute political observer has stated “We have lost all strategic influence with the GoI and trying to influence events and people from the tactical/operational level is courting disaster, wasting lives, and merely postponing the inevitable.”

The reality of Iraq in July 2009 has rendered the assumptions underlying the 2008 Security Agreement (SA) overcome by events — mostly good events actually. The SA outlines a series of gradual steps towards military withdrawal, analogous to a father teaching his kid to ride a bike without training wheels. If the GOI at the time the SA was signed thought it needed a long, gradual period of weaning. But the GOI now has left the nest (while continuing to breast feed as noted above). The strategic and tactical realities have changed far quicker than the provisions and timeline of the SA can accommodate. We now have an Iraqi government that has gained its balance and thinks it knows how to ride the bike in the race. And in fact they probably do know how to ride, at least well enough for the road they are on against their current competitors. Our hand on the back of the seat is holding them back and causing resentment. We need to let go before we both tumble to the ground.

Therefore, we should declare our intentions to withdraw all US military forces from Iraq by August 2010. This would not be a strategic paradigm shift, but an acceleration of existing US plans by some 15 months. We should end our combat operations now, save those for our own force protection, narrowly defined, as we withdraw. We should revise the force flow into Iraq accordingly. The emphasis should shift towards advising only and advising the ISF to prepare for our withdrawal. Advisors should probably be limited to Iraqi division level a higher. Our train and equip functions should begin the transition to Foreign Military Sales and related training programs. During the withdrawal period the USG and GOI should develop a new strategic framework agreement that would include some lasting military presence at 1-3 large training bases, airbases, or key headquarters locations. But it should not include the presence of any combat forces save those for force protection needs or the occasional exercise. These changes would not only align our actions with the reality of Iraq in 2009, it will remove the causes of increasing friction and reduce the cost of OIF in blood and treasure. Finally, it will set the conditions for a new relationship between the US and Iraq without the complications of the residual effects of the US invasion and occupation.
Ideas as Weapons is the title of a new book, a collection of essays edited by two Marine Corps officers, G.J. David Jr. and T.R. McKeldin (the publisher is Potomac Books). Subtitled “Influence and Perception in Modern Warfare,” the volume is dedicated to exploring the aspect of war most neglected by the Second Generation American military, ideas. The U.S. armed forces have never grasped the centrality of John Boyd’s dictum that for winning wars, people are most important, ideas come second and hardware is only third.

Mostly, the U.S. military reduces ideas to “Information Operations,” or IO, in which some junior officers and NCOs churn out leaflets, films etc. of indifferent quality. The idea, central to Fourth Generation war, that Information Operations are what you do, not what you say, is missed entirely. The results of typical IO range from minimal to hilarious. The book recalls one incident during the siege of Fallujah where Marines made and broadcast a film intended to show American troops feeding Iraqi refugees halal rations. It actually showed them feeding Arabs kosher rations, which did not play too well locally.

As with all collections, chapters vary in quality. They are organized in four parts, Geopolitical, Strategic, Operational (it’s nice to see Marines using that word correctly form once) and Tactical. In my view, the best chapter in the Geopolitical section is Ambassador David Passage’s “Reflections on Psychological Operations: The Imperative of Engaging a Conflicted Population.” He argues that “It has long been axiomatic in guerrilla warfare that a defending force (such as a government the United States is associated with) will find itself confronted with almost insuperable odds unless it can enlist the active — not passive — support of its own citizens in countering an insurgency.” Contrasting America’s failure in Vietnam with success in El Salvador, Ambassador Passage suggests the usual psyops messages are ineffective:

The modern age has reached the point where, given the babble of conflicting, contradicting, and combative messages, populations are decreasingly likely to simply accept what they are told. In the welter of competing messages and mediums, government-sponsored messages are at a particular disadvantage…
A better approach might be to ask questions rather than provide answers…

The fundamental message to the people of Iraq and Afghanistan and other countries in conflict needs to be, as the U.S. message was in El Salvador twenty years ago, “This is your country; the kind of country it’s going to be is up to you – not to the United States or any foreign country. What kind of country do you want it to be? Are you willing to help restore order, and law, and civility – or are you going to sit quietly while those who seek to destroy what you have do their work?”

A strong chapter in the Strategic section is Colonel William M. Darley USA’s “Clausewitz’s Theory of War and Information Operations.” Darley argues that “Contrary to entrenched perceptions, IO is not merely a family of related skill sets or capabilities that in all cases augment “kinetic operation.” Collectively, they are properly understood as a specific purpose and emphasis within an overall plan of action that under some circumstances might be the main effort.” I would add that in 4GW, they are usually the main effort.

Darley offers a Clausewitzian definition of IO, far broader than the current American technical definition. It reflects Clausewitz’s discussion of the power of “moral” factors in what is essentially a political contest. His chapter concludes with a quotation from Clausewitz that strikes to the heart of ongoing American failures in 4GW:

Political considerations do not determine the posting of guards or the employment of patrols. But they are the more influential in the planning of war, of the campaign, and often even of the battle … The only question, therefore, is whether, when war is being planned the political point of view should give way to the purely military … or should the political point of view remain dominant and the military (military force and violence) be subordinated to it?

The book’s Operational segment includes a devastating critique of the U.S. military’s whole intelligence system, “Clouding the Issue: Intelligence Collection, Analysis, and Dissemination during Operation Iraqi Freedom,” by Army Lt. Col. George J. Stroumpos. Too lengthy to summarize here, it proceeds from the statement that

Our intelligence apparatus has been our Achilles’ heel… the Coalition intelligence apparatus is a hodgepodge pick-up team, conflicting in its organization and lost in a sea of data. This, coupled with the sheer volume and complexity of the environment, is the primary problem…is poor information management and the resulting syntheses that follow from poor technique.

Ideas as Weapons’ Tactical segment, which junior-level practitioners will find of particular value, includes a superb chapter, “Tactical Information Operations in West Rashid: An Iraqi National Police Battalion and Its Assigned U.S. Transition
Team,” by Major E. Lawson Quinn, USMC. This chapter gets at one of the central fallacies of the whole American effort in Iraq (and elsewhere), namely that what local government forces need is American training in techniques. In reality, cultural factors are far more important than technical skills (Saddam's forces, after all, were technically quite capable of maintaining order in Iraq without American training). Major Quinn gets at the central problem when he writes:

The Sunni population in West Rashid unquestionably viewed 2/7/2 (an Iraqi National Police battalion) as a sectarian organization that served the interests of the Shi’a majority at the expense of the Sunnis, if not an instrument of or in collusion with the Shi’a militias. The very demographic makeup of 2/7/2, less than ten Sunnis among the four hundred or so Shi’a members of the battalion, precluded overcoming that sectarian perception even if the Shi’a majority and leadership wanted to do so, but their actions clearly did not evince the slightest proclivity toward it.

In fact, it was quite clear that at least the battalion leadership understood the value of information operations in reinforcing that perception. Even the casual Western observer…would have understood the message trumpeted by the large Shi’a flag posted at the front of the compound high atop the tallest building.

Ideas as Weapons is a book that should be high on the reading list of every American commander in Iraq and Afghanistan, from the theater level down through company. I stress commanders, not just intelligence officers, because IO properly defined are at the heart of Fourth Generation war. Until American commanders at all levels understand that fact, we will continue to rocket and bomb our way to defeat.

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On War #310: One Step Forward, One Step Back

William S. Lind
7 July 2009

According to the July 3 Cleveland Plain Dealer, President Barack Obama said something very interesting last week. He told the AP that he has “a very narrow definition of success when it comes to our national security interests” in
Afghanistan. “And that is that al-Qa’ida and its affiliates cannot set up safe havens from which to attack Americans.”

Well. If his words were reported accurately and he really means them, President Obama may have built the golden bridge we need to get out. That definition of success may be attainable.

But here’s the rub. Adoption of a realistic strategic goal in Afghanistan means reversing a decision the administration reportedly made last March, at Hillary’s insistence. Hillary demanded, and reportedly got, a commitment to the opium dream of a “secular, democratic, peaceful” Afghanistan.

Has President Obama already figured out he was had by the Clintons? Will he dare assert his authority over Hillary? How long will he stick to his guns when the Clintons ramp up a guerilla campaign against him among Democratic activists?

As I said in my last column, problems in court politics are often more difficult than problems on the battlefield.Dumping the Clinton’s dreamy-eyed idealism in foreign policy in favor of realistic strategic objectives promises a battle royal at court. Of course, Obama may have just been musing aloud, in which case Hillary will soon set the record straight. But if the President really meant what he said and sticks to it, it would represent a major step forward.

Unfortunately, the July 4 Plain Dealer reported another step back. In a story on the Marine Corps’ “big push” in Helmand province, the paper said that

The stiffest resistance occurred in the district of Garmser, where Taliban fighters holed up in a walled housing compound engaged in an eight-hour gunbattle with troops from the 2nd Battalion of the 8th Marine Regiment. The Marines eventually requested a Harrier fighter jet to drop a 500-pound bomb on the compound, which was believed to have killed all fighters inside.

This time, the problem was not Americans failing to understand that in 4GW, airstrikes work to our defeat. The PD continued,

The commanders directing the huge Marine security operation here had said they hoped not to rely on airstrikes...Officers here noted with pride that they had not used bombs or artillery in the first 24 hours of the mission.

But they were left with little choice after the insurgents refused to surrender.

It is hard to question the details of a tactical situation from half a world away, based on a press report. There may be reasons I cannot see from here why the airstrike was unavoidable. But from what was reported, it seems to have resulted from an all-too-frequent problem with American infantry, a narrow tactical repertoire that offers few options.
Anybody out there ever hear of a siege? That housing compound might not have had infinite supplies of food or water. Must we be in such a hurry to resolve every situation that sieges are not an option? They are, after all, one of the oldest techniques in war (read the Iliad).

Just how sure are we that the guys we killed were Taliban? Yes, they were shooting at us. But lots of Afghans do that. Local Pashtuns will fight us just because we’re there. If we kill locals in an airstrike, we create a blood feud with all their relatives.

Did anyone try to talk to those guys? A siege opens that opportunity. It also gives us a chance to talk to other locals and try to find out who we are fighting. Remember, the Taliban (if they were Taliban) is not a monolithic organization. Like almost all 4GW forces, it is a militia. Militia will often deal.

Ah, the Marines will reply, we told you they refused to surrender. Should surrender or death be our opponents’ only options? Whoever it was we were fighting put up what one Marine commander called “a hell of a fight.” No Americans were killed in the process. So why not let them march out with the honors of war? That would tell the Pashtun that we are men of honor who respect other men of honor. Not a bad message to send when going into a new 4GW neighborhood.

I know many Marines will sniff at this, quoting their favorite line, “No better friend, no worse enemy.” In response, I suggest a modification for 4GW: we should add the option, “No better enemy.” “Better” in this context does not mean “easy.” Rather, it means “honorable.” Against an opponent such as the Pashtun, whose culture puts a high value on honor, being an honorable enemy may be important when it comes to talk.

In turn, if Marines are to be seen by the Pashtun as an honorable enemy, we may want to reconsider slaughtering — with weapons such as airstrikes against which they have no defense — those who have fought bravely. “Better enemies” respect their enemies, and themselves, too much to do that sort of thing.

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On War #309: Going Nowhere Fast
The advent of General Stanley McChrystal as America’s overall commander in Afghanistan appears to be good news. He seems to understand that in this kind of war, the rule must be, “First, do no harm.” Associated Press recently reported him as saying that his measure of effectiveness will be “the number of Afghans shielded from violence, not the number of militants killed.” Unusually, he seems to include American and NATO violence in his calculation, since he has ordered a drastic cutback in airstrikes. Heavy American reliance on airstrikes has probably done more than anything else to win the war for the Taliban.

But history is littered with the failures of promising new generals; “Fighting Joe” Hooker somehow comes to mind. If General McChrystal is to represent any real hope that the U.S. might get out of Afghanistan with some tailfeathers intact, he must confront a host of challenges. Let’s look at just four:

* The Second Generation American armed forces must learn how to make war by means other than putting firepower on targets. However, that is all they know how to do. A friend who recently graduated from the U.S. Army’s Command & Staff College at Ft. Leavenworth told me that virtually the whole course is still about putting fire on targets. Nightwatch for May 17 reported that “An Indian criticism of the US effort in Afghanistan and Pakistan is that it does not lack will, it lacks skill.” That criticism is valid, and it traces directly to military education and training that remains stuck in the Second Generation.

* The U.S. touts its “new” counter-insurgency doctrine, but there is nothing new about it. It merely represents a recovery of knowledge thrown away after the Vietnam war. However, Fourth Generation conflicts are different from the Vietnam war. While some counter-insurgency techniques carry over, the multiplicity of players and objectives in 4GW face counter-insurgents with an entirely different context. The first draft of a counter-insurgency field manual written for 4GW, a product of the Fourth Generation seminar, will become available this summer on this web site.

* No doctrine, including the above manual, offers a magic potion for winning Fourth Generation wars. As the basic 4GW field manual FMFM-1A warns, even if an invader does everything right, he will still probably lose. Kelly Vlahos cautions in an important piece in the August issue of The American Conservative, “One-Sided COIN,” that the neo-libs are pushing counter-insurgency as patent medicine. Just get the dosage right and we can “do” counter-insurgency successfully anywhere. She quotes retired Lt. Col. John Nagl as saying, “The soldiers who will win these wars require an ability not just to dominate land operations, but to change entire societies.” That is hubristic nonsense.

* The Obama administration has decided to continue its predecessor’s Quixotic commitment to unattainable strategic objectives, i.e., changing entire societies. Afghanistan is to be made into a liberal, democratic, secular country...
with “rights for women” as defined by American Feminists. That is baying for the moon, and it can have no other outcome but failure. Setting unattainable objectives makes doctrine irrelevant, because it guarantees defeat. America could have Alexander the Great as its commander in Afghanistan, with Napoleon and von Moltke as his deputies, and we would still lose.

In sum, General McChrystal faces a full plate. His most difficult challenges are internal, in the form of a flawed military instrument, inadequate doctrine, a neo-liberal Establishment drunk on COIN juju and strategic objectives no commander can attain. Internal challenges are often harder to overcome than those posed by the external opponent, because potential fixes run into the immovable object of court politics.

As an Army friend put it to me, until these and similar internal challenges can be met, our efforts in Afghanistan are like trying to get somewhere by riding faster on an exercise bicycle.

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On War #308: The Iran Crisis and 4GW

William S. Lind
22 June 2009

The current crisis in Iran is not 4GW. It is a struggle for control of a state, not an attempt to replace the state with something else. However, it could prove a harbinger of 4GW in Iran, because what is at stake is the legitimacy of current Iranian political system.

In a manner that was cynical, blatant and remarkably stupid, the Khamenei/Ahmadinejad regime in effect toyed with its own legitimacy. Nightwatch for June 19 quotes Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei as saying in his Friday public sermon, “There is 11 million vote difference. How can one rig 11 million votes?”

The answer is, “Not without people taking notice.” Stalin, whose cynicism was legendary – one of his remarks was, “The death of one man is a tragedy; the death of a million men is a statistic” – also said, “What is important is not who votes. What is important is who counts the votes.” But throughout the history of
the Soviet Union, the Communist Party was careful to seem to take elections with
the utmost seriousness. It knew the pretence was important for its legitimacy.

In contrast, the Iranian regime in effect laughed as it rigged its election’s
outcome, saying to the Iranian people and the world, “Rig the elections? Of
course we rigged the elections. What are you going to do about it, sucker?” The
fact that the outcome was announced within three hours of the polls closing
suggests they did not count the votes at all. The Interior Ministry was just told
what numbers to put down on the tally sheets.

Now it has blown up in the regime’s face, in the worst kind of crisis any
government can face, a crisis of legitimacy. The Iranian opposition is able to say,
“You did not play by the rules you wrote.” That is a powerful rallying cry
anywhere in the world.

The Iranian people have rallied, by the millions, to the opposition. Iran is in the
midst of the greatest upheaval since the revolution that overthrew the Shah.

Like governments everywhere, Khamenei seems unable to grasp that he faces a
crisis not merely of leadership but of legitimacy. Had he grasped that essential
fact, he would have professed to be “shocked, shocked” by the electoral fraud,
dumped Ahmadinejad and devoted himself to showing Iran’s political system
works.

Instead, he has decided to keep himself and Ahmadinejad in power by force.
Today’s Washington Post quotes the opposition’s leader, Mir Hossein Mousavi,
as saying, “Shooting at the people, militarizing the city, scaring the people,
provoking them, and displaying power are all the result of the unlawfulness we’re
witnessing today.” Force may keep the current regime in power, but it also
completes the destruction of its legitimacy.

Fourth Generation theory warns that when a government loses its legitimacy and
attempts to retain power by naked force, it weakens the state itself. Iran has been
a relatively stable state. But there is no guarantee it will remain so. Iran includes
many different ethnic groups, not just Persians. If the opposition, which is loyal to
the Iranian state, is suppressed by force, Iranians may start to transfer their
loyalty away from the state.

The current crisis in Iran also reveals a fracture Fourth Generation theory
sometimes overlooks, a break on urban/rural lines. Ahmadinejad is genuinely
popular in much of rural Iran. His rural strength might have allowed him to win an
election where the votes were actually counted. The opposition, in turn, appears
to be almost entirely urban. Its urban strength is what has allowed it to contest
the announced electoral results with mass marches.
Urban/rural splits were common before the state arose. They sometimes led to bloody wars, usually in the form of peasant’s revolts. Exactly how they might play out in a Fourth Generation world is difficult to guess. Iran may offer an interesting test case.

But the larger lesson from events in Iran is one this column has harped on: few if any governments are able to perceive a crisis of legitimacy. Any governing system in time becomes a closed system, into which the question of legitimacy is not allowed to penetrate. To raise it is lese majesté. So long as that remains the case, the state system will grow more fragile.

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On War #307: Calling President Davis

William S. Lind
17 June 2009

Secession is in the air. In Texas, a Republican governor has dared breathe the word. Vermont has an active and growing secessionist movement. Oregon, Washington and British Columbia already call themselves Cascadia. Last weekend’s Wall Street Journal led off with a piece on secession. The author, Paul Starobin, wrote that:

The present-day American Goliath may turn out to be a freak of a waning age of politics and economics as conducted on a super-sized scale – too large to make any rational sense…

Is this all mere fancy, another amusing idea with which to wile away the summer? Fourth Generation theory suggests there is more to it than that. The crisis of legitimacy of the state has not passed America by. Washington pretends to offer “democracy,” but both parties are largely one party, the Establishment party. Its game is remaining the Establishment and enjoying the pleasures thereof, not governing the country. The only politics that count are court politics; America outside the beltway exists only as an annoying distraction. As both the economy and the culture crash, the Establishment says, “What is that to us?”
A collapse of the American state is not impossible. But the lines along which most secessionists see it breaking up are overly optimistic. Paul Starobin writes in the Journal,

The most hopeful prospect for the USA, should the decentralization impulse prove irresistible, is for Americans to draw on their natural inventiveness and democratic tradition by patenting a formula for getting the job done in a gradual and cooperative way.

Fat chance.

Instead of a restored Vermont Republic, Cascadia and perhaps a new Confederacy, if America breaks up it is likely to do so along non-geographic lines. Fourth Generation theory suggests that the new primary identities for which people are likely to vote, work and fight will not be geographical. Rather, they will be cultural, religious, racial or ethnic, ideological, etc. Following the sorts of massacres, ethnic cleansings, pogroms and genocides such Fourth Generation civil wars usually involve, new geographically defined states may emerge. But their borders will derive from cultural divides more than geographic ones.

The fact that a second American civil war would be nastier than the first — itself no picnic — does not mean it won’t happen. That depends on whether the Washington Establishment can recognize it has a legitimacy problem, get its act together and provide competent governance. It is currently failing that test, and I expect it to continue to fail. Any member of the Establishment who dares subordinate court politics to the good of the nation or advocates more than very modest change quickly finds he is no longer a member of the Establishment.

I spent most of last week at the Congress on the New Urbanism, which I have attended for many years. New Urbanism seeks to build new villages, towns and urban neighborhoods as alternatives to suburban sprawl, an essentially conservative endeavor. This time, something new came to the fore: making such communities agriculturally self-sufficient. Why? Because there is growing recognition among New Urbanists and others that only a local food supply may be secure as things fall apart. A few people at the Congress were looking toward the next logical step: giving such communities an ability to defend themselves. If the future brings the end of the empire, how do we get ready for the Dark Ages?

Again, if this sounds fanciful, Fourth Generation war theory says it is not. It is by no means inevitable, but it is one possible outcome of the Establishment’s misrule.

My most recent book, The Next Conservatism, talks at some length about these matters. In the mid-1990s, I wrote a novel, Victoria, about an American Fourth Generation civil war and its aftermath. It never found a publisher, perhaps because the idea seemed so outlandish, more likely because it is a face shot at
Political Correctness. Political Correctness, which is really the cultural Marxism of the Frankfurt School, has lost none of its ability to intimidate publishers. But the idea of an American break-up is no longer off the charts. It may yet prove time for President Davis to think of returning to Richmond, and for New Urbanists to design some good castles.

On War #306: A Memo to the President

by William S. Lind
June 2, 2009

The recent fire/counterfire between President Obama and former Vice President Dick Cheney over Guantanamo, the prisoners held there and techniques used in their interrogation revealed a distressing ignorance in the White House. Specifically, it revealed that Obama and his advisors are ignorant of military theory.

Cheney won the debate by drawing the usual Republican distinction, that between doing what is necessary for national security and being nice. If Republicans are allowed to frame the issue that way, they will always win. But in fact, theirs is a false position. We do not have to choose between doing what works in the “war on terrorism” and doing what is morally right. The two are the same.

The military theory that allows us to see this is the work of Colonel John Boyd, USAF. Boyd argued that war is fought on three levels: the moral, the mental and the physical. Of the three, the moral level is the most powerful, the physical level is the least powerful and the mental level lies between the other two.

Cheney argued that we should sacrifice the moral level to the physical. We should engage in torture because it may gain us information that could prevent another attack like 9/11. That could be the case.

But Boyd’s theory would respond that the defeat we suffer on the moral level by adopting a policy of torture will outweigh any benefits torture might bring us on the physical level of war. How so? By pumping up the “terrorists” will, cohesion and ability to cooperate while diminishing our own.

In effect, both our enemies and our allies will come to see us as evil. That enables enemies to recruit, raise money, and generate new operations while we must focus internally on papering over cracks in our coalitions. They gain greater harmony, while we face increased friction. Boyd’s dread “many non-cooperative centers of gravity.” They pull together, we are pulled apart.
For President Obama and other opponents of torture, the important fact here is that, if we understand what Boyd is saying, we no longer face the choice Cheney offered. We need not choose between doing what military necessity commands and acting morally. Military necessity itself demands that we act morally. The real choice is between doing what wins wars and loses wars, with Cheney arguing for the latter. Suddenly, it is the Republicans who are on the wrong side of the “national security” issue.

Let me offer President Obama three pieces of advice, all intended to escape the Republicans’ trap:

First, when this issue comes up again (and it will), go to your NSC director, General Jim Jones, for advice. He is familiar with Boyd’s work. Your political people are not.

Second, apply Boyd’s insight about the three levels of war not only to the question of torture but to everything we do in places like Iraq and Afghanistan. At present, we are sacrificing the moral level to the physical in lots of ways, which is to say we are defeating ourselves. A good start would be a Presidential order forbidding air strikes on populated areas and demanding they be restricted elsewhere to situations where our troops would otherwise be overrun.

Three, solve the issue of detainees at Guantanamo and elsewhere by designating all of them as what they are, namely Prisoners of War. International law specifies how POWs must be cared for. POW camps on American soil are nothing new; we have had them in every war. POWs may be held until the war is over or exchanged. This is what the Bush administration should have done from the outset, a point Democrats can make. The current mess was created by Republicans.

Politicians usually roll their eyes when military theory is mentioned, deeming it too esoteric for “the real world.” As President Obama’s inability to answer Cheney effectively shows, nothing could be further from the truth. The Bush administration led America into two quagmires, in Iraq and Afghanistan, because of its ignorance of the theory of Fourth Generation war. If the Obama White House continues as ignorant as its predecessor, it will set the country up for fresh disasters. A wise President will prefer to learn from theory than from failure.

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On War #305: The Future is Now

by William S. Lind
19 May 2009

For years, I have warned in these columns and elsewhere that the future weapon of mass destruction we should most fear is not a nuke. Rather, it is a genetically engineered plague, a plague no one has ever seen before and against which no one has any immunity. In the time it would take to identify the new disease, develop a vaccine, distribute the vaccine and have it become effective, modern societies could suffer death rates equivalent to those of the Black Death: up to 2/3 of the population.

Regrettably, it appears that dread future has now arrived. The May 12 Wall Street Journal carried a front-page story titled “In Attics and Closets, ‘Biohackers’ Discover Their Inner Frankenstein.”

In Massachusetts, a young woman makes genetically modified E. coli in a closet she converted into a home lab. A part-time DJ in Berkeley, Calif., works in his attic to cultivate viruses extracted from sewage …

These hobbyists represent a growing strain of geekdom known as biohacking, in which do-it-yourselfers tinker with the building blocks of life in the comfort of their own homes.

Developing nuclear weapons requires vast facilities. Even so significant a country as Iran must strain to its limits to design, build and operate the complex industrial plants required. The costs run in the billions of dollars.

In contrast, the Wall Street Journal writes of the woman in Massachusetts that

She’s got a DNA “thermocycler” bought on eBay for $59, and an incubator made by combining a Styrofoam box with a heating device meant for an iguana cage.

As usual, the Internet plays the role of Sorcerer’s Apprentice in this unfolding nightmare:

The (biohacking) movement has made big strides recently thanks to the commercial availability of synthetic DNA. This genetic material, normally found inside the nucleus of cells, can now easily be purchased online. That provides any amateur with the ingredients for constructing an organism.

The WSJ reassuringly notes that the government is interested in all this.
The E. coli manipulator got a phone call from a government security contractor: How did she build that lab? Did she know other people creating new life forms at home?

The woman, a Ms. Aull, says the worries are overblown. DIY biologists are trying to “build a slingshot,” she says, “and there are people out there talking about, oh, no, what happens if they move on to nuclear weapons?”

Well, my dear, the fact is that you and your fellow biohackers have moved on to nuclear weapons. Or, as I fear, something even more dangerous than nuclear weapons. One little “oopsie” in a basement lab could inadvertently unleash a plague.

In their collective hubris, modern people seem to have forgotten what the plague did. It brought down a whole civilization, the Middle Ages. So vast and terrible were its effects that children still sing about it:

Ring around the rosie,
Pocket full of posies,
One, two, three and
We all fall down.

The rosie was a rose-shaped, red blotch, often with a ring around it, that was one of the first symptoms showing a person had caught the plague. The posies were sweet-smelling herbs; people thought breathing through them might ward off the disease. One, two, three and we all fall down – dead.

It’s nice to know the Feds are paying some attention to what is happening here. But what are jihadi biohackers cooking up? What’s brewing in Columbian drug labs? Anything available on the Internet is available everywhere.

A calm, measured, thoughtful response to biohacking would be to run around madly in one’s underwear screaming “The sky is falling! The sky is falling!” It is impossible to overstate this threat.

What can we do about it? Probably nothing. Only students of history, who know what the Black Death did to Medieval Europe, will understand what is at stake. Since World War I, and in some ways since the onset of the mis-named Enlightenment, the Modern Age has been folding back on itself, creating self-amplifying feedback loops of ever-greater destructive power. But only Cassandra can see it happening.

One of the few effective defenses the Middle Ages had against the Black Death was immurement: when plague appeared in a household, the house was bricked up, with the inhabitants inside. Some towns saved themselves that way. Should we immure biohackers? Absolutely.
Of course we won’t, nor will we do anything until it is too late. One, two, three and we all fall down.

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On War #304: The Balkans Again

by William S. Lind
12 May 2009

A story I read years ago culminated with the protagonist holed up in a cheap hotel in the Balkans, listening unwillingly through the paper-thin wall as the man in the room next door beat his wife. As he pummeled her, she cried again and again, “Balkan! Balkan!” “Balkan,” it seems, may be a term of opprobrium even in the Balkans.

Few episodes in American history have been more Balkan than our late war there. In case the folly of the war in Iraq and the futility of the war in Afghanistan have caused us to forget, the Clinton administration bombed Serbia for almost three months, for reasons no one quite remembers. Somewhere around 5,000 Serbian civilians were killed, and much of an already poor country’s economic infrastructure was wrecked. As usual, the bombing had virtually no effect on military targets.

The Serbs caved when the Russians pulled the rug out from under them and NATO dropped its most extreme demands. NATO could have gotten the same deal with no bombing, had the initial ultimatum to Serbia not been written to make acceptance impossible (Operation Franz Ferdinand?).

The truce, which is the most one can get in Balkan wars, required Serbian forces to evacuate Serbs’ ancestral homeland, Kosovo. That turned Kosovo’s remaining Serbian civilians over to the tender mercies of the Albanians, who promptly ethnically cleansed most of them while NATO forces stood by. Serbia did not renounce its claim to Kosovo; no Serbian government could do that and survive.

Now, it seems, our distinguished Secretary of State, Madame Clinton, wishes to revisit the scene of the crime. Perhaps looking about for something more promising than fighting Pashtuns, she is rumored to want another round with the
Serbs. The demands, this time, are to be Serbian recognition of Kosovo’s “independence” (Kosovo is not a country and never has been; there are no Kosovars, only Serbs and Albanians who live in Kosovo) and the destruction of Republika Srpska, the Serbian portion of Bosnia. The effects would be to de-legitimize the current moderate Serbian government and drive the remaining Serbs in Kosovo and Bosnia out as refugees.

Only people as shallow and self-absorbed as the Clintons could want to mess around in the Balkans. Talk about smoking in the powder magazine. The potential for disaster is always high, and the effects can spread, as the unpleasantness between 1914 and 1918 might remind us.

In fact, the two previous rounds of Balkan fighting and American and NATO meddling have left unstable situations needing only a spark to erupt. Bosnia is a hot-house creation, a figment of the Globalist elite’s imagination. Like Oakland, there is no there there. It is a Croat-Moslem “federation” neither party accepts. The Croats want out, and the Muslims want to cut the Croats’ throats. All that keeps the lid on is the money that pours from the foreign troops who occupy the place.

Kosovo remains a festering boil, home to jihadists, drug distribution networks and other 4GW elements of every sort. Serbia won’t give it up, and the Albanians will not rest until every Serb is gone or dead and every Serbian church or cultural monument obliterated.

Mrs. Clinton wants to push America’s nose back into this beehive, or so the rumor mill in Washington has it. We must pray that adults somewhere in the Obama administration won’t let the children again set fire to the house so they can roast marshmallows over the embers. A few folks who, unlike the Clintons, know something of Balkan history are sponsoring a conference on Capitol Hill on May 27 to urge we let sleeping dragons lie. Let’s hope that for once someone listens.

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On War #303: Rehearsal

by William S. Lind
May 4, 2009
Thus far, the great swine flu “pandemic” exists mainly in newspaper headlines. “World Ends Tomorrow” always sells a few extra papers. I’m waiting for the Onion: “Pigs flu.”

If swine flu follows the route of its 1918-1919 predecessor, receding over the summer, then coming back in a more virulent version next winter, it could get serious. But so far, the “pandemic’s” most interesting aspect is as a rehearsal for one of 4GW’s most dangerous threats, the release of a genetically engineered plague.

Genetic engineering is a hideous technology, crafted in Mordor. Honest blunders will be enough to unleash plagues on crops, critters (honeybees may have already been hit), and man. It offers Brave New World its final, almost inescapable control mechanism.

Like every other technology man has invented, it will also be used in war. I have argued for years that a genetically engineered plague, a disease no one ever saw before and against which there are no defenses, could replicate what the Black Death brought to medieval Europe. Such a weapon could kill far more people than a single nuke or even several nukes. Worse, while building nuclear weapons requires vast facilities, genetic engineering is knowledge-based. No non-state entity will be able to build a fission or fusion weapon (they may buy or steal one), but they will be able to genetically engineer deadly diseases, if they can’t already.

Let us imagine, for a moment, that the ongoing swine flu epidemic were a deliberate rehearsal for release of a genetically engineered plague. What would be the lessons so far?

First, the main target, the United States, offers a wonderful incubator right next door: Mexico. Mexico has densely populated slums; a culture in which life is lived socially, outside the home; and typical Third World standards of public health. Getting a plague started is tricky. It needs to achieve “critical mass” before it is detected. Mexico is just the “Petri dish” a 4GW attacker would need.

An article in the Sunday, May 3 Washington Post noted:

Mexican scientists said the virus has been spreading primarily within families and among co-workers, often in dense, poor neighborhoods of Mexico City…

“When you have this huge accumulation with crowed people in a rather small area, you have a greater opportunity to spread the disease,” (Mexican epidemiologist) Lezana said. “Besides, it’s an area – in general – of low income, poor people, urban poor, very crowded, so those might be some of the main explanations…”
Second, the Washington Establishment will not even attempt to close the United States/Mexican border until it is too late. Spokesmen for the Obama administration said that an epidemic is preferable to the economic damage border closure would create. They would realize, too late, how wrong they were if the disease were a genetically engineered plague. But “too late” means a win for 4GW. The rehearsal shows the border will remain open, with vast movement of people, legally and illegally, between the United States and Mexico. Moving a plague northward, once Mexico has served its “incubator” function, will not be difficult.

Third, Americans, driven by sensation-seeking media, will panic. Panic is a reasonable response to a plague; one of the best ways to survive the Black Death was to get out of town as soon as it appeared. But panic will help a 4GW attacker achieve what might be his main objective, serious damage to the American economy, even if public health measures succeed in containing the plague without major population loss. Osama himself has said that al Qaeda’s main target is the American economy, since that is what Americas seem to care most about.

Could the swine flu epidemic in fact be a trial run for an attack by a genetically engineered plague? Might the swine flu have been deliberately created for a test? The answer is almost certainly no, although at this point scientists do not know how this version of flu arose.

But “objectively,” as a Marxist would say, it is a test nonetheless. We would be wise to regard it as such, and grade our response carefully. To date, we have gotten an F, largely because of the Establishment’s refusal to consider closing the U.S./Mexican border. The only effective immediate response to a genetically engineered plague is likely to be quarantine. Quarantines start with border controls. America and other countries used to know that, and they routinely closed borders and quarantined arriving travelers when epidemics were loose.

“Globalist” ideology, which is shared by both political parties, rejects border controls as hostile to its vision of “One World.” In a century when genetically engineered plagues will serve as weapons of mass destruction, that ideology may literally be the death of us.

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At the height of the Cold War, a U.S. army corps commander in Europe asked for information on his Soviet opposite, the commander of the corps facing him across the inter-German border. All the U.S. intelligence agencies, working with classified material, came up with very little. He then took his question to Chris Donnelly, who had a small Soviet military research institute at Sandhurst. That institute worked solely from open source, i.e. unclassified material. It sent the American general a stack of reports six inches high, with articles by his Soviet counterpart, articles about him, descriptions of exercises he had played in, etc.

What was true during the Cold War is even more true now, in the face of Fourth Generation war. As we have witnessed in the hunt for Osama, our satellite-photo-addicted intel shops can't tell us much. But there is a vast amount of 4GW material available open-source: websites by and about our opponents, works by civilian academics, material from think-tanks, reports from businessmen who travel in areas we are interested in – the pile is almost bottomless. Every American soldier with access to a computer can find almost anything he needs. Much of it is both more accurate and more useful than what filters down through the military intelligence chain.

Or at least he could. In recent months, more and more American officers have told me that when they attempt to access the websites they need, they find access is blocked on DOD computers. Is al Qaeda doing this in a dastardly attempt to blind American combat units? Sadly, no. DOD is doing it. Someone in DOD is putting blinders on American troops.

I do not know who is behind this particular bit of idiocy. It may be the security trolls. They always like to restrict access to information, because doing so increases their bureaucratic power. One argument points to them, namely an assertion that the other side may obtain useful information by seeing what we are looking for. That is like arguing that our troops should be given no ammunition lest muzzle flashes give away their positions in a fire-fight.

But the fact that websites of American organizations whose views differ from DOD’s are also blocked points elsewhere. It suggests political involvement. Why, for example, is access to the website of the Center for Defense Information blocked? CDI is located in Washington, not the Hindu Kush. Its work includes the new book on military reform America’s Defense Meltdown, which has garnered quite a bit of attention at Quantico.
The goal of the website blockers, it seems, is to cut American military men off from any views except those of DOD itself. In other words, the blockaders want to create a closed system. John Boyd had quite a bit to say about closed systems, and it wasn't favorable.

Intel officers supposedly can go all the way to the top of their chain of command with a request to view a blocked website; their petition may or may not be granted. But this just intensifies the problem, because it gives the intel community a monopoly on information. In 4GW, it is essential that everyone do intel, not just a few specialists. Every private has to understand the environment he is operating in. Many websites can help him do that. But if he tries to access them on a DOD computer, he finds them blocked. He is thrown back to pure kinetics, which leads to our defeat.

Never could it be said more truly that we have met the enemy, and he is us. People on our own side are blinding our men. One person in a senior position could put an end to this absurd practice. Secretary Gates? General Petraeus? Jim Jones? Surely you all understand that putting blinders on our own side is less than helpful. Anyone listening out there?

As I said, I don’t know where this mindless action originates. Whoever is responsible for it should get the Order of the Black Turban, First Class. They are doing our opponents a great favor.

Rigid control of information through a compartmented, stovepiped process is characteristic of the Second Generation. Once again we see why Second Generation militaries cannot win Fourth Generation wars. Our defeats are less a product of what our enemy does to us than of what we do to ourselves.

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Apr.20.2009
4:09 pm
by Chet
On War #301: Escaping the 2GW Trap

William S. Lind
As the U.S. sends thousands more American soldiers to Afghanistan, it risks speeding its own defeat in that graveyard of empires. Why? Because the Second Generation practice of the U.S. military reduces tactics to little more than bumping into the enemy and calling for fire. The fire, most often delivered by aircraft that can see and understand little of what is happening on the ground, often kills civilians. Even when it does not, the disproportion of pitting jet fighter-bombers and attack helicopters against guys in bathrobes armed with rusty rifles turns us into Goliath, a monster. Both effects bring about our defeat on the moral level. In effect, the Second Generation leaves us in a trap of our own making: to win the engagements we have to lose the war.

How might U.S. forces in Afghanistan escape the 2GW trap? To start with, they should accept and live by a principle laid down by Marine Corps General James Mattis, one of our more successful commanders in Iraq. That principle, taken from medicine, is, “First, do no harm.” When and where fighting is likely to cause civilian casualties, wreck the civilian infrastructure and alienate the population, don’t fight. A withdrawal is better than a combination of tactical victory and strategic loss.

Second, seek to de-escalate. De-escalation is the way state armed forces prevail in Fourth Generation wars. De-escalation is the first principle of FMFM 1-A, Fourth Generation War and the field manuals derived from it. Those field manuals are available on d-n-i and, for U.S. military personnel, on the website of the Marine Corps’ Expeditionary Warfare School. Any soldier or Marine heading for Afghanistan who has not read these FM’s is ignoring an important resource. They include two books of 4GW Tactical Decision Games units can use for their own training.

Third, use The Grid to evaluate every mission before it is undertaken. The Grid is a simple tool I devised last year in a seminar with Royal Marines who were on their way to Helmand Province. Its purpose is to try and forsee the larger consequences of tactical actions, or, as one Royal Marine general put it, to predict potential second-order effects. Here it is:

The Grid

Physical Mental Moral
Tactical Operational Strategic

Second Generation armed services consider only one of the nine boxes on the grid, the Tactical/Physical box in the upper left corner. They are subsequently surprised by the results of their action in the eight other boxes. The surprises are seldom pleasant.
The Grid is easy to understand and relatively easy to use, though the questions it poses may require both commanders and intelligence officers to think in ways different from those they are accustomed to. S-2s and G-2s will have to go beyond the rote processes of Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB), which in truth is merely intel for dogs ("How old are you, Rover?" “Woof, woof, woof.”).

Before undertaking an action, commanders and their staffs should attempt to fill in every box. Then, they should consider whether the probable results in all the boxes are what they want. If the answer is no, they should probably re-evaluate what they intend to do in the Tactical/Physical box. The process is iterative and Socratic, not mechanical. Of course, no one can know what all the effects of an action will be; certainty is not to be expected in war. But as units gain experience in the theater, the quality of their estimates will improve. Even a “best guess” is preferable to not asking the question.

Together, these three recommendations can help U.S. Army and Marine Corps units in Afghanistan escape the Second Generation trap of winning tactically at the expense of losing strategically. They are not a substitute for the reform we really need, namely moving all the U.S. armed forces from the Second to the Third Generation, while thinking seriously about the Fourth. But as palliatives of a fatal weakness inherent in 2GW, they have value. Especially when time and events are pressing, it is useful to remember the old Russian saying, “Best is the enemy of good enough.”

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On War #300: Retrospective

By William S. Lind
April 15, 2009

The 300th column in this series offers a useful point from which to look back. Events since On War #1 have, I think, generally validated the Four Generations framework. Iraq was not a “cakewalk,” nor did our initial invasion of Afghanistan “eviscerate” the Taliban. Mullah Omar proved the better prophet; before the first American bomb fell, he said, “We will lose the government and lose Kabul, but it doesn’t matter.”
What lessons might we draw from the previous 299 On War columns and their interplay with the larger world? Three seem to me to be of overriding importance.

1. So long as America pursues an offensive grand strategy, Fourth Generation war will ensure her defeat. The reason is Martin van Creveld’s concept of the power of weakness and its intimate relationship with legitimacy. In a Fourth Generation world, legitimacy is the coin of the realm. At root, Fourth Generation war is a contest for legitimacy between the state and a wide variety of non-state primary loyalties. American power lacks legitimacy because, on the physical level, it is so overwhelming. That is the power of weakness: anyone who stands up to the American military becomes a hero. In turn, any state the American military supports loses its legitimacy. The more places America intervenes militarily, the more states lose their legitimacy, to the advantage of Fourth Generation, non-state entities. In effect, we have a reverse Midas touch. Only a defensive grand strategy, where we mind our own business and leave other states to mind theirs, can break us out of this downward spiral.

2. Second Generation militaries cannot win Fourth Generation wars. Second Generation armed forces, such as those of the United States, fight by putting firepower on targets. This wins at the physical level, but as it does so it brings defeat at the moral level, which is decisive in 4GW. The best current example is Pakistan, where the combination of Predator strikes and arm-twisting of the Pakistani government has undermined the legitimacy of the Pakistani state. That state now stands on the verge of disintegration, which would give al Qaeda and other Islamic 4GW forces the greatest victory they could imagine. The image on Osama’s cave wall should be a Predator, with the title, “Our best weapon.”

3. There is no chance America will adopt a defensive grand strategy or reform its military to move from the Second to the Third Generation – a necessary though not sufficient step in confronting 4GW – so long as the current Washington Establishment remains in power. That Establishment is drunk on hubris, cut off from the world beyond court politics and thoroughly corrupted by Pentagon “business as usual,” which knows how to buy whatever political support it needs. Like all establishments, it sees any real change as a threat, to be avoided. So long as it reigns, nothing will change.

What are the implications of these three observations? Militarily, they portend continued failure and defeat. We will fail to get out of Iraq before the next phase of that war begins, or, worse, an Israeli attack on Iran costs us the army we have in Iraq. We will be defeated in Afghanistan, because we will refuse to scale our strategic objectives to what is possible and we will continue to alienate the population with our firepower-intensive way of war.

We will push Pakistan over the brink into disintegration, which will be a strategic catastrophe of the first order. We will ignore the disintegration of the state in Mexico, while importing Mexico’s disorder through our ineffective border controls. We will not even be able to stop Somali pirates. What does it say about us when
the whole nation rejoices because the U.S. Navy, the most powerful navy on earth, defeated four Somali teenagers?

It does not end with this. These foreign policy failures and military defeats — or even more embarrassing “victories” — become just two of a larger series of crises, including the economic crisis (depression followed by runaway inflation), foreign exchange crisis (collapse of the dollar), political crisis (no one in the Establishment knows what to do, but the Establishment offers the voters no alternative to itself), energy crisis, etc. Together, these discrete crises snowball into a systemic crisis, which is what happens when the outside world demands greater change than the political system permits. At that point, the political system collapses and is replaced by something else. In the old days, it meant a change of dynasty. What might it mean today? My guess is a radical devolution, at the conclusion of which life is once again local.

That would be, on the whole, a happy outcome. But I fear this will be a trip where the journey is not half the fun.

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On War #299: Another Vandergriff Book

by William S. Lind
April 6, 2009

Don Vandergriff has published another book, which is good news for all who care about the future of the U.S. Army. Titled Manning the Future Legions of the United States: Finding and Developing Tomorrow’s Leaders, Don’s new book brings together many strands of Army reform to create a comprehensive and intelligent reform program.

The book begins by describing the Four Generations of Modern War, which together establish the context in which we can see both where the Army is (in the Second Generation) and what it needs to prepare to fight (Fourth Generation war). Unlike many other descriptions of the Four Generations, Vandergriff’s is generally correct, although I would quibble here and there. Most importantly, he does not fall into the common error of saying the U.S. Army is now a Third Generation military. On the contrary, much of what the book prescribes is intended to move the Army from the Second Generation into the Third, as a
necessary step forward facing the Fourth. Cultural change is central to that transformation, and quite properly it is the purpose of much of what Vandergriff proposes.

After a look at the history of manning the U.S. Army, which explains how and why it adopted the Taylorist “industrial age” model, the book makes an important call for “parallel evolution.” Parallel evolution, in which many things change at the same time, is essential for bringing the Army’s culture from the inward-focused, process-driven Second Generation to the outward-focused, result-driven Third Generation. In its absence, all you get is specific, unrelated alterations such as the recent move to brigades (while keeping the fifth-wheel division headquarters) that leave the culture untouched. Instead of reforming, the Army merely reorganizes. Vandergriff rightly points to the reforms of the Prussian Army under Scharnhorst as a model of parallel evolution the U.S. Army might profitably follow (see Charles Edward White’s superb book, The Enlightened Soldier).

When he discusses the key subject of developing leaders, Vandergriff draws on his earlier work at Georgetown (described in his book Raising the Bar), which the Army now calls Adaptive Leader Methodology (ALM). ALM is of central importance to cultural change, because it teaches outward focus. Thanks largely to Don’s missionary work, ALM is spreading in the Army, including to important places such as West Point and the Basic Officer Leader Courses at Ft. Benning and Ft. Sill.

Manning the Future Legions is optimistic about the future of the U.S. Army, but it also raises the question of how optimistic dare we realistically be? As Vandergriff writes, “Proposed reforms to Army culture still avoid changing the system’s legacies, which also serve as the four pillars holding up the (current) cultural structure.” He rightly identifies the “four legacy pillars” as:

1. The up-or-out promotion system
2. Quantity-based vs. quality-based officer accessions
3. Centralized control of the evaluation and promotion system, and
4. A top-heavy officers corps and too many headquarters.”

As Vandergriff states, “As long as these legacies of today’s Army culture remain invulnerable, the service will evolve only slowly, or not at all, and therefore will have trouble in recruiting, developing, and retaining adaptive leaders and soldiers.”

My own view of the Army is that, to borrow from an old European bon mot, while the United States Marine Corps’s situation is serious but not hopeless, the U.S. Army’s condition is hopeless but not serious. I participated as an “outside expert” in one of the Army’s “transformation” exercises, and all I saw were the usual games, despite explicit guidance to the contrary from the Army Chief of Staff.
One thing could change that. In Iraq and Afghanistan, Army units from battalion downward have had to develop an outward-focused, Third Generation culture in order to succeed in their missions. Officers and soldiers who experienced an outward-focused culture are coming home, where they find still an inward-focused, Second Generation Army. Many are responding by getting out. But some will stay, and they will work for reform. They know there is a better way.

Don Vandergriff’s pioneering intellectual work, readily available in his books, will give Army combat veterans the ammunition they need to make reform real. Here’s hoping they read the books, including this one.

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Mr. William S. Lind

On War #298: Another War Lost?

by William S. Lind
30 March 2009

With the usual fanfare, the Obama administration has proclaimed a new strategy for the war in Afghanistan. On the surface, it does not amount to much. But if a story by Bill Gertz in the March 26 Washington Times is correct, there is more to it than meets the eye. Gertz reported that:

The Obama administration has conducted a vigorous internal debate over its new strategy for Afghanistan…

According to two U.S. government sources close to the issue, senior policymakers were divided over how comprehensive to make the strategy…

On the one side were Vice President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. and Deputy Secretary of State James B. Steinberg, who argued in closed-door meetings for a minimal strategy of stabilizing Afghanistan…

The goal of these advocates was to limit civilian and other nonmilitary efforts in Afghanistan and focus on a main military objective of denying safe haven to the Taliban and al Qaeda terrorists.

The other side of the debate was led by Richard C. Holbrooke, the special envoy for the region, who along with U.S. Central Command leader Gen. David H. Petraeus and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton fought for a major nation-building effort.
The Holbrooke-Petraeus-Clinton faction, according to the sources, prevailed. The result is expected to be a major, long-term military and civilian program to reinvent Afghanistan from one of the most backward, least developed nations to a relatively prosperous democratic state.

I have not seen similar stories in other papers, so it is possible Gertz is not correct. But if he is, the Obama administration has just made the Afghan war its own, and lost it.

Ironically, the reported decision duplicates the Bush administration’s error in Iraq, another lost war (the next phase in Iraq’s Sunni-Shiite civil war is now ramping up). The error, one that no tactical or operational successes can overcome, is setting unattainable strategic objectives.

Short of divine intervention, nothing can turn Afghanistan into a modern, prosperous, democratic state. Pigs will not only fly, they will win dogfights with F-15s before that happens. The most Afghanistan can ever be is Afghanistan: a poor, backward country, one where the state is weak and local warlords are strong, plagued with a drug-based economy and endemic low-level civil war. That is Afghanistan at its best. Just achieving that would be difficult for an occupying foreign power, whose presence assures that war will not be low-level and that no settlement will be long-term.

In fact, even the minimalist objectives reportedly urged by Vice President Biden are not attainable. We cannot deny safe haven in Afghanistan for the Taliban, because the Taliban are Afghans. They represent a substantial portion of the Pashtun population. The most we can hope to obtain in a settlement of the Afghan war is the exclusion of al Qaeda. That is a realistic strategic objective, because al Qaeda is made up of Arabs, i.e. foreigners, whom the Afghans dislike the same way they dislike other foreigners. The Taliban’s commitment to al Qaeda is ideological, and the right combination of incentives can usually break ideological commitments.

Instead of a pragmatic, realistic approach to attaining that limited objective, it seems we are committed to a Quixotic quest for the unattainable. Again, that guarantees we will lose the Afghan war. No means, military or non-military, can obtain the unattainable. The circle cannot be squared.

Here we see how little “change” the Obama administration really represents. The differences between the neo-liberals and the neo-cons are few. Both are militant believers in Brave New World, a Globalist future in which everyone on earth becomes modern. In the view of these ideologues, the fact that billions of people are willing to fight to the death against modernity is, like the river Pregel, an unimportant military obstacle. We just need to buy more Predators.
Meanwhile, the money is running out. The ancien regime syndrome looms ever larger: we not only maintain but increase foolish foreign commitments, at the same time that debt is piling up, those willing to lend become fewer and we are reduced to debasing the currency. Historians have seen it all before, many, many times. It never has a happy ending.

It appears Afghanistan will be the graveyard of yet another empire.

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On War #297: Tactics Over Strategy Again?

William S. Lind
23 March 2009

Several weeks ago, a U.S. Navy survey ship, the Impeccable, was harassed by the Chinese in waters off Hainan Island. The Chinese have built a major submarine base on Hainan Island, and the newest classes of Chinese nuclear submarines are based there. The Impeccable's obvious mission was to collect intelligence, including sonic and other "signatures," on the new Chinese submarines.

Legally, there is no doubt or question the Impeccable was in the right and China in the wrong. The ship was in international waters, where it had every right to be. China’s claim that it was in her Exclusive Economic Zone is irrelevant. Impeccable was fishing for information, not fish. An EEZ is not the same thing as territorial waters. Beyond the 12-mile limit, every navy can legally spy on any other navy as much as it wishes.

However, to say the U.S. Navy’s actions were legal is not the same as saying they were strategically wise. On the contrary, the incident looks like another case of elevating tactics over strategy, on the part of both the U.S. and China.

Tactically, it is easy to understand why the U.S. Navy wants to collect as much information as it can about Chinese submarines, especially boomers [Ed. note: subs that launch ballistic missiles]. In a war between the U.S. and China, that information would greatly facilitate American anti-submarine warfare. Boomers represent the greatest Chinese naval threat to the American homeland, and Chinese attack subs are probably the second most dangerous threat to the ships of the U.S. Navy (I would rank attacks on U.S. Navy aircraft carriers by nuclear-armed ballistic missiles at the top). Information on oceanographic conditions
around Hainan Island, for which Impeccable surely was also trolling, would be critical for any attempt to bottle Chinese submarines up in their base.

I’m sure these arguments were used by the U.S. Navy to sell Impeccable’s mission. But whoever bought the sales job forgot about strategy. America’s strategic interests dictate that we avoid, rather than prepare for, a war with China. Such a war could end up destroying both countries as powers. More, in a Fourth Generation world, America needs China to be a center and source of order. If China lost a war with America, there would be a real danger that China’s internal unity might also be lost. If China came apart internally, as she has so many times in her history, she could end up a vast, bubbling cauldron of Fourth Generation war. Few outcomes would be worse, from the standpoint of all states.

The U.S. Navy might respond that a Chinese-American war is unlikely to start over harassment of a survey ship, and it would be right. But missions such as Impeccable’s send a message that we see China as a likely enemy. Such messages, if repeated often enough, can establish a dynamic that is difficult to reverse. It took almost half a century for just such a dynamic to bring war between the U.S. and Japan — I think the first U.S. Navy “Plan Orange,” for war with Japan, dated to 1907 – but eventually it did the trick.

The way Washington works, it would take courage for someone in OSD or the State Department or the White House to tell the U.S. Navy to swallow the tactical disadvantages and avoid missions we know will antagonize China. But that is what sound strategy requires. Anything else elevates tactics over strategy, an elementary blunder that almost always brings unfortunate results.

The same critique applies to the Chinese. Tactically, it is understandable that the Chinese navy wants to give its submarines every possible advantage. Protecting its boomers is important strategically as well as tactically. While China has more submarines than America, its fleet is far inferior qualitatively, in personnel as well as hardware. In any naval confrontation with the U.S., China is very much the underdog. She needs every advantage she can get.

But the wise and prudent strategy of China’s leaders, ever since the end of the disastrous reign of Chairman Mao, has been to avoid military conflicts while building up China’s economy. The Chinese leadership has understood that economic power must precede military power if the latter is not to be shallow and brittle. China needs at least 20 to 30 more years of peace and rising prosperity before she dare think about war. From this perspective, the harassment of Impeccable was putting tactics ahead of strategy, the same error the U.S. made by sending the ship on her mission. No less than America, China must avoid establishing a dynamic of conflict between the two powers.

Here again we come to the central requirement dictated by the rise of Fourth Generation war. States should avoid conflicts with other states, because the
winner will most likely be the non-state forces of the Fourth Generation. Rather, states should seek an alliance of all states against non-state elements. The fact that this most basic of all strategic requirements is understood neither in Washington nor in Beijing may not surprise us, but it should trouble everyone who dares hope the 21st century will not see the end of the state system and its replacement by a world of bottomless chaos.

Note: Since I wrote my last column, “Responses,” the weekly Zeppelin brought another response to my annual call to Kaiser Wilhelm. I want to thank Dr. Vomact for his insightful commentary, “Who was this ‘Kaiser Bill’?” He is correct that “the disaster of our age was the Great War,” and that Kaiser Wilhelm “embodies an older, more civilized order that was destroyed in that war, superior to most who came after him.” Superior indeed to Stalin, Hitler, Mao and the latest howlers for ideological world war, the ignorant neo-cons.

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Mar. 17.2009
10:23 am
by Chet
On War #296: Responses

William S. Lind
March 17, 2009

As regular readers of this column know, I usually do not see responses to it because I will not use a computer. (I explain my reasons for that in a forthcoming book, due out in April, The Next Conservatism.) A colleague at Zossen recently put together some responses to two recent columns and sent them to me via the Reichspost. I was pleased to find that virtually all were thoughtful, and here I would like to comment on several.

Most related to On War #293, “The Price of Bad Tactics”:

* Boris M. wrote, “I wonder if this is the result of bad tactics or the logical consequences of the zero (American) casualty policy followed by the US since the Vietnam war.” Emery Nelson added, “The question that needs to be asked is,
‘Would you rather win with higher casualties, or lose with few casualties?’ I am not sure adopting Third in place of Second Generation infantry tactics would result in higher casualties. It might do so in individual engagements, but it might reduce total friendly casualties in the war. Air strikes serve as one of our opponents’ most effective recruiting tools, both because of the civilians killed and because when you attack someone from an invulnerable position, i.e. 20,000 feet up, you make him want to fight you all the more. If we deprive our opponents of the recruits our airstrikes generate, might not our total casualties go down?

* Bob P. writes, “We call for airstrikes because that’s what you do to equalize combat power when you are outnumbered.” Later he added, “Most AARs in Afghanistan start with a platoon getting ambushed by approximately equivalent forces, then the enemy forces, through various means (the part I won’t discuss) obtain local superiority. Platoon calls in airstrikes…” I find it interesting that our opponents appear better at concentrating forces at the decisive point than we are. I wonder if two 3GW tactical concepts might help us, namely Schwerpunkt and the importance of maintaining a strong reserve (normally at least one-third of available troops). In contrast, 2GW tactics scatter forces in penny-packets and regard troops in reserve as “wasted” because they are not engaging the enemy. Does that describe what we are now doing in Afghanistan?

* Jeffrey R. writes, “I do not agree that our officers are not well read and educated on ‘good’ tactics. Remember, they have to operate in a ‘system’ that does not reward innovation and success.” That is certainly true of our system. But it is also true that the U.S. military’s educational system offers little real education. Mostly, it just trains people in one way to do something. If an American officer wants broad education in alternative tactics, he has to educate himself.

* Sven Ortmann writes, “The light infantry approach doesn’t help much in a terrain that doesn’t offer enough concealment, though. It’s no solution for all problems… Tanks in an assault gun role could handle the problems that plague light infantry in open terrain.” This is correct, in that light infantry is terrain dependent. That is why it seldom fights “pure,” but mixed with heavy infantry (now motorized/mechanized) units. However, those heavy infantry forces also need 3GW tactics, which are simpler versions of Jaeger tactics. In the 1980s, some military reformers, including John Boyd, asked German General Hermann Balck why so many of the best Panzer commanders in World War II had been light infantry officers in World War I. He replied, “Because it was the same.” As to tanks, I would say instead, “infantry guns.” These may be tanks, wheeled assault guns or towed pieces, depending on the situation. Their purpose is to provide heavy direct fire, which in many cases could replace airstrikes with less risk of collateral damage.

* Max writes, “Somebody was saying there’s no way the current US force of occupation in Iraq could be seriously imperiled by any force on earth.” That bit of hubris is common in Washington, and it has given me many a bad night. If either the U.S. or Israel attacks Iran, we could lose the whole army we have in Iraq. Such a defeat would be our Adrianople, or, given the degree to which we now resemble Imperial Spain, our Rocroi.
The package from Zossen also included some responses to my message to Kaiser Wilhelm on his birthday.

* R.M. Hitchens wrote, “I’ve always wondered why the very serious Mr. Lind would invoke the spirit of the utterly unserious and notoriously shallow Kaiser Bill…” Martin van Creveld agrees with me that this common view of His Majesty is unfounded. On the contrary, Kaiser Wilhelm was right far more often than were his advisors. He deferred to them too much, it is true, but he explains that in his memoirs on the not unreasonable ground that he was a constitutional monarch. In fact, Kaiser Wilhelm was the most intelligent head of state in Europe in 1914. The greatest fool among the key players in that fateful year was Sir Edward Grey.

* Nimbus 48 wrote, in kindly fashion, “For many years I have profited from Bill Lind’s articles but I can’t help wonder just what the structure of his ideal monarchy would be.” As conservatives know, there is no ideal structure, in the abstract, for any government. A country’s government must be shaped by its own culture and traditions. For Saudi Arabia, that means an absolute monarchy, and for Britain, a constitutional monarchy, although Commons has grown so powerful compared to the Queen and Lords that it has effectively abolished the British constitution. I also suspect Heaven wants two countries to be republics, Switzerland, to show that it can be made to work, and the United States, as a warning to everyone else.

Finally, as the rector of my church in Cleveland (St. James’ Anglican Catholic Church; if you want to see how a high mass should be done, visit us some Sunday) says, “I am a monarchist because God is.” And I am by choice a subject of Kaiser Wilhelm II because, in all probability, the very last chance Western civilization had of surviving was a victory by the Central Powers in World War I.

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Mr. William S. Lind

On War #295: Rounding Up the Usual Suspects

by William S. Lind
March 10, 2009
President Barack Obama recently announced a bold new initiative to save up to $40 billion per year by reforming defense procurement. Like the Pentagon, I greeted his proclamation with a yawn.

If there is one game the Pentagon knows how to play, it is “reforming defense procurement.” It has gone through the drill more times than it or I can remember. The script is always the same. A “reform” program is announced with great fanfare. Experts are convened (all from or on their way to defense industry), commissions and panels meet, reports are issued and recommendations are offered. Then it all peters out, and nothing changes. The whole game is just another form of “rounding up the usual suspects.”

How do I know this time won’t be different? By the Obama administration’s defense appointments. With the exception of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who seems to have some inclinations toward genuine reform, they are hacks. All either served in Pentagon jobs in the Clinton administration or come from defense industry, or both. They have demonstrated for years that they are custodians of business as usual.

A further clue to the meaninglessness of President Obama’s “reform” initiative is its focus on “waste, fraud and abuse” in defense budgeting. There is no shortage of all three, in the Pentagon as in all government departments. But the only “reforms” this focus will elicit are changes in procedures, which are not the heart of the problem. More “reviews,” more layers of bureaucracy and more powerpoint briefings will do nothing to reduce waste, fraud and abuse. The system will have dozens of work-arounds for any changes that might actually threaten rice bowls. Again, we’ve seen it all before, with virtually every new administration.

What would real reform of defense procurement entail? First, we would reform what is being procured. Most current and projected major defense programs are buying weapons and other “systems” that are outdated or simply represent a false understanding of war.

We spend tens of billions of dollars on computerized command and control systems that encourage more and more centralization of decision-making. But sound military doctrine calls for decentralized decision-making. The Army’s Future Contract System, the most expensive current Pentagon program, is a Rube Goldbergian, semi-portable Maginot Line that in combat would collapse of its own internal complexity. The J-35 fighter-bomber is another F-111, a flying piano that is useless for the one attack aviation function that really works, supporting ground troops. Only a handful of the ships the Navy wants are useful in coastal waters, where future naval actions are likely to be fought. These and many similar “legacy” systems are military museum pieces, designed for wars with the armies, navies and air forces of other states. Serious defense procurement reform would start by canning all of them.
Once we figured out what to buy for real wars, another reform would help us buy it at reasonable prices. It is a common tool in private business, called “should cost.” Based on marketplace prices for similar systems and components, we would determine what a given system should cost. Bids would not only be compared with each other but with the “should cost” figure. If all the bids were over the “should cost” figure, we would re-bid or decide to do without the system. Prices would soon come down, especially if at the same time we made it easier for companies that now do no defense work to get into the business.

Another simple procurement reform that would turn from state capitalism to the free market is buying off the shelf. When a service identified a need, it would look around the world to see what is available to fill that need. Then we would build it here, under license if it were a foreign design. At present, DOD buys virtually everything by coming up with a wish list, then finding someone to build it. It is as if when you wanted a new car, you came up with a list of everything you wanted in that car, then went to an automobile company and asked them to build it for you. You can imagine what it would cost.

This is just a small sample of real defense procurement reforms. Among the long-time military reformers are people who have studied defense procurement for decades. They have identified many other similar reforms that would make a genuine difference. Of course, that is why none of the reforms they recommend have ever been enacted.

John Boyd used to say, “It is not true the Pentagon has no strategy. It has a strategy, and once you understand what that strategy is, everything it does makes sense. The strategy is, don’t interrupt the money flow, add to it.” That was true before the Obama administration, it will be true while it is in office, and it will still be true when it ends. The people it has appointed to the Pentagon — again, Secretary Gates excepted — know the strategy, benefit from it and will continue it. They will defend it as if their future incomes depended on it, which, of course, they do.

The one wild card that could change everything is the growing probability of national financial collapse. If that happens – or perhaps when it happens – defense procurement will be on the chopping block along with everything else. At that point, reformers’ slogan should be, “Keep the combat units, cut everything else.” If we have a Secretary of Defense strong enough to do that (the bureaucracy will want to do the opposite), we will find that almost everything above the battalion level was waste, fraud and abuse of one sort or another.

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On War #294: A Barometer of Order

William S. Lind
March 3, 2009

On the surface, the antics of Somali pirates and the comic opera response of the maritime powers is worthy of a re-visit by Gilbert and Sullivan. Despite the presence off Somalia of the largest concentration of international warships since World War II, Somali pirates go on their merry ways, taking ships and holding them for ransoms. While they seldom make their captives walk the plank and most prefer the green flag of Islam to the Jolly Roger, they are pirates in the full sense of the word, owing allegiance to no state. Pirates might be justified in claiming they were the original Fourth Generation warriors.

What is comic about the piracy off Somalia is the inability of the maritime powers, most of whom now have warships on station in the region, to do anything about it. Their governments wring their hands and say, “Oh, my, whatever shall we do. Our laws don’t seem to cover piracy, so it seems we must do nothing.” The warships are left to steam in circles, scream and shout. The British Foreign Office produced a formal legal opinion warning Royal Navy ships not to capture pirates, on the grounds that the pirates might claim asylum in Britain! The Foreign Office, it seems, has become an asylum.

On no question is international law more clear or more ancient than on piracy. Law has recognized pirates as “enemies of all mankind” since the Roman Empire. They are outlaws whom anyone may kill on sight. Common law, which used to count for something in Britain, makes hunting down and killing pirates the duty of all maritime powers. The Royal Navy used to be pretty good at it. Has it perhaps run out of rope?

Cleaning up Somali piracy should take tens days, a fortnight at most. It’s not hard. International ships and aircraft hunt down and sink the pirates’ vessels at sea. (As in the 17th and 18th centuries, there are very few pirate “ships;” most pirates operate from open boats, now as then.) Any ship taken by pirates is immediately re-taken by some state’s navy or Marines. Captured pirates are hanged from the nearest yardarm, without trial, as common law allows. Ports out of which pirates frequently sail, such as Eyl, are bombarded, and any likely pirate craft are destroyed. This is a script any admiral from the age of sail would know by heart.

Why hasn’t it happened? Here is where the subject becomes serious. Piracy is a barometer of two related qualities in the world of states: the state’s belief in itself
and the state system, and international order. The failure of states to follow ancient law and precedent in dealing with Somali pirates says nothing about the pirates. But it speaks volumes concerning the weakness of the state, in its own eyes. So little do the international elites who now rule all but a handful of states – the administrators of Brave New World – believe in the state that they cannot even hang pirates. They have the souls, not of leaders or governors, but of petty functionaries. When not even states’ elites believe in the state anymore, why should anyone else? Piracy not suppressed represents history lifting its leg on the whole state system.

Similarly, piracy is a barometer of order. It has been so since Roman times. When order weakens, pirates flourish. When order returns, pirates are hunted down and hanged. The piracy barometer tells us order is vanishing fast. That should not surprise us, since order in the post-Westphalian world depends on states.

Piracy is only the barometer; the storm will be something else. That storm is coming, and soon, as Brave New World’s promise of unending material wealth in return for acceptance of an administered life proves a lie. By the time the storm is over, the elites that fear to hang pirates will be hanging from lampposts themselves.

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http://www.d-n-i.net/dni/2009/03/03/on-war-294-a-barometer-of-order/

On War #293: The Price of Bad Tactics

by William S. Lind
February 23, 2009

For the gazillionth time, the U.S. military in Afghanistan had to announce last week that an American airstrike killed civilians. The incident followed a familiar pattern. We first announced that 15 insurgents were killed, then had to climb down, finding after an official investigation that only three of the dead were fighters, while 13 civilians died.
In Congressional testimony, Secretary of Defense Gates said that unless we stop killing Afghan civilians in airstrikes, “we are lost.” So why do we keep doing airstrikes?

The answer is, because American infantry tactics are bad. They amount to little more than bumping into the enemy and calling for fire. The easiest way to provide the overwhelming firepower our bad infantry tactics depend on is with airstrikes. So to win tactically, we have to lose strategically. At least from the Vietnam War onward, that equation has come to define the American way of war. It is the price of bad tactics.

Why does American infantry continue to employ bad tactics? Superior alternatives are readily available. The “infiltration tactics” used by German infantry in the Kaiserschlacht of 1918 are far superior. Better still are true light infantry or Jaeger tactics, which influenced the development of infiltration tactics. Light infantry tactics rely less on firepower and more on stealth, surprise, ambush and encirclement. Their history is well known, and reaches back as far as the 18th century. The literature on them is extensive. [Ed. note: please see the 4GW Light Infantry Manual, available on our 4GW Manuals page, for more on these tactics.]

There are three basic reasons why the U.S. military continues to employ bad infantry tactics when superior alternatives lie ready to hand. The first is the unfortunate combination of hubris and intellectual sloth which characterizes most of the American officer corps – and infantry officers in particular. Most read nothing about their profession. Of those who do read, most confine their study to doctrinal manuals — the U.S. Army’s are wretched rehashed French stuff, the Marine Corp’s somewhat better — or histories of American victories. The number who really study tactics, learning about infiltration tactics, Jaeger tactics, the infantry tactics of oriental militaries etc. through reading, is tiny.

This ignorance is buttressed by hubris, false pride. The American military spends a great deal of time and effort telling itself how wonderful it is. Gorged on its own baloney, it thinks, “How could we possibly learn anything from anyone else? After all, we’re the greatest.” So there is no need for any study beyond study of ourselves. Hubris justifies the closed system ignorance creates.

The second reason we persist with bad infantry tactics is bad training. Almost all American training is focused on procedures and techniques, taught by rote in canned, scripted exercises where the enemy is a tethered goat. Free-play training, against an active, creative enemy, generates imaginative tactics, because whoever employs such tactics wins. But free-play training is so rare in the American military that most American infantrymen receive none at all. They become expert in techniques for applying fires, but they know nothing else. In effect, many American infantry units have no tactics, they only have techniques.
The third reason American tactics are bad is a bad personnel system. American infantry units are allowed to maintain personnel stability only for short periods, and sometimes not at all. They are always receiving new, largely untrained troops, who have to be taught “the basics,” which is assumed to mean procedures and techniques. Even if they try — and few units do — they cannot get beyond just bumping into the enemy and calling for fire, because that’s all the newbies can possibly manage.

A piece in the February 19 Washington Post cited the American commander in Afghanistan, General McKiernan, as saying that the planned increase in American troops could allow for the use of fewer airstrikes. On the contrary, the bad tactics those troops will employ, because they know no others, guarantee that the demand for airstrikes will go up. So will Afghan civilian casualties, and with them the speed with which we will lose the Afghan war.

How many wars does America have to lose before American infantry officers get serious about studying tactics?

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On War #292: Two Elections

by William S. Lind
February 17, 2009

In many Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, the story line depends on some sort of magic elixir or potion. Similarly, the advocates for Brave New World tell us the comic opera called “democracy” flows from the magic of elections. Just hold elections and presto!, wars vanish. Regrettably, BNW’s music is not nearly so entertaining as that of Sir Arthur Sullivan, while its plot is even more absurd than most of Gilbert’s.

Two recent elections point to a grimmer reality. The first was in Iraq, for provincial councils. In Iraq as in most of the world, the question is neither whether elections were held nor who won. The question on which social order depends is who accepts the results of an election. If elections are to substitute for war, not only the winners but also the losers must accept their outcome. Losers must give up power, patronage — one of the very few local sources of money (often lots of it)
and possibly physical security as well, hoping for better luck next time, if there is a next time.

I suspect the odds of that happening in Iraq are small. The Washington Post recently quoted one U.S. officer who served as an adviser to Iraqi army units saying of Iraqi commanders, “When you got to know them and they’d be honest with you, every single one of them thought that the whole notion of democracy and representative government in Iraq was absolutely ludicrous.”

That quote was in a piece by Tom Ricks, the Post’s long-time defense correspondent, in the Sunday February 15 “Outlook” section. Rick’s goes on to say,

I don’t think the Iraq war is over yet, and I worry that there is more to come than any of us suspect…

Many of those closest to the situation in Iraq expect a full-blown civil war to break out there in the coming years. “I don’t think the Iraqi civil war has been fought yet,” one colonel told me.

In such an environment, elections do not substitute for war but rather prepare the way for it. They exacerbate differences, heighten local conflicts, and lengthen the lists of “injustices” each party uses to justify fighting.

This unfortunate reality points again to what America needs to do in Iraq: get out now, fast, while it can. If we are lucky, history will grant us a “decent interval” between our departure and the next round of 4GW in Iraq. If we dawdle until the fighting ramps up again, we may find it difficult, politically if not militarily, to leave at all.

This brings us to another election, that in Israel. It is not clear what government will emerge from Israel’s vote. It is clear the Knesset has shifted to the right.

From the standpoint of America’s interests, that is a negative outcome. The danger is not only to prospects of peace between Israel and the Palestinians, which are probably small in any event. The danger is that a new Israeli government in which Likud and voices to Likud’s right are stronger is more likely to attack Iran.

As I have said repeatedly in past columns, an attack on Iran by the U.S. or Israel threatens consequences disastrous to America. The worst potential consequence is the possibility of the destruction of the army the U.S. now has in Iraq. As almost no one in Washington seems to realize — thanks, as usual, to hubris — that possibility is all too real. All one need do to see it is look at a map. Iran sits alongside our main line of communications, supply and retreat all the way from Baghdad to the straits of Hormuz. Add in the probability that various
Shiite militias and perhaps much of the new Iraqi army as well would join with the Iranians in attacking us, and the possibility of finding 100,000 American troops in an operational Kessel is frighteningly evident.

Thus we find that in two overseas elections, the magic elixir has proven poisonous to the United States. The two reinforce one another in their toxic effects, the one threatening to hold us in Iraq, the other to entomb us there. As Tom Ricks concluded his piece in the Post, “In other words, the events for which the Iraq war will be remembered probably haven’t even happened yet.” Thanks to two elections, they may be coming all the faster.

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On War #291: New 4GW Literature

by William S. Lind
February 10, 2009

Beyond the mindlessness of airstrikes in Afghanistan and elections (that decide nothing) in Iraq, the body of thoughtful literature about 4GW continues to expand. The latest offering, and an important one, is Michael Vlahos’s new book, Fighting Identity: Sacred War and World Change.

Vlahos offers a useful follow-on to Martin van Creveld’s last book, The Culture of War. Like van Creveld, Vlahos urges us to escape the Clausewitzian trap that sees war merely as an extension of politics, a tool employed by statecraft. That is true in cabinet wars, but Fourth Generation entities, having no cabinets, do not fight cabinet wars.

Rather, Vlahos argues, war is a “liturgy” that establishes or expresses identity.

My hypothesis is that harnessed human spirit is the essence of military effectiveness. This spirit represents identity, which itself can be understood as the core power of culture. Military effectiveness is at root always about culture.

While Vlahos does not use the terminology of 4GW theory — what he calls identity I call primary loyalty — he grasps a central fact of Fourth Generation war, namely that culture is a great deal more powerful than technology in determining
war’s outcome. 4GW is a clash between two cultural meta-narratives, one embodied in the state, the other in non-state entities rising up against states. Regrettably, the state meta-narrative is weakened by a turning inward on itself, something Vlahos discusses with special reference to America.

Much of Fighting Identity is devoted to considering Globalization as an act of “creative destruction” that generates ever more non-state elements. Here, Vlahos usefully compares the current period of Globalization with two earlier globalizations, that which occurred in Late Antiquity and the globalization of the High Middle Ages. I think Vlahos is correct in seeing the present as the Third Globalization; it is only the hubris of Moderns that prevents them from recognizing parallels.

He further argues that in the end, those earlier globalizations too created new types of entities, entities which did not entirely fit in pre-existing frameworks. Here the book does present something of a terminological problem, in that Vlahos speaks of “states” and “non-state” entities anachronistically, before states existed. But in substance what he is saying is justified.

I do have one substantive quibble. Vlahos in effect argues that Rome never “fell.” Well, yes, it did, Mike. A city of 1,500,000 people ended up with 5000 inhabitants, while wolves prowled the forum. It is true that elements survived, especially symbols that conveyed legitimacy (which is different from identity). The Holy Roman Empire lasted until 1806. But 90% of the literature of the ancient world was lost, and in northern Europe, people forgot even how to make bricks. That’s like Americans forgetting how to make hamburgers, and it suggests some significant events took place. A dying St. Augustine watched from the walls of Hippo as the Vandals burned the villas.

Vlahos puts in context the American narrative and that of America’s Islamic 4GW opponents, by arguing that each supplies context for the other. Of America’s invasion and occupation of Iraq, he writes:

Thus in looking at them, I came back at last to us. In its 9/11 War the United States embarked on a flamboyant enterprise: the “transformation” of the Muslim world…

We staged the grandest opera to remake the world, but also centrally to set up our own transcendence in history.

We achieved our apocalyptic goal, but not as we had planned. Our ensuing and intimate relationship with the Muslim world was liberating – at least in forcefully opening that world to new things. But they turned out not to be our things, nor old things, but things still taking form.
Fighting Identity does not offer the last word on culture and Fourth Generation war. Its merit lies in the fact that it is one of the first words. There is much work yet to be done. But as we all play the blind men and the elephant, Mike Vlahos has laid hands on some interesting parts of the beast. Those who hope someday to see the elephant would do well to read this book.

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On War #290: Blowback Revisited

William S. Lind

February 3, 2009

Some time ago, I wrote a column warning that our involvement in Fourth Generation wars overseas would spur 4GW here at home. One way it would do so is by introducing soldiers to statelessness.

I do not see e-mail, but I was told that column generated lots of it. Many e-diots howled that I had somehow “attacked the troops.”

Well, guess what? It’s starting to happen. A reader sent me a copy of a story from The Oklahoman dated December 25, 2008. The title is, “Police Say Vet Made, Sold IEDs to Gangs.” It reads in part:

Police spent the day searching the house of a decorated, two-tour Iraq war veteran on Tuesday, one day after he was arrested and charged with making explosive devises and attempting to sell them...

Steven Andrew Jordal, 24, was an infantry tank (sic) specialist in the U.S. Army from 2002 to 2007. He received the Army’s Good Conduct medal, along with several other medals, badges and ribbons, the military confirmed.

Oklahoma City police took interest in Jordal when they received a tip he was selling IEDs to criminals. IEDs have emerged in Iraq as the weapon of choice for insurgents against U.S. forces.
For as little as $100, Jordal was making the same kinds of weapons he saw used against his fellow soldiers in Iraq and selling them on the streets of Oklahoma City to gang members…

Surprise, surprise. This is not the first such report I have seen. Shortly after my initial column ran, I received a letter from a reader in Poland with a news story that Polish police were being attacked and killed with IEDs.

If we read these stories merely as accounts of the spread of a technology, IEDs, we read them too narrowly. American and other foreign troops in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan are learning more than how to make IEDs and how effective they can be. They are learning by direct observation how a place works when the state disappears.

To the large majority of American and European soldiers, this is a lesson in horror. They return home thankful they live in a place where the state endures. The last thing they want is to see their native country turn into another Iraq or Afghanistan.

But a minority will learn a different lesson. They will see statelessness as a field of opportunity where people who are clever and ruthless can rise fast and far. They look upon themselves as that kind of people. They will also have learned it is possible to fight the state, and how to do so. The effectiveness of IEDs is part of that lesson; so are the power and rewards that come to members of militias and gangs. In their own minds, and perhaps in reality, they will have found a new world in which they can hope to thrive.

There is a parallel here with what the men who fought in the trenches on the Western Front in World War I learned. For most, it was the worst time in their lives. Their experience is captured by All Quiet on the Western Front. But a minority found it the best time of their lives. Their book is Ernst Junger’s Storm of Steel. It was these men, looking to re-create that tremendous experience, who made up the Brownshirts of the S. A. Their very name, Storm Troopers, originated in what they had done during the war. They came home determined to create a different Germany, and they did.

As I have argued both in these columns and elsewhere, if we want to avoid importing 4GW into the United States, we need to isolate ourselves from 4GW overseas. We need a defensive, not an offensive, grand strategy. So long as we enmesh ourselves in Fourth Generation wars like those in Iraq and Afghanistan – will the Obama administration add Somalia and Sudan to the list? – we will increase the danger we should seek most to avoid, the horror of 4GW on our own soil. That is the Fourth Generation’s strategic IED, and if it ever goes off in America, we will all get blown up.
On War #289: His Majesty’s Birthday

by William S. Lind

January 27, 2009

This week marks the birthday of my liege lord and reporting senior, Kaiser Wilhelm II. As usual, I placed a call over my 1918 telephone to offer my felicitations and ask how our poor world looks from the heights of Mount Olympus.

This time, my call was routed from Berlin to our naval airship base at Nordholz. His majesty, it seems, has taken to the air.

After congratulating der Allehoechster on the anniversary of his birth, I enquired where he had been flying. To Capri, perhaps?

“Guess again,” the Kaiser replied. “I’ve just led a bombing raid on London, flying in L-70, our finest Zeppelin. We laid our eggs right down Whitehall.”

“So we’re still bombing England, even in Heaven?”, I asked.

“Oh yes, of course. The ordnance has changed. We now bomb with sausages rather than explosives. This time we hit them with echte Goettingen Bratwurst, right at supper time. It was retaliation for a raid on Duesseldorf last week by 100 Handley-Pages, dropping bangers. Just yesterday the French shelled our fortress at Metz with whole fois gras. Every Prussian soldier now looks rather like Max Hoffman.”

“A delightful prospect,” I replied. “Please save any artillery duels with the Austrians until I get there. In the meantime, may I enquire whether Heaven has any reaction to America electing its first Black President?”

“As Uncle Deng likes to say, we don’t care whether a cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice,” His Majesty answered.
“And is President Obama likely to prove a good mouser?”, I ventured.

“Judging by most of his appointments, he seems better at catching fleas,” the Kaiser replied. “This ‘democracy’ business is such a joke. All you get is a different slice from the same sausage. Now, when kings died and their sons took the throne, you saw real change. Just think of the differences between Bertie and my grandmother Queen Victoria. Not a change for the better, let me add.”

“Yet your generation of monarchs also got blindsided by history,” I suggested.

“Yes, we did, as poor mortals always will,” the Kaiser said. “All earthly leaders are time-blinded. We saw backward too clearly and forward hardly at all.”

“My generation of kings and emperors were fixated on the age-old contest between dynasties. Would the houses of Hapsburg and Hohenzollern defeat those of Romanoff and Savoy or the other way around? We could not see the paradigm shift welling up all around us, the onward rush of democracy and equality and socialism and all the rest of that garbage. What we needed was an alliance of all monarchies against democracy. Instead we wiped each other out, putting the levellers in charge everywhere, to the world’s ruin.”

“Does that hold any lessons for our time?”, I asked.

“From Olympus, the picture could not be more clear,” His Majesty replied. “As we were mesmerized by dynastic quarrels, so your politicians cannot see beyond the state. They think only of states in conflict. Will America be threatened by China? Should India go to war with Pakistan? Is Iran a danger to Israel? They cannot see that states are now all in the same, sinking boat, just as all the dynasties were in 1914.”

“What should states then do?”, I enquired.

“Form an alliance of all states against non-state forces, what you call the Fourth Generation,” the Kaiser answered. “The hour is late, and the state system itself has grown fragile. That is the lesson of America’s quixotic war in Iraq. You destroyed the state there, and now no one can recreate it. That is what will happen almost everywhere when states fight other states. But none of your leaders can see it, because they, too, are time-blinded. It is the human condition.”

“So is ‘democracy’ both the culmination of the state and its end?”, I asked.

“Indeed,” Kaiser Wilhelm replied. “If states have a future, it will be monarchy, not democracy. A good monarch is above politics. When governments fail, people do not blame the king, who remains as the symbol of the state. The state obtains
some distance from political failure, which helps the state endure such failures. In the times you are about to face, political failures will be common.”

“So our future is ....?”

“Chaos or the return of the king. And now I must go, as the Imperial train is waiting.” His Majesty rang off, leaving me with some interesting words to ponder, along with dreams of 42 cm. Skoda siege guns hurling vast Malakofftorte. War in Heaven, it seems, it is not always hell.

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On War #288: Israel Doesn’t Get 4GW

William S. Lind

January 13, 2009

So far, Israel’s assault on the Gaza Strip has produced no surprises. On the physical level of war, the IDF is triumphing. The Palestinians are suffering about one hundred people dead for every dead Israeli. To a 2GW military, which is what Israel’s formerly Third Generation army has become, that is the main measure of victory.

On the moral level, the picture is reversed. Hamas is almost assured of victory. As Martin van Creveld has observed, all it has to do to claim victory is survive, which it will. That claim will not just be propaganda: for Hamas to survive everything a modern state military can throw at it is a legitimate victory. In fact, it will not only survive but be strengthened by a world-wide flood of sympathy, which will translate in part into new recruits and more money.

In the end, if Israel wants to stop Hamas’s rockets, it will only be able to do so by making a deal with Hamas. Since that was equally true before the war, the question of why it was fought will soon present itself. The real reason is a tad sordid: the current Israeli government is trying to split the “get tough” vote to prevent Likud from winning the next election. The same motivation lay behind last weekend’s “discovery” that Mr. Olmert asked the U.S. for permission to attack Iran. The parties in the current Israeli coalition government are in effect
saying to Israeli voters, “Why vote for an oaf like Bibi Netanyahu when you can get the same thing from us without the endless embarrassments?”

What all Israeli parties and the IDF seem to share is that they don’t get 4GW. They have repeatedly been defeated by Fourth Generation forces but they do not learn.

The problem goes beyond John Boyd’s framework of moral-mental-physical, with the moral the most powerful level of war and the physical the weakest. What Israel cannot grasp is that in the face of 4GW, all states should be seen as allies.

The most dangerous opponent of any Fourth Generation entity is a local state. The state must be local: interventions against 4GW forces by outside states are doomed to failure. But local states can sometimes win. It does not matter whether the state in question is a democracy or not. It does not matter whether it is a friend or enemy of Israel. By its inherent nature as a state, it will view Fourth Generation forces as threats.

A state may or may not be strong enough to suppress 4GW entities on its soil. It is in Israel’s most vital interest that neighboring states be strong enough – morally as well as physically – to do so.

In concrete terms, what does that suggest? First, it means Israel should be very concerned about the strength and solidity of Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Iraq (Lebanon is a state in name only). The Israeli assault on Gaza has seriously undermined the legitimacy of three of those four, with Syria the only exception. Egypt and Jordan have diplomatic relations with Israel, and Egypt has been an all-too-obvious partner of Israel in besieging Gaza. Iraq’s government (still a government without a state) is an American creation, and the U.S. is seen as Israel’s main enabler. On the moral level, every Israeli bomb dropped on Gaza has also landed on Cairo, Amman and Baghdad.

One Israeli party, Likud, is so oblivious to 4GW that its proposed grand strategy for Israel, largely written by American neo-cons, calls for the destruction of every Arab state. Iraq was the first victim of that strategy, thanks to the neo-cons’ influence on the Bush administration. If Likud wins the coming Israeli elections, there is every reason to think it will put its strategy into practice, pushing Israel into the maelstrom.

Israel’s dependence on strong neighboring states is equally true with regard to the Palestinians. That means Israel needs a strong Palestinian state in the West Bank. But the effect of the war in Gaza is to undermine Fatah in favor of Hamas on the West Bank, which also has elections coming up. So Israel has in effect shot itself in both feet.
What of Gaza itself? Here, Israel should have taken advantage of a blunder by Hamas. By winning an election in Gaza and then defeating Fatah in a short civil war, Hamas became a state. On balance, that was not to its benefit. Israel could and should have dealt with Hamas in Gaza as a state. It should have opened the border crossings, avoided raids (an Israeli raid into Gaza first broke what had been a fairly effective cease-fire) and let Hamas become immersed in all the problems of governance. It should have sought a Hamas state in Gaza that was strong enough to prevent rocket-firings and other acts of “terrorism” by other 4GW groups. As a state, Hamas would have gradually “normalized,” even if it did not want to and even though in theory it would have remained devoted to Israel's destruction.

Now, by its invasion, Israel may have reduced Gaza to ungovernable chaos. It may think it can reinstall the Fatah as the government there. But if Fatah were so foolish as to try to ride into power on the backs of Israeli tanks, it would destroy its legitimacy both in Gaza and on the West Bank, with no hope of recovery.

Ironically, the best hope Israel now has in Gaza is that when the dust settles, Hamas is still in charge. At that point, if Israel wants to stop the rocket fire, it will have to make a deal with Hamas. That deal should include what Israel ought have done in the first place, namely help Hamas make Gaza a functioning, gradually normalizing state. Again, Israel’s most vital interest is that it be bordered by strong states, not the stateless chaos that is 4GW’s natural breeding ground.

I visited Israel a few years ago. I liked the country and its people. I wish Israel well. But wishing it well does not mean supporting it in actions that undermine its own security. Until Israel comes to think in 4GW terms, everything it does is likely to undermine its own security, as the assault on Gaza has undermined it.

Can Israel learn? If not, apartment buildings in Miami will prove a great investment.

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5:28 pm
If we look around the world at the prospects for Fourth Generation entities, what does the new year reveal? Regrettably, they seem to face a rosy future.

The Israeli assault on Hamas in Gaza will succeed physically, prove a mixed bag mentally and fail on the moral level of war. Hamas is militarily a pushover compared to Hezbollah, which makes the David vs. Goliath nature of the conflict all the more evident. The stronger the contrast, the worse the outcome for Goliath. The fact that the timing if not the event is driven by Israeli electoral politics makes the moral picture even grimmer. Add in that absent a deal Hamas’s rocket fire will continue and we see the makings of a debacle for Israel.

Some may see the assault as Israel selecting the “Hama option” van Creveld discusses, but I do not agree. Choosing the Hama option would mean subjecting Gaza to a World War I-style bombardment, with tens of thousands of Palestinians killed and the rest fleeing into Egypt for their lives. Gaza would largely be flattened, as was the Syrian city of Hama. As usual, the reality here is that the state has fallen between the two stools of the Hama option and de-escalation, which guarantees failure.

When the dust settles, I expect Hamas to emerge bloodied but stronger. It will continue to control Gaza, its support on the West Bank will soar (right before elections there) and the Palestinian Authority will look more like a stooge than ever. Strategically, the most important result will be further weakening of the legitimacy of the Egyptian government, which is bad news for America’s interests in the region.

On another front, the seeming quiet between India and Pakistan is deceptive. I expect an out-of-the-blue strike by India on 4GW training camps in Pakistan, a Pakistani defeat and possibly a collapse of the Pakistani government in consequence. How many collapses of governments Pakistan can endure before the state itself crumbles is a key strategic question. The answer, I suspect, is not many more. Pakistan could offer Islamic 4GW forces an earth-shaking victory in 2009.

In Afghanistan, the war continues to go badly for NATO and the U.S. More American troops doing what they are doing now will make the situation worse. The U.S. Army seems incapable of transferring what it learned in Iraq to Afghanistan. It is attacking the population rather than protecting it, which
guarantees failure. The one bit of good news is that the Taliban and al Qaeda are replicating the latter’s mistakes in Iraq.

The advent of the new American President changes nothing, because in Washington nothing really changes. One wing of the Establishment leaves government and goes into the think tanks and lobbying firms, another returns from those same places to government. The Obama crowd will not face up to the problem of America’s over-extension. It is just as Globalist, interventionist and imprudent as Bush’s herd of Gadarine swine. Gates may prove the one exception, but in the land of the blind the one-eyed man is hated. Plan on more mad foreign military adventures, despite the fact that we now have to print the money to pay for them. 4GW opponents will end up winning most.

Perhaps the brightest sign on the horizon for 4GW entities of all types, not just those that represent Islamic jihad, is the world economy. If the world recession becomes a world depression, which looks more and more likely, states everywhere will be weakened. For reasons Martin van Creveld lays out in The Rise and Decline of the State, citizens now expect their state to take care of them economically. If they have no jobs and face penury, they will be ready if not eager to transfer their primary allegiance from the state to something else. A big winner here will be gangs of every sort.

This bleak Rundschau should not surprise us. We live in a time toward the end of the world of states. A growing number of states will vanish. Still more will become hollow shells, within which 4GW entities thrive while protected by “state sovereignty.” As Globalism collapses economically and the global elites are revealed as emperors without clothes, the motto of every state will become “sauve qui peut.”

If you’re lucky enough to have a time machine, set it to “Back” and get aboard.

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On War #286: America’s Defense Meltdown

by William S. Lind
15 December 2008
America’s Defense Meltdown is the title of a new book on military reform, edited by Winslow Wheeler and published by the Center for Defense Information. In it, some of the leading figures from the military reform movement of the 1970’s and ‘80’s update their work and relate it to today’s challenges, including that posed by Fourth Generation war.

The book is timely. For years, Chuck Spinney and I have said that there will be no reform until the money simply isn’t there anymore. If that day has not yet arrived, it is on the calendar. The combination of a severe recession or depression and vast New Deal-type public works programs means something has to give. As the largest element in the discretionary federal budget, defense spending is an obvious target. More, it is a worthy target, in that much of what we spend buys little or no capability. The problem is not only mismanagement, but outdated and fundamentally wrongheaded approaches to war.

The latter are the focus of America’s Defense Meltdown, although the book addresses financial and managerial issues. Here, I want to focus on three chapters, the three most innovative (I leave my own two chapters, on the Marine Corps and the Navy, for others to weigh). The first is Chet Richards, “Shattering Illusions: A National Security Strategy for 2009-2017.”

In its first incarnation in the 1970’s and 1980’s, the military reform movement deliberately avoided the subject of strategy. It did so because the Cold War locked the U.S. into worshipping the great clay god NATO, which is to say into a continental strategy. Then as now a maritime strategy made better sense, but anyone who questioned the holiness of NATO was cast into outer darkness. So we bit our tongues and bided our time.

Now, with the Cold War over and the challenge of 4GW upon us, a debate over strategy is urgent. Chet Richards launches it con brio, arguing that we must determine what state militaries can and cannot do in a Fourth Generation world. Then, we must stop asking our armed services to do things that are impossible for them, like turning fly-blown, flea-bitten Third World hellholes into Switzerland. More, we should stop buying forces that are useless or worse for the types of conflicts we are likely to face.

Chet may disagree, but I think that in his chapter he moves closer to what I have advocated for years, namely a defensive rather than an offensive grand strategy. In any event he puts the subject of strategy on the table, which is vitally important. Because a higher level of war dominates a lower, if you don’t get your strategy right, no matter what you do at the tactical and operational levels, you lose.

The book’s second brilliant chapter is by Pierre Sprey and Bob Dilger, “Reversing the Decay of American Air Power.” In it, the authors chop up the idea of “winning through air power,” aka strategic bombing, and flush down war’s cloaca maxima.
More, they explain in detail how we can build an air force that can really make a difference in wars’ outcomes and do so for less money than we are spending now. The key idea is simple, and well supported by military history: build an air force that works in close union with ground forces.

A personal anecdote: Years ago, I was asked by a thoughtful SAC commander (yes, there was one), “What am I supposed to do with 18 B-2 bombers?” I replied, “Tow them around to county fairs and charge admission.”

My favorite chapter in America’s Defense Meltdown is Bruce Gudmundsson’s, “The Army National Guard, the Army Reserve, and the Marine Corps Reserve.” Bruce is the highly talented author of Stormtroop Tactics, the history of the development of Third Generation war in the German Army in World War I. Here, he shows how to take the classic European reserve system and adapt it to American conditions. Few transplants work “straight,” as direct imports. Adapting them requires great insight and imagination, and Gudmundsson demonstrates both in proposals that would improve the usefulness of our Guard and Reserve forces by orders of magnitude. His chapter alone is easily worth the price of the whole book.

Is anyone listening? Maybe. Interest is growing on Capitol Hill in reviving the Military Reform Caucus. Both Republicans and Democrats see major cuts in the defense budget are coming, and they know that left to its own devices the Defense Department will cut combat forces while preserving the bureaucracy and the money flow to the contractors. I suggested to a Hill staffer last week that the motto of a revived Reform Caucus should be, “Preserve the combat units, cut the bureaucracy.” That slogan could quickly gain bi-partisan support.

America’s Defense Meltdown is available immediately in Kindle Edition and will be published in hard cover on March 20.

Note: This will be the last On War column for 2008. Best wishes to all for a holy Christmas and a safe and prosperous new year!

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On War #285: If Wishes Were Horses…
By William S. Lind  
December 8, 2008

Panglissading through reality, the New York Times recently offered the sort of thoughtlessness sunny picture of the Obama administration’s security policy that lulls children to sleep but leaves adults restlessly wakeful. In a front-page story on December 1, “A Handpicked Team for a Foreign Policy Shift” by David Sanger, the Times reported that the new administration’s key national security policy appointees were selected in large part because they have embraced a sweeping shift of resources in the national security arena.

The shift, which would come partly out of the military’s huge budget, would create a greatly expanded corps of diplomats and aid workers that, in the vision of the coming Obama administration, would be engaged in projects around the world aimed at preventing conflicts and rebuilding failed states.

Whether they can make the change..."will be the great foreign policy experiment of the Obama presidency," one of his senior advisors said recently.

In the best Christmas spirit of my old friend Mr. Scrooge, I will spoil the story by spilling the ending up front. The “great foreign policy experiment” will fail.

It will fail for two reasons, one practical and one theoretical. The practical reason is that, no matter how much money you give them, out State Department and other civilian agencies cannot produce a product.

Over the years, I have heard one ambassador after another say, “I had to turn to the military because they are the only people who can get anything done.” If you give the U.S. military an order, something usually happens. It may happen late, clumsily, and expensively, but still, something happens.

In contrast, with State and other agencies, most of the time nothing happens. Why? Because the internal culture of our civilian agencies is so rigid, bureaucratic, risk-averse and rule-bound that they cannot act.

Often, the people at the working level are quite talented. They want to do the assigned job. But the internal focus of their agency is so strong they cannot, at least without risking their careers. A single broken rule or bent regulation, undotted i or uncrossed t, and they quickly learn to follow the regs and forget about the product. So nothing happens.

The Obama administration may wish this were not the case. Worse, it may pretend it is not the case, and learn only by failure. But if it is serious about its
“one great foreign policy experiment,” it must start by reforming the internal
culture of the State department and all related agencies. That is a long-term and
difficult undertaking. As to wishes, well, if wishes were horses, we would all get
rich collecting golden road apples.

The second reason the great experiment will fail is that it represents a failure in
strategic theory. In effect, it says that the Bush administration’s debacle was a
result of not of mistaken ends, only of mistaken means.

America will start to endeavor to govern the world, “preventing conflicts and
rebuilding failed states.” We will insert ourselves everywhere, exporting
“democracy” and “human rights,” aka Brave New World. We will re-make other
societies in our own image, whether they want us to or not (no one does). This
time, it will work, because instead of Marines, we will storm the beaches with
brave State Department lads, armored with blue suits and armed with briefing
papers and bottles of sherry.

In fact, our offensive grand strategy is itself the root of our failures. We cannot re-
make societies in our own image, regardless of the means employed. Attempts
to do so are doomed to failure, and so long as we insist on undertaking them, we
are doomed to imperial overreach, with its inevitable consequences of decay and
decline.

Some so-called “conservatives” may object to the Obama administration’s great
experiment because it will take money away from the Pentagon. That merely
shows the right’s usual instinct for the capillaries. We would take half the defense
budget, pile it in heaps, set it on fire and roast marshmallows over it and gain no
less from it than we do now. The real issue is whether America’s grand strategy
should be offensive or defensive. From President Washington to Senator Robert
A. Taft, conservatives knew it should be the latter. That should be the critique
conservatives offer, and it is one to which the Obama administration should pay
thoughtful attention.

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4:59 pm
Applying operational art in Fourth Generation war is so difficult it is hard to point to many successful examples of it. The recent assaults in Bombay are among the few and also among the best, bordering on brilliant. We may regret brilliance on the part of our opponents, but that should not prevent us from acknowledging it.

The operational logic is evident:

1. The United States wants Pakistan to focus on fighting al Qaeda and the Taliban.
2. To be able to do so, Pakistan must shift its focus away from the Indian threat, which requires a détente with India. A piece by Jane Perlez of the New York Times which ran in the November 28 Cleveland Plain Dealer reported that Reconciliation between India and Pakistan has emerged as a basic tenet in the approaches to foreign policy of President-elect Barack Obama, and the new leader of Central Command, Gen. David H. Petraeus. The point is to persuade Pakistan to focus less of its military effort on India, and more on the militants in its lawless tribal regions….
3. Friends of al Qaeda and the Taliban need to block this shift in focus by Pakistan. To do so, they must ramp up the hostility between India and Pakistan. How could they do that?
4. With a special operation in India’s most important city. Remember, a special operation must have operational significance to qualify as “special ops.” If its meaning is only tactical, it’s just a bunch of yahoos running around making noise.
5. The special operation was tactically well planned and carried out. To work operationally, India must blame it on Pakistan. Early indications suggest that may happen.
6. If India does blame Pakistan and Pakistan feels the Indian threat is increasing, the American strategy of convincing Pakistan to focus on the Taliban and al Qaeda will have been defeated. That is operational art at its best.

Meanwhile, in Iraq, an odd combination of events may offer a strategic win-win-win opportunity for all parties: the U.S., the al-Maliki government and al Qaeda. Last week, the Iraqi parliament passed the new status of forces agreement that would keep American troops in Iraq through 2011. Washington regards that as a success, which it is not. What America needs most is to get out of Iraq before the next round in the Iraqi civil war starts.

However, to get Sunni support for the agreement, the al-Maliki government had to agree to submit the deal to a national referendum next year. If the agreement
is defeated in that referendum, everyone could win. American troops would have a better chance of getting out while Iraq is still quiet. The al-Maliki government could gain some legitimacy by obeying the expressed will of the Iraqi people and telling the Americans to pack and go. Al Qaeda could claim that, in the end, the Americans were expelled from Iraq rather than leaving on their own preferred timetable, which in fact stretches far beyond 2011.

Here, al Qaeda has an operational opportunity, and it will be interesting to see if it can grasp it. At present, al Qaeda in Iraq is on the ropes, largely because its brutality toward the Iraqi population has cost it its political base among the Sunnis. If al Qaeda can think operationally, it will announce that it is suspending all combat operations until the referendum. That truce would allow it to patch up its relations with its base. Further, al Qaeda would state that if the status of forces agreement is defeated, it will not resume combat operations. It would have no need to do so, since it could claim victory. And its pledge would encourage Iraqis, who are tired of seemingly random bombings, to vote no. Al Qaeda in Iraq could recover at the ballot box from the defeat it has inflicted on itself in the field.

A strategic win-win-win would be a strange outcome indeed for this phase of the Iraq war (there is more to come). But such are the vagaries of Fourth Generation war. We will see similar oddities in Afghanistan as that war moves toward settlement. The sooner Washington can stop thinking in binary terms and get used to strange outcomes, the better.

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On War #283: The Russian Imperative

By William S. Lind
November 17, 2008

The arriving Obama administration will be handed not merely a can of worms but a bucket of asps. Somewhere, I suspect the ghost of Herbert Hoover is smiling. The inherited foreign policy problems are no less daunting than the economic mess. But on the latter front, there is at least one piece of good news. It may be possible to set the U.S. – Russian relationship on a new course.

America’s failure to reintegrate post-Communist Russia into the concert of powers was a strategic blunder of the first order. The threat from the global
south, manifested most powerfully by invasion by immigration but also evident in many other ways, can only be met by a united global north. Russia holds the West’s vast eastern flank, which stretches all the way from the Black Sea to Vladivostok. Were that flank to collapse, as Russia came close to doing in the early 1990s, the West’s geo-strategic position would become well-nigh hopeless.

Despite this strategic reality, evident to anyone who can read a map, Republican and Democratic administrations have vied to determine which could more effectively humiliate and alienate Russia. The Clinton administration probably won that contest with its inane war on Serbia, Russia’s historic ally. Bush II’s subsequent efforts to enlarge NATO and insistence on locating anti-missile defenses in eastern Europe were additional sticks in the Kremlin’s eye. The only reason for any of it was great power hubris, of the sort which littered the 20th century with wreckage. Regrettably, the Washington Establishment is as prideful as it is short-sighted.

Until last week, I would have said that the U.S. had damaged the prospects for an American-Russian entente beyond repair. But to the West's potential good fortune, Russian president Dmitry Medvedev has now signaled otherwise. According to the November 14 Financial Times, speaking shortly before his trip to Washington to a group of Russian and European business leaders, President Medvedev said that Russia could develop “neighborly and partnership-based relations with the U.S.” In Washington for the Group of 20 meeting, he repeated the message. The November 16 Washington Post quoted him as saying, “I think we can create in principle a new framework…a partnership between the U.S. and Russia.”

Responding to a question before the Council on Foreign Relations, Medvedev sent the message yet again. According to the Post, he said, “In my state of the nation address, I mentioned that Russia has no anti-Americanism, but there are some difficulties in understanding each other. We would like to overcome this with the new administration.”

It is imperative that the Obama administration respond positively to this diplomatic opening. After eight years of alienating friends and making more enemies, America is in dire need of fewer enemies and more friends. Russia could be a valuable friend indeed, diplomatically, militarily and economically.

Medvedev offered tantalizing hints about how the issue of missile defense might be handled. Again quoting the Post, he said, “But to my mind we have good opportunities to solve this problem … to agree either on a global system of protection against rogue states … or to find ways out in terms of programs existing already.” Russian anti-aircraft and anti-missile defense technology is at least as good as our own, maybe better. If the Obama administration is serious about missile defense for Europe, it can be provided far better by working with Russia than by threatening Russia.
Even more significantly, when Medvedev was asked before the CFR about the possibility of Russia joining NATO, he said, “There is a good phrase – never say never.” Since the fall of Communism, NATO has had no real reason to exist. But if Russia joined NATO, NATO would become what the West needs most, an alliance of the global north. This is a lead both the Obama administration and the European members of NATO should pursue avidly.

With all the old Clintonistas moving straight into the new Obama administration, there is not much hope for change. But perhaps even they can see that America is not wise to turn all the world into its enemy. That was Germany’s fatal blunder in both world wars. The Russians have opened the door to at least a normal relationship, perhaps much more. This time, let’s not slam it in their face.

P.S: There will be no On War column Thanksgiving week.

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http://www.d-n-i.net/dni/2008/11/19/on-war-283-the-russian-imperative/

On War #282: Obama’s First Test

By William S. Lind

November 10, 2008

President Obama’s first test in the national security arena is likely to come not from al Qaeda or Iran or the Taliban but from within his own Democratic Party. Powerful constituencies in that party, the Feminists and the gays, will demand that he open the ground combat arms to women and allow acknowledged homosexuals to serve in the U.S. armed forces. If he agrees to either of these demands, or both, he will begin his Presidency by doing immense damage to the fighting ability of the America military.

Both demands are ideological in nature. They reflect the cultural Marxism of the Frankfurt School, commonly known as “Political Correctness.” Cultural Marxism sees Feminist women and gays as the equivalent of economic Marxism’s proletariat, i.e., “good,” and white males as an equivalent of the bourgeoisie, i.e., “bad.” The former are therefore to be “privileged” over the latter, in what Roger
Kimball calls “experiments against reality.” We must pretend that there are no meaningful differences between men and women, even on a battlefield, and that gays and normal men and women can mix without serious friction, even in very close quarters. Anyone who refuses to play “let’s pretend” is to find himself in trouble.

The military reformers rightly argued that for winning in combat, people are most important, ideas come second and hardware is only third. Allowing women into the ground combat arms and open homosexuals into the armed services will impact critically important “human factors” in strongly negative ways. They will strike directly at why men fight.

It is a mistake to think that if you call a group of people an army, give them uniforms and hand them some weapons, they will fight. Throughout history, some armies have fought a lot harder than others. The specific reasons vary widely, but one way or another they all come down to human factors.

One of the most basic human factors is that men fight to prove they are real men. They join fighting organizations, whether the U.S. Army or U.S. Marine Corps or MS-13, because those organizations are made up of fighting men. Their membership is a badge of honor that says, “We’re not sissies or pansies. We are men who fight, serving alongside other men who fight.” That tells others and themselves they are real men.

If ideologically-driven policies deprive fighting organizations of their ability to convey that message, men who want to prove they are real men will not join. Instead of men who want to fight and will fight, they will end up recruiting men who join for good pay, or education benefits, or because they can’t get a civilian job. Armies like that may fight when they have no other choice, but if they come up against opponents who want to fight, they will be in trouble.

No two actions would more powerfully undermine the ability of the U.S. armed forces to recruit the kind of men who want to fight than allowing women into the ground combat arms and open gays into the military. How can a man prove his manhood by serving with women and gays? The recruitment of women into the U.S. military has already gone far beyond what military effectiveness would counsel. Martin van Creveld has written a whole book, Men, Women and War, arguing that women have essentially no place in a military. President Obama would do well to read it before making any hasty decisions.

President Obama’s first national security test will in fact be a test of his honesty. Will he govern as the centrist he presented himself as being during the campaign? If so, he will allow present policies on women and gays in the military to remain in place. Or, will he reveal himself as a cultural Marxist who deceived the American public in order to get elected and will govern from the left, not the center? If so, we will witness many experiments against reality, with the U.S.
In standard military theory, a culminating point is where an offensive runs out of gas. The troops are exhausted; vehicles urgently require maintenance; fuel, ammo and rations are all short. No matter how alluring the potential results of continuing the offensive, the attacker has to take a break. Often, a culminating point will mark the high water line of an attack. Afterwards, the initiative shifts to the defender.

Not surprisingly, culminating points are seen as something to be avoided. But a report in NightWatch for October 29 suggests that 4GW may offer a new variety of culminating point, one that is useful to an invader more than it is harmful. According to NightWatch:

The Pakistani daily The News reported today that a new “anti-coalition force” party has been formed in Afghanistan which would resist the activities of US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan. This new party is composed of those who detest the Taliban and Mullah Omar and who also are unhappy about the presence of Coalition forces in Afghanistan and considered them a compromise of Afghan sovereignty.

How large and how effective this new anti-coalition, anti-Taliban faction might become is impossible to say. Should it become a significant player, it would represent a new type of culminating point. It would represent the point at which an invader’s presence pushes the vital “middle” in an occupied country into resistance, without simultaneously pushing it into an alliance with the invader’s sworn enemies.

Why is this a culminating point in 4GW? Because it represents both the point at which the invader is doing himself more harm than good by staying and the point beyond which he does not need to stay. If the political middle can fight the
invader and more extreme 4GW elements at the same time, it is probably strong enough to defeat the latter. We have seen this happen in Sunni-controlled regions in Iraq. Once American forces stopped fighting the nationalist Sunni resistance, those Sunni fighters wiped out al Qaeda.

At the same time, it is almost inevitable that the presence of occupying foreign troops will eventually alienate most of the population. When the alienation reaches a degree where it leads the political center to start fighting the occupier, the latter has reached a strategic culminating point (defined in time rather than in space). The longer he remains in country after reaching that point, the weaker his position will become.

If we put these two aspects of our new 4GW culminating point together, we see it marks the moment in time when an occupier both can leave and should leave. Unlike traditional culminating points, this new variety is useful rather than harmful. It helps an invader answer one of the most difficult questions in 4GW, when to leave. Timing a strategic withdrawal is always challenging, but in 4GW it is critical to winning the war. If timed too early, the occupier may open the door to inherently hostile 4GW elements. If timed too late, he risks uniting most of the people against him, which can cost him an army as well as a hostile post-war relationship with the country he invaded. A culminating point that tells him the best moment to withdraw is something a wise occupier will welcome rather than seek to avoid.

What might our new, useful culminating point tell us about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq? If the new anti-coalition, anti-Taliban grouping in Afghanistan proves real and gains significant strength, it tells the U.S. and NATO it’s time to go. The new centrist grouping would have legitimacy, unlike the Karzai puppet regime; if it can fight the Taliban effectively, it would probably represent the best chance of re-creating an Afghan state.

We may be on the cusp of a similar development in Iraq. The former Sunni insurgents now allied with U.S. forces as “the Awakening” have been rejected by the Shiite al-Maliki government, and at some point they will start fighting that government. If Washington reacts stupidly (as it usually does) and orders the U.S. military to fight the Sunnis, the latter will be fighting us and al Qaeda at the same time. Muqtada al-Sadr’s militia is preparing for another round with the Americans, this time on the Hezbollah model which relies on small, well-trained units instead of armed mobs. As Shiites, they will be equally hostile to us and to al Qaeda. Once we find ourselves fighting Sunnis and Shiites simultaneously we will have hit the 4GW culminating point.

If the U.S. government and the American armed forces understand the new culminating point, which is doubtful, they will withdraw from Iraq when they see it coming but before they actually hit it. They would thereby avoid a new round of fighting, which they would lose, and avoid a fighting withdrawal, which is always
perilous. In other words, the time to get out of Iraq is now, while the going is good.

The American military will probably ignore all this, as it ignores military theory generally. But the Europeans may pay some attention. European militaries do pay attention to military theory, in part because they know they cannot solve problems by throwing money at them and in part because the 20th Century taught them the perils of Great Power hubris. Europe can do little to affect the war in Iraq, but if the Europeans were to decide that the moment to leave Afghanistan had arrived, the U.S. government would have to listen.

So here’s to the new Afghan centrists: may they prove strong enough to defeat the Taliban and save the U.S. and NATO from themselves.

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On War # 280: The Other Election

by William S. Lind
October 28, 2008

While the world’s eyes are fixed on the American election coming up soon, another election with equal importance for America’s future crawled onto the calendar over the past weekend (don’t expect a monarchist to think highly of elections). Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni gave up her efforts to form a new Israeli government and called for elections. Her move may be a last negotiating gambit. If not, Israel will probably face national elections in February 2009.

At present some, polls suggest the Likud party will win. If that happens, it will mean as much for America as for Israel. Why? Because America’s Middle Eastern policy is effectively the tail on Likud’s dog. Many American neo-cons, those great guys who gave us the war in Iraq, are de facto members of Likud. Several leading American neo-cons wrote Likud’s strategy for Israel, which calls for someone – guess who? — to destroy every Middle Eastern country that could be a threat to Israel. The American invasion of Iraq represented in part that strategy being put into effect.
Those who imagine an Obama victory will see the neo-cons shown the door are in for an unpleasant surprise. Under the guise of neo-libs, they are no less influential in the Democratic establishment than in the Republican. The only way Likud could get shut out of a Democratic administration is if Obama bypasses the whole establishment in choosing his foreign and defense policy appointments. While that is fervently to be wished, it is probably not going to happen. Like figures on a medieval clock, the Republican and Democratic establishments succeed each other in an unbroken chain of policy failure.

A Likud government in Israel come next spring would make two wars virtually certain: a war between Israel and Hezbollah and another between Israel and Iran. The Israeli military leadership recently announced that in the event of another war with Hezbollah, Israel would destroy Lebanon's civilian infrastructure throughout the country. Since the neo-libs will make certain America backs Israel to the hilt, world-wide Islamic anger over the unnecessary destruction of a small, helpless Middle Eastern country (at least a third of whose people are Christians) will focus as much on America as on Israel. Islamic 4GW organizations will get a huge boost to their recruiting and fundraising, while the legitimacy of Islamic states with ties to America will be further weakened.

An Israeli attack on Iran, in turn, could bring about the loss of the army America has in Iraq. If I sound like Cato in repeating this warning endlessly, I do so with reason. The destruction of an entire American army would mark an historic turning point, America’s Syracuse Expedition, which is what the Iraq war has resembled from the start. Our strategic position in Iraq hangs by a thread, its long, thin supply line coming up through the Persian Gulf and Kuwait. If Iran and its allied Iraqi Shiite militias cut that line, the best outcome we can hope for is a sauve que peut withdrawal of U.S. forces north into Kurdistan.

To this happy picture a Likud government in Israel might add a war with Syria and an open U.S. break with Pakistan, driven by Pakistani popular anger at America for its alliance with a Likud-led Israel. That would cut our main supply line for the war in Afghanistan, again forcing a withdrawal.

All of this would occur against a background of a world economic depression, a depression wars in the Middle East would intensify. The price of oil, now artificially depressed by a fire sale of commodities held by hedge funds, would soar to unprecedented heights. Those countries still exporting oil might dump the dollar and demand payment in gold. The American defense budget could skyrocket at a time when the U.S. faced an urgent need to cut federal spending, leading to printing-press dollars and hyperinflation.

It may be that elections in Israel hold more meaning for the United States than does America’s own coming vote. One writer quoted in the Washington Post said that if McCain wins, history will pay America a visit, “the shroud, the scythe and all Four Horsemen.” That may be no less true if Obama wins, unless he
improbably finds the wisdom and courage to break with the Democratic Party’s foreign policy establishment. That establishment is as tied to Israel as Russia’s foreign policy establishment was tied to Serbia in 1914. Past, I suspect, is prologue.

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On War #279: Confirmation

By William S. Lind
October 20, 2008

I have suggested in previous columns that the al Qaeda model of 4GW may be failing for inherent reasons, i.e. for reasons it cannot fix. “Tom Rick’s Inbox” in the October 19 Washington Post offers some confirmation of that assessment. Ricks writes:

Where did al Qaeda in Iraq go wrong? In a paper prepared for the recent annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, the Australian political scientist Andrew Phillips argues persuasively that, by their nature, al Qaeda affiliates tend to alienate their hosts….

He then quotes Phillips at some length:

In successive conflicts ranging from Bosnia to Chechnya to Kashmir, the jihad jet-set has rapidly worn out its welcome among local host populations as a result of its ideological inflexibility and high-handedness, as well as its readiness to resort to indiscriminate violence against locals at the first signs of challenge…. That this pattern has so frequently been repeated suggests that the underlying causes of al Qaeda’s defeat in Iraq may transcend the specific circumstances of that conflict. Baldly stated, the causes of al Qaeda’s defeat in Iraq can be located in its ideological DNA.

In my view, the “DNA” to which Phillips refers is the type of people drawn to al Qaeda and other Fourth Generation entities modeled on al Qaeda. They are mostly religious fanatics of the most extreme varieties, similar to the Levellers and Diggers of the English Civil War. Regardless of what their organization’s leadership may enjoin, they will treat any locals they regard as religiously “lax”
with severity. They cannot do otherwise without becoming “impure” themselves. It is useful to remind ourselves where the word “Puritan” comes from.

A failure of the al Qaeda model, while welcome, does not imply any weakening of the impulse toward Fourth Generation war. On the contrary, it represents its evolution. 4GW is something new in the post-Westphalian world, and it is likely to go through many cycles of innovation, failure, learning and adaptation as it evolves. I expect that evolution to play out over the course of the 21st century and beyond.

What does the prospective failure of the al Qaeda model mean for other current models? The Taliban model would seem to share al Qaeda’s DNA. When they were in power in Afghanistan, the Taliban also imposed a Puritanism that overrode local cultural norms and thereby alienated much of the population. However, the Taliban also left power with several assets on its balance sheet, assets it continues to draw on. It represented Pashtun dominance of Afghanistan, something all Pashtun regard as natural and necessary (the Karzai regime’s origins are Uzbek and Tajik). Like a state, it brought order. It reduced corruption, now out of control, to locally acceptable levels. And while actually a creation of Pakistan’s ISI, the Taliban successfully presented themselves as something home-grown, which the Karzai government will never be able to do. In terms of the all-important quality of legitimacy, Robespierre always trumps Vichy.

Beyond Afghanistan, the Fourth Generation future belongs neither to al Qaeda nor to the Taliban but to two more sophisticated models, Hezbollah and the Latin American drug gangs. Both can fight, but fighting is not primarily what they are about. Rather, both are about benefiting their members with money, services, community, identity, and, strange as it may sound, what passes locally for good government. Even the drug gangs’ governance is often less corrupt than that of the local state.

Both of these 4GW models can fall into the fatal error of alienating the local population, but the tendency is not inherent. While Hezbollah is religiously defined, it seems to appeal well beyond the Puritans, which means it can give orders Puritans will not obey. The drug gangs’ principal faith is in making money, and few faiths are more broadly latitudinarian.

Andrew Phillips adds to his analysis the prudent warning that “Al Qaeda may have lost Iraq, but this is no way implies that America and its allies have won.” In Iraq as elsewhere, the fading of the al Qaeda model is being balanced not by the rise of a new state but by the adoption of other models of 4GW. So far, as best I can determine, no foreign intervention in a Fourth Generation conflict has succeeded in re-creating a real state (you can add Ethiopia in Somalia to the long list of failures).
Do intervening foreign forces, like al Qaeda, have DNA that preordains failure? The answer, while not final, seems to be pointing toward the affirmative.

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On War #278: The Afghan Advantage

By William S. Lind
October 15, 2008

As the military situation in Afghanistan deteriorates, there may be at least the possibility of better news on the political front. Nightwatch for October 7 reported that

Multiple news services have reported meetings hosted by Saudi Arabian King Abdallah between representatives of the Kabul government and the Taliban. Both Taliban and Afghan government spokesmen have denied that the talks were official. Both have acknowledged that talks occurred…Mediated talks between enemies accompanied by denials always signify the first step toward power sharing.

Intervening powers seldom if ever win Fourth Generation wars militarily, though they may lose them militarily. Rather, if they win, which means they witness the re-emergence of a state, they do so politically.

Here we see what might be called the “Afghan Advantage.” Unlike most Fourth Generation situations, including Iraq in Afghanistan we face one predominant enemy, the Taliban. That means we have someone to negotiate with who can actually deliver, and can do so on a country-wide scale.

Usually, any “deal” in a 4GW environment can only be local. The local sheik, clan leader, gang leader or militia captain can deliver only in his own back yard. Foreign occupiers must try to assemble, then maintain, a fragile, endlessly complex network of local deals, most of which tend to unravel. Ceasing to juggle leads not to stability but to the collapse of all deals and a return to chaos. That is one reason why occupiers find they cannot get out.

The situation in Afghanistan is more favorable. If we can make a deal with the Taliban, they can enforce it throughout most of the country. They can speak for
the Pashtun, the people with whom we are at war. We can get out without Afghanistan falling back into chaos. The Taliban have shown they can govern, even to the point of shutting down the opium trade.

The action of the Saudi government in sponsoring talks between Mr. Karzai’s regime and the Taliban is something the U.S. and NATO should welcome and support. As quickly as we can without upsetting the applecart, the U.S. should also start to talk with the Taliban.

As NightWatch has indicated, the obvious direction of the talks should be toward some sort of power-sharing. That will only be a temporary arrangement; the Pashtun, Uzbeks and Tajiks will sort out their differences in the usual way, by fighting.

But an Afghan coalition government that includes the Taliban could give the U.S. and NATO what they need, an opportunity to get out. It is not too difficult to envision how such a government might be put together. The Taliban would get some seats in the cabinet in Kabul and control over the provinces they regard as their homeland. They would promise not to invite al Qaeda to set up new bases in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda now has no need for Afghan bases, since it has better ones in Pakistan, the country which is its current strategic focus. Mr. Karzai would go, much to his own relief, no doubt, perhaps to be replaced by a restored monarchy. The monarchy was popular in Afghanistan, and would be accepted by most Afghans as a legitimate government.

Pipe dreams of a democratic, secular, modern Afghanistan would vanish, as pipe dreams always do. The U.S. and NATO would have gotten out of Afghanistan without suffering an obvious defeat. In the history of Afghan wars, that is the best outcome an invader can hope for.

As Churchill said, “Better “jaw, jaw” than “war, war.”

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On War #276: War on Two Fronts, Without Railways

By William S. Lind

September 30, 2008

One way to look at the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan is to see them as one war with two fronts. Germany fought two-front wars twice in the 20th century, and it was almost able to prevail because it had the advantage of interior lines. The German Army could quickly shift divisions and corps from the Eastern to the Western front or vice versa, using the superb German rail system. Unfortunately, the U.S. lacks the advantage of interior lines in its ongoing two-front war. No railways run from Baghdad to Kabul.

U.S. commanders in Afghanistan have reportedly requested an additional 10,000 troops. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates was recently quoted in the Washington Post as telling the Senate Armed Services Committee, “I believe we will be able to meet that commanders’ requirement, but in the spring and summer of 2009...we do not have the forces to send three additional brigades to Afghanistan at this point.”

The only source for additional troops for Afghanistan is Iraq. The September 2008 issue of Army magazine quotes Joint Chiefs Chairman Admiral Michael Mullen as saying, “I don’t have troops I can reach for, brigades I can reach, to send into Afghanistan until I have a reduced requirement in Iraq.”

Without railways running on interior lines, we cannot move three brigades from Iraq to Afghanistan this week, then move them back to Iraq again a few weeks later if the situation there demands them. That means any shift of forces requires long-term stability in Iraq. Neo-con voices in Washington are now claiming “victory” in Iraq, which, if it were true, would release American forces stationed there for redeployment. This appears to be what Secretary Gates is counting on when he says we should be able to meet commanders’ request for 10,000 more troops in Afghanistan next spring or summer.

But I fear this represents a falsely optimistic reading of the situation in Iraq. In my view, the current relative quiet in Iraq is merely a pause as the parties there regroup and reorient for the next phase of the war. Unless we have the good sense to get out of Iraq now, while the going is good, we will be stuck there when that next phase starts. We will not then be in a position to shift forces from Iraq to Afghanistan, because without interior lines, any such shift much be long-term.

While most of the stuff on the internet is junk, the junk pile does hold an occasional diamond. One such is a daily report called “NightWatch,” written by a retired DIA analyst, John McCreary. As quoted in the Washington Post’s “Tom Rick’s Inbox,” “NightWatch” for September 11, 2008 said that
The U.S., as the most powerful faction (in Iraq), imposed power sharing on the Kurds, the Arab Sunnis and the Arab Shiites...Power sharing is deceptive because it always features reduced violence. It looks like victory, but is not....

Power sharing can last a long time, but it is not a permanent condition and does not signify one faction’s triumph over the others. It is never an end state, but rather a transitional period during which the participants prepare for the next phase of the struggle....

Thus, power sharing is always a prelude to violence.

If the next phase of Iraq’s civil war breaks out before spring 2009, Secretary Gates’s promise of more troops for Afghanistan will go unfulfilled. Both the Army's and the Marine Corps’ cupboards are bare. We will in effect face enemy offensives on both fronts simultaneously, with no reserves.

Even with the advantages of interior lines and excellent railways connecting both fronts, Germany was not able to deal with such a situation from the summer of 1944 onward. Lacking those advantages, our predicament will be worse. We will find ourselves face-to-face with failure both in Iraq and Afghanistan, with few if any options. If an attack on Iran has meanwhile brought that country into the war against us, we will face a third front. Events in Pakistan could create a fourth. It is the nature of long wars that they tend to spread.

Whoever the next President is, he is likely to find himself living in interesting times.

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http://www.d-n-i.net/dni/2008/10/01/on-war-276-war-on-two-fronts-without-railways/

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All of Martin van Creveld’s books are worth reading, but a few are “big books,” books so important that anyone interested in war must read them. To date, his big books include The Transformation of War, The Rise and Decline of the State and Fighting Power. Van Creveld’s latest book has just come out, and it is a very big book indeed. Titled The Culture of War, it targets, hits and obliterates Clausewitz’s assertion that war is merely the continuation of politics by other means.

Like John Boyd, van Creveld has engaged in a running feud with Clausewitz. I happen to think Clausewitz still offers much of value, as do many things Prussian. But as Boyd often said, we have learned a few things since Clausewitz’s day.

The Culture of War offers one of the most important lessons. War exists not to serve the interests of states, it argues, or anything else. Rather, it is a fundamental part of human nature and culture. No human culture is imaginable that excludes war. At the same time, war and those who fight it develop their own cultures, cultures which shape how war is carried on far more powerfully than do rational calculations of military effectiveness.

It is impossible to summarize a book this rich in a column. Rather than try, let me give two examples from it, both from German military history. The first illustrates the danger of military culture divorcing itself from actual war, the second the consequences of trying to separate military institutions from the culture of war.

After the end of the Seven Years War in 1763, the Prussian army routinized itself to the point where complex and largely useless drills came to be everything. Creveld writes,

Many were especially devised for the king’s benefit; the most spectacular, if not the most useful, movement of all was turning a battalion on its own axis, like a top…

However, the extent to which the culture of war had taken over from war itself is nicely illustrated by two contemporary stories. One had (General) von Saldern earnestly debating the pros and cons of increasing the regulation marching speed of seventy-five paces a minute to seventy-six; according to the other, when he went to heaven and explained his system of maneuvers to Gustavus Adolphus, the king answered that he was not aware that in the years since his death the earth had been made flat. Briefly, a thousand details—"pedantries" as Field Marshal Gebhard von Blücher was to call them later—that had originally served a useful purpose now became detached from reality, so to speak. They continued to float about solely as parts of a highly developed culture, one that no longer made sense in any terms except its own.
The result was an army so brittle that, when faced in 1806 with Napoleon, it shattered.

Creveld’s second example is today’s German military, the Bundeswehr. Germany’s politicians have demanded the Bundeswehr be stripped of all German military traditions, not just those of the Nazi period. Creveld notes that

At first, only the years 1933-1945 were exorcised. From 1968 on, however, there was a growing tendency to extend the shadows until they covered previous periods. Not only the Panzer leader Heinz Guderian, not only the desert fox Erwin Rommel, but Hans von Seeckt, Paul von Hindenburg, Erich Ludendorff, Alfred von Schieffen, and Helmut von Moltke disappeared. From heroes who had served their country, they were turned into “militarist,” “reactionary,” and “imperialist” villains; in today’s casernes, it is in vain that one looks for their names or their portraits…

In comparison with similar institutions in other countries, German military academies, staff colleges, and other educational institutions have an empty, bare, functional, and soulless appearance. The relics of the “wars of liberation” apart, almost the only items on display pertain to the Bundeswehr’s own history. However, since the Bundeswehr has never gone to war, the ability of those items to excite and inspire is limited…

Given the terrible historical background, all this is perfectly understandable. On the other hand, it is indisputable that an armed force, if its members are to fight and die for their country, must have a culture of war…

One does not have to be a “militarist” or a right-wing extremist to note the peculiar smell that prevails throughout the Bundeswehr. That smell is made up of impersonal bureaucratic procedures, political correctness, and the obsequiousness that results when people worry lest speaking up will lead to bad consequences.

Both of these extremes hold lessons for today’s U.S. military. The inward-focused culture of the Second Generation that dominates the American armed forces has generated an ever-widening disconnect with the nature of the modern battlefield. That contradiction lies at the heart of the American failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. At the same time, like the Bundeswehr, the U.S. armed forces are under political assault by forces that care nothing for preserving the necessary culture of war. The forced insertion of large numbers of women into the American military is one example. If the next administration opens the combat arms to women and also demands the recruitment of homosexuals, the damage to the culture of war may be vast. The kind of men who fight often join the military to validate their manhood. They cannot do that in armed services heavily peopled with women and homosexuals.
Just as van Creveld’s book The Transformation of War warns that war is changing, The Culture of War cautions that some things do not change. The culture of war must contain certain elements, elements common to successful militaries throughout history. If ideologies or other political or social forces outlaw some of those elements, the consequence will not be the end of war. War will be carried on by other means, by gangs, militias, tribes and terrorists who are not subject to political correctness and can embody in full the culture of war. From that perspective, Creveld’s The Transformation of War and The Culture of War are two volumes of the same work.

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On War #274: Why Obama Is Wrong

William S. Lind
September 16, 2008

A few weeks ago I wrote a column explaining why Senator John McCain is wrong on Iraq. In contrast, Senator Barack Obama is largely right on Iraq. Whether he would follow through on his plan for withdrawing U.S. troops is another question. The Democratic foreign policy establishment is no less Wilsonian than its Republican counterpart, and once it has used anti-war voters to gain power it will want to show them the door as soon as it dares.

But if Obama is right on Iraq, he is wrong on Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. His prescriptions for each are so close to the policies of the Bush administration that if McCain is McBush, Obama appears to be O'Bush. It seems many voters’ desire to climb up out of the Bush league altogether is doomed to frustration.

On Afghanistan, Obama wants to send in more troops and win the war. But more troops doing what U.S. troops now do—fighting the Pashtun and calling in airstrikes on anything that moves—guarantee we will lose the war. As was the case in Iraq, the first necessary step is to change what our troops are doing. From what I have seen, Obama has said nothing on that score, probably because his position on Afghanistan is mere posturing intended to show he will be “tough on terrorism.”

Obama’s position on Pakistan is even more dangerous. In August of 2007, Obama called for direct U.S. military action in Pakistan, with or without Pakistani
approval. Speaking to the Woodrow Wilson Center, he said, “If we have actionable intelligence about high-value terrorist targets and President Musharraf won’t act, we will.” President Bush took Senator Obama’s recommendation this past July, authorizing such actions.

This is an example of the classic strategic error of sacrificing a more important goal to one of lesser importance. Not even outright defeat in Afghanistan would do America’s interests as much damage as would the disintegration of the Pakistani state and the transformation of Pakistan into another stateless region. The state of Pakistan is already dangerously fragile, and actions such as cross-border raids by American troops will diminish its legitimacy further. No government that cannot defend its sovereignty will last. Ironically, if Pakistan collapses, so does our position in Afghanistan, because our main logistics line will be cut. In effect, Obama wants to hand al-Qaeda and the Taliban a double victory.

In June of this year, Obama spoke to the annual AIPAC conference. What he said there about Iran put him once again firmly in the Bush camp:

As President, I will use all elements of American power to pressure Iran. I will do everything in my power to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon….

There should be no doubt: I will always keep the threat of military action to defend our security and our ally Israel. Do not be confused.

Sometimes there are no alternatives to confrontation. If we must use military force, we are more likely to succeed and have more support at home and abroad if we have exhausted our diplomatic options. That is the change we need in our policy.

In other words, the change we need in our policy is to offer a bit more diplomatic kabuki before we attack Iran.

As I have said repeatedly and will keep on saying, an attack on Iran could cost us the whole army we have in Iraq. It could set the region on fire, from Afghanistan to the Nile. It could create an oil crisis with severe economic consequences at a time when the world economy is tottering. It is, in short, madness. But it is also what Obama promised AIPAC.

Here we see the central reality of American politics shining through the smoke and mirrors. America has a one-party system. That party is the Establishment Party, and its internal disagreements are minor. Both McCain and Obama are Establishment Party candidates. They agree America must be a world-controlling empire. Both men are Wilsonians, believing we must re-make other countries and cultures in our own image. Neither man conceives any real limits, political, financial, military or moral, on American power. McCain and Obama vie only in
determining which can drink more deeply from the poisoned well of hubris, around which, unremarked, lie the bones of every previous world power.

Such is the “choice” the American people get in November. As a monarchist, it is sometimes hard to keep from smiling.

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On War #273: Defending the Baltics

By William S. Lind

I recently returned from Estonia and the Baltic Defence College, where the Russian counter-attack on Georgia had left a residual case of nerves. They have little to fear in the short run, unless they duplicate Georgia’s folly and attack Russia. But the question of how the Baltics might be defended is worth considering, both in itself and in terms of what it means for defending other small countries.

The worst option, which Georgia took, is to create a toy army. A handful of modern jet fighters, a battalion or two of tanks, a frigate for the navy, all add up to nothing. Against a Great Power, a toy army goes down to defeat in days if not hours. More, even a few modern jet fighters or tanks cost so much there is no money left for a real defense. Unless the Baltic states want to fight each other, they should leave military toys to children.

Second, the Baltics could try to ally with other near-by Powers strong enough to balance Russia. But this option exists only in theory. Germany could fill the role but has lost all Great Power ambitions, while Sweden has been out the game for two centuries. There could be benefit for all concerned in a union of the Baltic states and Finland under the Swedish crown, all retaining complete domestic autonomy but united for defense and foreign policy, but it is probably only historians who can see the potential.

A third option is to ally with distant Great Powers in order to balance the threat from a local Great Power. That is what the Baltic States have done through their membership in NATO. Unfortunately, while central European states have attempted this over and over again for centuries, it never works. It may involve Western Powers in war with Russia, or in the past with Germany, but it does
nothing to protect the country in question. Poland is a recent example: Britain and France went to war with Germany in 1939 over Poland, but Poland remained an occupied country for 50 years.

NATO membership also increases the pressure to build a toy army, or to specialize in “niche” capabilities like water purification that serve NATO but not home defense. Both are roads to military irrelevance.

There is a model that would work for the Baltic states and other small countries: the Iraqi model. Instead of creating a toy army, they should plan an Iraq-style insurgency against any occupier. This requires a universal militia like Switzerland’s, where every male citizen knows how to shoot and how to build and emplace IEDs and where weapons and explosives are cached all over the country. In the Baltics, this would be a rural rather than an urban defense: Russia could take the cities but not the countryside. The “Forest Brothers” kept up just such a resistance to the Soviet presence well into the 1950s.

An Iraqi-model defense would not make it impossible for Russia to conquer the Baltic states. It could only make such a venture expensive for Russia, hopefully too expensive.

For long-term security, the Baltic states must approach the problem not just at the military but at the grand strategic level. What that means is that, like all small countries bordering Great Powers, they must accommodate the Great Power’s interests. The model here is Finland during the Cold War. Finland maintained complete sovereignty in her domestic affairs, but she was careful to accommodate the Soviet Union in her foreign and defense policies. She was a good neighbor to Russia, as the Baltic states should strive to be good neighbors to Russia now. Their goal should be to create a situation where it is more in Russia’s interests for the Baltics to remain independent than to reincorporate them into the Russian empire.

I realize this advice is unpalatable to the Baltic peoples. Half a century of Soviet occupation has left a residue of hatred for all things Russian. But grand strategy must be based on facts and reason, not emotion. The most important fact is geography. Geography dictates that the Baltic states must accommodate Russian interests, whether they want to or not. If they refuse, then the recent example of Georgia may have more relevance than anyone would wish.

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Mr. William S. Lind
On War #272: A Deeper Global Crisis

William S. Lind  
August 18, 2008

Despite the recent drop in the price of oil, the world economy is still sailing into troubled waters. The U.S. credit crisis is intensifying and spreading to Britain. Europe is moving toward recession. The international financial system continues to depend on mountains of debt. If the financial panic the Federal Reserve Bank has thus far managed to stave off materializes, we could witness a meltdown of historic proportions.

What does all this portend for Fourth Generation warfare? Regrettably, it means the omens are favorable for some non-state entities, especially those which compete with the state in the delivery of vital social services.

Here we must remind ourselves that the root and origin of Fourth Generation war is a crisis of legitimacy of the state. One of the functions the state is now expected to perform, in free market as well as socialist countries, is to ensure that the economy functions as well. A world-wide financial panic followed by a world recession or depression would mean the state was failing in one of its core functions. That in turn would further diminish the legitimacy of the state.

Wilsonians and other “democracy” hucksters think that a state’s legitimacy is a function of elections. Even in established democracies such as the United States, those elections are becoming empty forms, political kabuki in which citizens are not given an opportunity to vote against the New Class. In most of the world elections do not even determine which collection of thieves will next get to plunder the treasury. The game is blatantly rigged.

In poor countries, the state’s legitimacy is more a function of its ability to provide vital services than the election of ju-ju. Often, those services include allowing people to eat. Most people’s diets depend on subsidized state rations, such as the bread ration in Egypt. Recent riots there when the issue of cheap bread was disrupted showed the potential power of hungry mobs.

A world-wide depression would cause hardship in rich countries. In poor countries, it would quickly lead to widespread starvation. The state would no longer be able to provide the subsidized rations millions of its citizens rely on. The rise in world food prices already underway would put states in a double squeeze: the state’s revenues would be falling at the same time that the difference between market and subsidized prices was growing. Add in global
financial panic where credit dries up and we will see the number of failed states rise rapidly.

In the Great Depression of the 1930s, states’ economic failure brought governments and even systems of government, including democracy, into question. In both Europe and the United States, Communism and Fascism gained certain popularity because in the Soviet Union, Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, everyone had a job. But the state itself was not challenged, because there was no alternative to the state.

Now, there is. Intelligent Fourth Generation entities, ranging from some drug gangs through organizations such as Hezbollah, are competing directly with the state for people’s primary loyalty. If those Fourth Generation entities can provide basic services, including food, when the state can no longer do so, they will gain the legitimacy that state is losing. In Fourth Generation war, that is a bigger win than any potential military victory.

In terms of 4GW theory, the lessons here are two. First, a global economic crisis is likely to lead to a much deeper crisis, a widespread existential crisis of the state itself. Second, the Fourth Generation entities that benefit from this crisis will be those that provide basic services more effectively than can the state. Once again, just as from a military perspective, we see that the “Hezbollah model” is the most promising model for Fourth Generation, non-state organizations. That model includes a highly competent military that can defeat state armed forces. But it employs its military capability sparingly, fighting only when attacked or when a low-risk, high-payoff military opportunity presents itself, which will be seldom. For 4GW entities as for states, the outcome of wars will remain unpredictable. Instead, the Hezbollah model focuses day-to-day on providing services to the people, building its legitimacy vis-à-vis the state and gaining the population’s primary loyalty. At some point, that loyalty will become so strong that not even military defeat by a state’s armed forces will destroy it.

Notes:

1. Do not assume the war between Russia and Georgia is over. So long as Mr. Saakashvili remains Georgia’s President, he will continue to challenge and taunt Russia. As the last week has made plain, he will be encouraged to do so by the Bush White House, his partner in folly. If Russia does not force his removal from office now, it will have to come back and finish the job.

2. The will no On War column next week, as I will be in Ostland.

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What interests does the United States have at stake in the war between Russia and Georgia? Only one: that we remain out of it.

It almost passes belief to think that the Bush administration, bogged down in two wars and planning a third (with Iran), might move toward a confrontation with Russia. Yet that is what the White House appears to be doing. The August 11 Cleveland Plain Dealer reported that

President Bush called the violence unacceptable and Vice President Dick Cheney…said Russia’s actions in Georgia “must not go unanswered”…

Asked to explain Cheney’s comment, White House spokesman Gordon Johndroe said, ”It means it must not stand.”

That phrase should send cold chills down the back of every American. It precisely echoes President George H.W. Bush’s statement in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, a statement that led to war. The White House cannot be unaware of the parallel, which means it is threatening war with Russia.

Have these people gone utterly mad? It is doubtful we should risk nuclear war for Alabama, much less Georgia.

A few facts are in order here. First, the current conflict was started not by Russia but by Georgia, which foolishly attacked the Russian dependency of South Ossetia. Did Georgia make this suicidal move with prior assurance of American backing? If so, Washington provoked the conflict, which would be as great a crime as the Bush administration lying us into war with Iraq.

Second, Georgia clearly lies inside Russia’s sphere of influence and as far outside America’s as it is possible to get.

Third, there is nothing America can do to defend Georgia except threaten nuclear war. We could send in a small “tripwire” force of a battalion or two – God help us if we do – and dare the Russians to attack it. But if they called the bluff – and I think they would – what then? It is impossible for the United States to wage conventional war with Russia in her own backyard. We would have to go nuclear,
or back down and accept defeat. It is all too easy to guess which alternative the Bush administration would select.

President Bush has used Georgia to taunt and humiliate Russia, even putting Georgia up for NATO membership, which the Europeans were wise enough to block. This folly was part of a larger strategic blunder, going back to the Clinton administration, of treating Russia as an opponent despite the fall of Communism.

That blunder is now blowing up in our face, as Russia in turn uses war with Georgia to teach America a lesson about the dangers of overextension and the price to be paid for humiliating a Great Power. Prudence suggests we swallow our medicine and profit by it, tempering our ambitions and our arrogance with a dose of reality.

But under the King of Misrule, folly remains the order of the day. The Bush White House tells itself American power knows no limits. All that is required is that they show sufficient “will,” and the rest of the world will buckle.

Not this time. Russia has taken all it is going to take.

It beggars the imagination to think that America could find itself in a nuclear confrontation with a post-Soviet Russia. But if the White House acts in accordance with its rhetoric, the next few weeks or even days may witness just such a strategic catastrophe.

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On War #270: Changing Horses in Mid-Stream

By William S. Lind

As the neo-cons celebrate a “victory” in Iraq that has yet to be won, they also proclaim the downfall of Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Mahdi Army militia and staunch opponent of the American occupation. The headline of the August 5 Wall Street Journal announced, “Radical Iraq Cleric in Retreat.”

Well, maybe. But I think something else is happening to the Mahdi Army, and it is a development of more than passing interest to those concerned with 4GW
theory. I think Muqtada al-Sadr is attempting to transition from leading a 4GW, non-state entity, the Mahdi Army, to taking over a state.

Like all changes of horses in mid-stream, the operation is delicate and can easily go awry. But Mr. Sadr so far seems to be making all the right moves. As the Wall Street Journal piece reports,

Mr. Sadr began moving away from military operations when he ordered a cease-fire last August after Mahdi Army members clashed with government forces in the southern city of Karbala during a Shiite religious holiday. The fighting represented growing rivalry between Sadr followers and supporters of the main Shiite parties in government … In February Mr. Sadr extended the cease-fire for an additional six months.

If Muqtada al-Sadr wants to rule Iraq, he cannot let himself and his organization be drawn into Shiite-on-Shiite violence. That would narrow his base when he needs to broaden it, and would also alienate the large majority of Iraqis who want order and security, not more war. The cease-fire and its extension were wise.

The Journal quotes from a new brochure issued by the Mahdi Army leadership that lays out Sadr’s next move:

(The) brochure … states that the Mahdi Army will now be guided by Shiite spirituality instead of anti-American militancy. The group will focus on education, religion and social justice... The brochure also states that it “is not allowed to use arms at all.”

Here, the Mahdi Army is clearly taking a page out of Hezbollah’s book. Hezbollah’s strength comes from its effectiveness and honesty in delivering services to the community that the state cannot provide. The Journal quotes Kenneth Pollack of Brookings as saying, “If the government fails to deliver on basic services and other needs of the Iraqis, Sadr followers could use their new organization to tell people they should look to them as the voices of change.” Precisely so. This is a key element of the struggle for legitimacy, which Mr. Sadr seems to understand will be decisive in determining who controls post-occupation Iraq.

Mr. Sadr has promised that small, well-trained elements of the Mahdi Army will continue to attack the Americans, but so far he has held off launching such attacks. That too is wise. He can maintain his anti-American credentials, another key to legitimacy, with less risk by working politically for the Obama-al-Maliki plan, under which the American occupation troops would leave Iraq by 2010. If I were in Sadr’s position, I would be organizing massive street demonstrations to demand withdrawal by 2010 be the basis of any new status of forces agreement with the Americans. That is a win-win position. If the Iraqi government demands American withdrawal on that timetable, Sadr can claim the
credit, and if al-Maliki crumbles under American pressure and allows the occupation to continue indefinitely, al-Maliki loses his only chance to gain some legitimacy.

The Mahdi Army will retain its ability to go to war with the Americans if it has to. But that capability is most useful as a “fleet in being,” maintained as a threat but not employed. The threat gives Mr. Sadr more leverage than armed action would buy him, because the Mahdi Army is not strong enough to force the Americans out and it could suffer a military defeat. More, war with the Americans would bring more chaos and suffering to the Iraqi people, for which they might blame Sadr.

Sadr’s change of horses in mid-stream may of course fail. His movement could come apart under the strain, as militant elements that want to fight the Americans split off. His failure is not in America’s best interest, not only because it would mean more American casualties but also because it would undermine the chance for a new state to arise in Iraq. I continue to think Muqtada al-Sadr represents that best available leader for a new Iraqi state, because only someone who has opposed the occupation can have legitimacy. America only wins in Iraq if and when a new state emerges there, a real state, not a fig-leaf to cover the reality of continued American control.

From the standpoint of Fourth Generation War theory, the Mahdi Army’s attempt to move from its status as a 4GW, non-state entity to an organization that can create and control a new Iraqi state is a hopeful sign. If it succeeds, other 4GW entities may be tempted to do the same. That brings them back within the state framework, a positive development in terms of the interests of the international state system. It is the success and continuation of that system that is America’s most vital interest in the face of Fourth Generation War. Not all 4GW entities will take that track, nor would it be in their interest to do so. But if even some can be drawn back into the framework of the state, the 4GW threat will diminish.

Washington will never see it this way, because Washington cannot think strategically. But those who can should pray that Muqtada al-Sadr continues to make all the right moves.

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On War# 269: Why McCain is Wrong
By William S. Lind
July 28, 2008

Senator John McCain’s position on the situation in Iraq is wrong on two counts, which means his criticism of Senator Obama is also wrong. The twin pillars of McCain’s assessment of the war are a) the surge worked and b) because the surge worked we are now winning. Neither of those views is based in fact.

The first represents the long-recognized logical fallacy known as post hoc ergo propter hoc, i.e., because one event occurred after another, it was a consequence of the first event. Because the cock crows before sunrise, he thinks he makes the sun come up. Because violence in Iraq dropped after the surge, McCain claims the surge caused the reduction in violence. He is quick to add that he supported the surge at the time, which Obama did not. In the real world, neither rooster nor Senator has quite so much reason to strut upon his dunghill.

The reduction in violence in Iraq, which is likely to prove temporary, has four causes, the least of which is the surge.

In order of importance, they are:

1. Al Qaeda’s alienation of much of its Sunni base, a consequence of its attempt to impose its Puritanical version of Islam before it won the war and consolidated power. This is a common error of revolutionary movements. The smart ones back off and take a “broad front” strategy until the war is won, at which point they cut their “moderate” allies’ throats. Al Qaeda’s non-hierarchical structure, coupled with the message it employs to recruit, may prevent it from adopting a broad front strategy. If so, that may prove a fatal weakness.
2. A change in policy by the U.S. Marines in Anbar Province whereby they stopped attacking the Sunni population and started paying it instead. As the FMFM 1-A argues, in 4GW, cash is your most important supporting arm. The Marines’ new policy, which has now spread to the U.S. Army and beyond Anbar, enabled the locals to turn on al Qaeda and its brutally enforced Puritanism.
3. General Petraeus’s decision to move U.S. troops off their FOB’s and into populated areas where they could protect the population instead of merely protecting themselves.
4. Last and least, the surge, which made more troops available for #3. Absent the other three developments, the surge would have achieved nothing.

In his first assertion, Senator McCain is claiming credit where credit is not due. In his second, that we are winning in Iraq, he fails to understand what “winning” means in a Fourth Generation conflict.
The current reduction in violence in Iraq does not mean we are winning. Nor does al Qaeda's incipient defeat mean we are winning. We win only if a state re-emerges, the state we destroyed by our invasion. A reduction in violence and the defeat of al Qaeda are necessary preconditions for the re-emergence of a state, but they are not sufficient to ensure it.

A state will be re-established in Iraq only if and when authority comes from a person's position in the state hierarchy, e.g., governor, minister, mayor, army or police commander, functionary, etc. Services must also come from the state. At present, as best as I can determine, this is happening seldom. If at all. Rather, authority derives from non-state bases such as relationship to a tribe, clan or militia, and services are provided by the U.S. military, NGOs, and Iraqi militias or religious organizations. An Iraqi who holds a nominal state office may have authority, but his authority is not a product of his state office. A local Iraqi government may provide some services, but the government in Baghdad is seldom the source of the resources or authority to provide those services.

In fact, the relative peace now prevailing in Iraq is largely the product of deals the U.S. military has made with real non-state Iraqi authority figures. These deals were both necessary and prudent, but they represent de facto acceptance of the reality that there is no state.

So McCain is wrong on both counts. The fact that a Presidential candidate is fundamentally wrong on so important a subject as the war in Iraq is disturbing. More disturbing is the nature of the errors. Both represent carryovers of Bush administration practices. The first, stating that the surge is the cause of reduced violence, represents the Bush White House's cynical practice of assuming the American people are too stupid to understand anything even slightly complex. The second, claiming we are winning the Iraq war, represents President Bush's policy of making statements that are blatantly at odds with reality and figuring that if the truth catches up with them, it will do so too late to alter the course of events. It was the latter practice that got us into the Iraq war in the first place.

Together, the twin pillars of McCain's Iraq assessment, both built of sand, give substance to the Democrats' charge that a McCain Presidency would represent a third term for George Bush. They also raise the question of whether they are honest mistakes or, like the arguments the Bush White House used to sell the Iraq conflict, simply lies. One would hate to think that McCain's "straight talk" comes from a forked tongue, but the parallels with Bush administration practices are too obvious to overlook.

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On War #268: Evidence

By William S. Lind
July 23, 2008

Two recent news stories added important evidence to issues raised in On War columns. The first concerns a Fourth Generation war taking place on America’s doorstep, that between the Mexican state and drug gangs. The July 14 Financial Times, one of the world’s best newspapers, reported that the head of Mexico’s intelligence agency told a small group of foreign media recently: “Drug traffickers have become the principal threat because they are trying to take over the power of the state.”

Mr. Valdes said the gangs…had co-opted many members of local police forces, the judiciary, and government entities….

Those efforts, he said, could now also be targeting federal institutions such as Congress itself. “Congress is not exempt…we do not rule out the possibility that drug money is involved in the campaigns of some legislators,” Mr. Valdes said.

The news here is not the “possibility” that some Mexican legislators are on drug traffickers’ payrolls. The news is that a prominent Mexican official, one whose position gives him a good look at what is going on, was willing to go public about the threat to the state itself. The fact that he took that risk suggests the cancer is far advanced. For intelligence officers, going public is usually an act of desperation.

From the perspective of 4GW theory, it is beginning to look as if the drug traffickers/Hezbollah model may be more sophisticated and more successful than the al Qaeda model. Al Qaeda seemingly is on the ropes in Iraq, not because of the “surge” but because of its own blunders. To at least some extent those blunders proceed from its strategy, which faces the state with a life-or-death struggle. In contrast, all Hezbollah and the Mexican drug gangs demand is a deal with the state: we’ll leave you alone if you leave us alone. The state’s real sovereignty bleeds away, but the structures remain, allowing the politicians to do what they want, i.e. continue to line their own pockets.

The Lebanese state recently cut a deal with Hezbollah along exactly these lines, and the Mexican state will have to do the same at some point. The Financial Times reports that under the Merida Initiative, the U.S. will give Mexico $400 million this year for counter-narcotics operations, but the Mexican state is already
too deeply suborned to use such aid effectively. Mexican politicians, cops, and military officers will happily accept the U.S. money with their right hands while their left hands take the drug gangs’ payoffs. If the Mexican state wants to restore order, it will have to offer the gangs a “live and let live” deal.

The other story moves from tragedy to farce. It seems Iraq’s pretend Prime Minister, Mr. al-Maliki, gave an interview to Der Spiegel in which he said Obama’s timetable for pulling U.S. troops out of Iraq is about the right one. Not surprisingly, the Bush White House went ballistic. I suspect Iraqi officials had not heard the f-word used so many times in one sentence since they last had to pass a roadblock manned by Marine lance corporals.

Here the Bush administration is hoist on its own petard. On the one hand, it wants “democracy” in Iraq. On the other hand, it wants to keep U.S. troops there indefinitely, using Iraq as a base from which the U.S. can dominate the region. But the Iraqi people want the American troops to go home, so “democracy” leads to an American withdrawal at Iraq’s demand. Squaring that circle would take a Bismarck, and Miss Rice isn’t even a Holstein.

Poor Mr. al-Maliki, whose only goal is survival, is left twisting in the wind, an awkward position for a marionette. He remains dependent upon American support, without which he would be either an exile or dead in 48 hours. But he must also grasp at such shreds of legitimacy as he can, which requires setting a date by which the Americans will leave. The two requirements contradict each other fatally. Meanwhile, Muqtada al-Sadr, whose demand for an American withdrawal is unambiguous, follows Iraq’s “government” like Captain Hook’s crocodile. I suspect that if he survives, he will in time enjoy his dinner.

One man could cut the knot and free both Iraq and America from its entanglements. Were Ayatollah Sistani to say what Mr. Maliki said, that Obama’s timetable for withdrawal is about right, no one could gainsay him. The Shiite Iraqi government dare not contradict him, nor could George W. Bush (or John McCain) without risking all-out war between American troops in Iraq and the Shiites. For the sake of both countries, let’s hope he is listening.

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The war as in life, the secret to success is having a wide range of options. That was the basis of von Moltke’s approach to operational art, as opposed to the Schlieffen school’s myopic focus on one option. The list of commanders and nations whose single option failed is a long one.

Regrettably, whoever takes over as America’s President and Commander in Chief next January will face a rapidly narrowing range of options. With the fall of Communism and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, America was given an almost limitless range of options. A series of bad decisions since that time have reduced that range to a paltry few, none of them particularly attractive. Running the narrows with a ship of state is a perilous enterprise.

In foreign affairs, most of the rest of the world is now hoping to see America take a fall. We have alienated the Russians, irritated the Chinese and dragged the Europeans into a “war against terror” that finds little support outside ruling elites. Virtually every European public would vote to pull out of Afghanistan tomorrow if given the chance. The elites go along only because of a residual fear of “losing the Americans,” much as Berlin feared “losing the Austrians” if she did not support Vienna in 1914. Both were allied to a corpse, which at some point even the wizened moles who govern Europe may discern.

Militarily, the US has managed the contortionist’s feat of getting various body parts stuck in different pits of quicksand. Washington counts on Iraq gaining stability, but the absence of a state means it can go unstable again overnight. The Afghan war is going the way Afghan wars do, as the Pashtun slowly get their act together to push the occupier out. Spillover from the war in Afghanistan is destabilizing Pakistan, with Washington accelerating the process by putting impossible demands on that country’s leaders. Finally, the likelihood of an attack on Iran by the US or by Israel acting as a proxy grows, which would in turn pitch Iraq back into chaos as all the Shiite militias ganged up on us.

More, the money is about to run out. We seem to have forgotten that no activity the state can undertake is more expensive than war. If a tanking economy cuts off the money flow, what comes next? The Sunday, July 12 Cleveland Plain Dealer quotes a local investment advisor saying, “A year ago, I would have discounted the scenario of the next depression. After what I’ve seen this year, I don’t discount anything anymore.” The Fed is trying to head off a full-scale financial panic by turning itself into a pawnshop, but no one knows how long that trick will work. The whole Ponzi scheme that is the current US economy still depends on an inflow of $2 billion in foreign, money daily. What happens if, or when, that flow ceases?
Were American politics as sensible as the average flock of turkeys in a thunderstorm, the public would be asking those running for President just how they expected to steer through this narrows filled with rocks and shoals. Instead, all the public wants are more nostrums, more empty promises that somehow Big Brother will enable them to party on. Senator Obama and Senator McCain vie in proposing programs that cost more billions, to come from … where? Why, from the printing presses of course. Those presses are churning out dollars so fast already that we can feel the rumble all the way across the country — and the world.

The bottom line reached by printing-press money is always the same: runaway inflation. Inflation is almost always one of the consequences of war, and it can be the worst, worse even than losing. If it impoverishes the middle class, the country has little if any base from which to recover.

For America to run the narrows successfully, it needs to act boldly, not to find the one course through, but to widen its range of options while it still can. That means getting out of at least a few of the quicksand pits — certainly not entering any new ones — while lowering our foreign policy ambitions, cutting government spending until the budget is in surplus, improving our balance of trade to bolster the dollar and getting unhooked for foreign oil. It will hurt, but not nearly so badly as a combination of defeat, depression and hyper-inflation.

Would anyone happen to know Count Witte’s home number?

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On War #266: Viva Colombia!

By William S. Lind
July 14, 2008

The war between the Colombian state and the Marxist FARC is not a Fourth Generation conflict, because it is fought within the framework of the state. The Colombian government seeks to maintain control of the state, while the FARC want to replace it. It’s all about who runs the state, not offering alternatives to the state.
Nonetheless, some lessons for Fourth Generation wars may be drawn, because
the way in which the war is fought — a guerilla-style insurgency — similar to
many (not all) Fourth Generation conflicts. The recent successful rescue of
hostages long held by the FARC is a case in point. It was a brilliant victory for the
Colombian government and armed forces, on all levels, including the moral level.
What might the U.S. Armed Forces learn from it that they could apply in Iraq,
Afghanistan, and (we fear) elsewhere?

First, it illustrated the advantage mental cleverness has over brute firepower. The
Colombians’ previous foray, the aerial bombing of a FARC camp in Ecuador,
blew up in their face. In contrast, the hostage rescue made the Colombians look
both brave and smart and the FARC appear to be the Three Stooges. The FARC
was not bombed or blown up, it was outsmarted. It has no martyrs to off the
public or its supporters, just its clownish face covered in pie. The FARC was
made a laughingstock, which is the worst blow that can be inflicted upon any
political organization.

Second, the combination of outsmarting the FARC with the fact that no one on
either side was hurt, much less killed, allows this action to count as an unmixed
victory, a rarity in this kind of war. Usually, a victory at the physical level
generates blowback on the mental and moral level. Not here. It was a real triple-
play. The fact that the testimony of the rescued hostages made the FARC, not
the government forces, into the bully adds to the score.

Third, the operation was a strategic success because it was a Colombian, not an
American, operation. Had American forces gone in and done exactly the same
thing, the action would have made the Colombian government look weak, not
strong. It would have undermined rather than strengthened its legitimacy. Most
Latin Americans would have seen the rescue as one more humiliation of fellow
Hispanics by the North Americans, and they would have identified with the FARC
rather than laughing at it.

The reason the FARC now seems to be on the ropes and, one hopes, going
down for the count is that it is fighting a Colombian enemy, not an American
enemy. As several observers have noted, while almost no foreign occupiers have
defeated insurgencies, the local state has sometimes won.

I am sure the United States played some role in the Colombian hostage rescue,
but for once we seem to have been smart enough to keep our mouth shut about
it. Whoever is running the show there for us — I think it is an admiral — seems to
understand the value of a small footprint. We had another admiral who knew his
business running the show for a while in the Persian Gulf, Admiral Fallon. The
Bush White House fired him for the mortal sin of committing truth, a sin his
successor is not likely to repeat.
All of these points relate directly to the Fourth Generation wars we are enmeshed in, in Iraq and Afghanistan. Outsmarting and embarrassing our opponents, holding them up to ridicule by the locals, is far more effective than killing them. But only locals can do the outsmarting and humiliating, with some discreet help from us behind the scenes. If we do it openly, we’re still Goliath and our local opponents remain David, which means they win morally. The local government can only gain legitimacy from its own successes, not from victories won on its behalf by foreign invaders and occupiers. Such “victories” diminish rather than enhance its legitimacy, the currency in which gain or loss in 4GW is measured.

I think it is safe to say that if several American divisions were today fighting the FARC in Colombia, the FARC would be gaining strength, not withering away. (It will soon be time, if it is not time already, for the Colombian government to offer the FARC a very generous peace, the all-necessary “golden bridge.”) It follows that so long as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are American wars, we will continue to lose them. Dare we hope the next American president realizes that “victory” in both places requires not mindless “staying the course” but American withdrawal?

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On War #265: The Necessary War

By William S. Lind
July 2, 2008

Pat Buchanan’s new book, Churchill, Hitler, and the Unnecessary War: How Britain Lost Its Empire and the West Lost the World, is causing a stir, which is a good thing. Buchanan argues that both World War I and World War II were unnecessary wars; that Britain bears at least as much responsibility for both as Germany; that Winston Churchill was “the indispensable man” in reducing Britain from a world-encircling empire to “a cottage by the sea-to live out her declining years;” and that the consequence of the Western civil war that encompassed both World Wars (I would add the Cold War as well) has been the fall of the West.

Buchanan is correct on all counts. His book represents a counterattack in the necessary war, the war to introduce Americans to genuine history. At present, most Americans know only a comic-book version of history, one in which
Germany deliberately started both World Wars as part of a drive to conquer the world, a drive stopped when valiant American armies defeated the German army. And, oh yes, some Brit named Churchill beat the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain. Thanks to the victories of the freedom-loving allies, we now live in the best of all possible worlds, where everyone can be a “democracy.”

Nothing of the comic-book version of history is true, not even the Battle of Britain bit. Curiously, the key British records from the Battle of Britain remain classified “secret;” it seems the RAF was on the ropes. Buchanan goes after the rest of it with spirit and zest, demolishing it utterly. As Colonel House told Woodrow Wilson after talking extensively with Kaiser Wilhelm in 1915, the Kaiser neither wanted nor expected war. I have seen the last, desperate telegram he sent the Tsar, trying to avoid a general European war. He was mocked for years before the war by many Germans as the “Peace Kaiser” because in crisis after crisis he backed down. Kaiser Wilhelm knew, as did Theodore Roosevelt, that a World War would cost the West its world dominance.

Because World War I was unnecessary, so was World War II, which was really a resumption of World War I. Buchanan goes further and argues that had Britain and France not offered a wildly imprudent guarantee to Poland in the spring of 1939, there would have been no war in the West. Hitler wanted to fight Stalin, not the Western powers. That too is true, but Buchanan makes one assumption I am not so sure of, namely that Germany would have defeated the USSR. As it was, World War II was fought mostly in the east, and it was the Red Army, not the comparatively small British and American armies, that defeated the Wehrmact. Could Stalin have done it alone? Maybe.

In both World Wars, the U.S. came out a winner because it left most of the fighting to others. In World War I, Germany was defeated by the (under international law, illegal) starvation blockade. The French army bore the brunt of the war in the west. Buchanan’s debunking of Churchill is thorough and valuable. Churchill was brilliant, forceful, imprudent, and often wrong. A howler for war both in 1914 and 1939, he may not have sought to preside over the dissolution of the British Empire, but it was his own fault he did so. Prudence, which means evaluating prospective actions in terms of their probable long-term effects, is conservatives’ first political principle, and the debacles created by Churchill illustrate why. At heart, he was far more Whig than Tory. Burke would have loathed him.

Buchanan’s historical revisionism is welcome on several counts. The neo-cons have elevated an unhistorical Churchill into the patron of interventionism, selling him in Washington and elsewhere like saints’ bones. It is a snare for the simple, with George W. Bush numbered among them.

Debunking comic-book history and replacing it with the real thing is vital if America is to avoid the dual trap of cultural Marxism and Brave New World. As
ideologues and totalitarians everywhere have long known, if you can cut a people off from their past, you can do whatever you want with them. We need a similar debunking of the comic book history of the Civil War now fed to Americans, in which it was all about slavery.

Buchanan’s relevance comes from the sad fact that America is now duplicating Churchill’s central error, imprudence. We have entered into two wars with little thought for their long-term consequences. Washington hands out guarantees, similar to Britain’s to Poland, all over the world like penny candy, with no consideration of where they may lead. We give less thought to the potential future consequences of our actions than the average Mayfly. All that matters is receiving the applause of dunces and pleasing the SMEC.

Britain did the same thing twice, in 1914 and 1939. It is perhaps not too much to infer that Little England will be followed by Little America.

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On War #264: The Yellow Press

By William S. Lind
June 23, 2008

A person my age has watched many things decline in America, and few get better. As one of my neighbors says, everything good is gone or going. In that category we must now include good reporting. When I started work in Washington in 1973, it was axiomatic that a newspaper reporter talked to many sources for any story. The story, in turn, reflected a number of viewpoints and perspectives. No reporter worth his bourbon would have dreamed of just printing some press release put out by the government.

But that is now what they all seem to do, especially in covering the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Forgetting that the phrase “to lie like a bulletin” is military in origin the reference is to bulletins issued by Napoleon’s grande armée — they print verbatim the happy talk the U.S. military is obliged by the Bush administration to spew. To the degree the war in Iraq is still covered, the American public is assured over and over that “violence is down.” For the moment, that is true, but the implication that we are on a roll is not true. Fourth Generation wars do not move in linear fashion. Violence is down because the
constantly shifting network of deals and alliances among Iraq's warlords has created a stable interlude. Those alliances will continue to shift, and as they do so violence will rise again. How many reporters are asking the talking dog majors who brief the press the central strategic question, namely whether there is any evidence a state is re-emerging in Iraq? As best I can tell, none. The same number appears to be trying to answer that question from other, more reliable sources.

The reporting on Afghanistan is if anything worse. On Sunday, June 22, the Cleveland Plain Dealer, a paper I like, printed an AP article under the headline, “Marines drive Taliban from volatile province,” namely Helmand. The article itself more modestly claims victory in one Helmand town, Garmser. If the 24th MEU has driven the Taliban out of Helmand province, I'll eat my yurt. One town, maybe, but what does taking a town mean in a guerrilla war? When the Marines leave, which they will, the Taliban will return.

The fact of the matter is, the whole NATO/American effort in Afghanistan is circling the drain. The American papers should be full of in-depth, multi-sourced stories about the war there. A friend just back from Britain reports that the British press is full of just such stories. In one recent ten-day period, the Brits lost nine soldiers killed, including their first woman. Was that reported anywhere in the U.S. press?

What lies behind the decline in the quality of American reporting? Cutbacks in the size of newsrooms are part of the answer. As the electronic image replaces the printed word, newspapers are dying. To those who know that perceiving reality requires more than shadows on the cave wall, that is bad news.

Lazy reporters are another part of the answer. It is easy to print the bulletins. Reporters have always been lazy, but now their editors let them get away with it. Not too many decades ago, any reporter who single-sourced a story would have been sent back on the street to get more sources, with a richness of invective editors seldom lacked.

But the biggest reason, I suspect, is intellectual cowardice. After the defeat in Vietnam, many supporters of the war blamed the press for our failure. By printing the bad news, the press supposedly undermined popular support for the war and thereby caused our defeat. It's poppycock, of course. The Vietnam War was lost early in the game when MACV, at the demand of General William Depuy, ordered an end to efforts to control the populated coastal lowlands in favor of fighting formal battles against enemy main force units in the highlands. Those units were sent there as bait, which MACV took.

But the American press was scarred by the accusations. Now, it is afraid to be accused of “not supporting the troops” if it does anything but print the bulletins. So the American public gets the mushroom treatment, and two failed wars
continue ad infinitum. When the roof falls in both in Iraq and in Afghanistan, the shock will be considerable. America’s yellow press will deserve no small share of the blame.

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On War #262: Pyrrhic Victory

William S. Lind
June 9, 2008

Robert Doughty’s Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War, published in 2005, completes his trilogy on the French Army from 1914 to 1940. Both of his other books, The Seeds of Disaster, which is the definitive history of French Army doctrinal development between the wars, and The Breaking Point, the story of the French defeat at Sedan in 1940 when the Second and Third Generations of modern war met head-on, are in the canon. For those new to 4GW literature, the canon is the list of seven books which, read in the correct order, take the reader from the First Generation into the Fourth. It can be found as an appendix to FMFM 1-A, Fourth Generation War, on the DNI website.

Those who characterize the French as “cheese-eating surrender monkeys” would do well to read Pyrrhic Victory. France bore the main burden of World War I on the Western Front, the weight of which would have crippled any country. France lost almost 1,400,000 men killed or missing in action from a population of only 39 million, plus another 4,000,000 wounded. On average, she lost 890 soldiers killed every day from August of 1914 to November, 1918. Adjusting for population, that would roughly equal America suffering 7000 soldiers killed daily for more than four years. Does anyone think today’s American society could stand that?

Pyrrhic Victory is relevant to the American armed forces today on several grounds. First, it is the story of the development of methodical battle, which was largely a creation of General Petain (who comes across in this book as France’s most thoughtful general). The U.S. armed services learned methodical battle from the French Army during and after World War I, and it remains the heart of American military doctrine today. As Doughty writes, “Within the constraints of the methodical battle, rigid centralization and strict obedience — not decentralization, initiative, or flexibility — became the bywords of the officer
corps.” So they remain today. Several years ago, an instructor at the U.S. Army Armor School at Ft. Knox began his first lecture by saying, “I don’t know why I have to teach you all this old French crap, but I do.”

The answer to that captain’s question is also illustrated in Pyrrhic Victory. Militaries have enormous continuity over time. Prior to World War I, the French Army’s doctrine was to take the offensive under all circumstances. That doctrine killed almost half-a-million French soldiers in the four months from August to November of 1914 and nearly cost France the war then. Nonetheless, it kept rearing its head again and again throughout the war, despite Pétain’s bitter and justified resistance. Reincarnated in the Nivelle offensive in April, 1917, it failed again so disagreeably that the French Army mutinied.

The common picture of World War I is of dunderheaded inability to learn on the part of all participants. It was certainly not true of the Germans, but Doughty’s book tends to confirm the image for the Allies. The French, for all their slowness is giving up the offensive á outrance, nonetheless learned faster than the British, Russians or Americans, all of whom seemed to measure success in own casualties. In the AEF’s appallingly bad staff work lies the origin of another outdated habit of the U.S. military, the fixation of its schools on developing staff officers rather than commanders. The astounding degree to which the early 21st century U.S. armed forces still revolve around World War I is evident to historians but apparently invisible to American soldiers and Marines.

There is also a lesson about learning in the Germany Army in Pyrrhic Victory, though it must be read between the lines. Doughty makes clear just how close the great German offensive of 1918 came to success. Why did it fail? As General Max Hoffman, one of the best operational minds in the First World War German Army, hints in his memoirs, German operational reserves were mal-deployed. That, I think, was at least in part a consequence of Germany’s fixation of developing the tactics that broke the deadlock of the trenches. Focusing on just one aspect of the challenge, the Germans neglected and thereby forgot some of their expertise at operational art — fatally, since in war a higher level dominates a lower.

These lessons are all relevant to the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan today, because they are lessons about how militaries learn, or fail to, or learn one thing but forget another. Could someone someday write a book about our current wars with the title Pyrrhic Victory? No, because we are not going to win those wars. Is there such a thing as Pyrrhic defeat?

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As the U.S. remains fixated on two Fourth Generation wars half a world away, in Iraq and Afghanistan, 4GW is knocking at our back door. The death spiral of the Mexican state appears to be accelerating. To quote just one illustrative bit of evidence, the Cleveland Plain Dealer recently reported that:

Seven Mexican federal agents looking for an arms cache died early Tuesday in a shootout with gunmen in the northern state of Sinaloa, officials said. The agents came under fire when they went to search a home in Culiacan, the state capital. Four other agents were wounded. At least one gunman was reported killed during the confrontation, which came as a wave of drug-related violence has washed over Mexico.

The fact that seven government agents were killed and four wounded while only one 4GW fighter died suggests the raid was tipped off. The Mexican security forces have been so thoroughly penetrated by criminal gangs of every sort that the government’s hands have been cut off. It may want to reassert the state’s authority, but it has no uncompromised means of doing so.

Here we see a model of 4GW that is likely to be much more common than what we are now fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the state has disappeared, despite our frenetic efforts to make its corpse gibber and dance (the al-Maliki and Karzai “governments”). Most 4GW entities, unlike al Qaeda, have no need to overthrow the state. They just need to render it impotent to interfere with their activities (as Hezbollah has done in Lebanon).

This will generally best be accomplished quietly, by taking relevant aspects of the state from within. Those aspects may include the security forces, which usually are not difficult to penetrate; leading politicians, who can be bought, bullied or both; and at least elements of the media. Mexican drug gangs have been effective in killing local political leaders and media figures who have opposed them. Others can be counted on to get the message.

The result is not the disappearance of the state but its hollowing out. To the outside world it remains a state, with all the sovereign rights of a state. Internally, it becomes a Potemkin village, a stage-setting on which dramas like “elections” can be played out while 4GW entities go about real business. Often, that business will include much of the country's economy, which the state dares not throttle even if it could.
As I have noted previously, operating within a hollowed-out state may benefit many 4GW entities more than replacing the state. A Potemkin state protects 4GW organizations from foreign attack; the U.S. cannot go after drug gangs within Mexico except in a surreptitious manner, because doing so would violate Mexican sovereignty. The penetrated Mexican government will ensure that any “cooperation” with U.S. anti-drug efforts will not go beyond a “check the box” level. Everyone benefits from maintaining the fiction of a state: the 4GW gangs, the Mexican economy, the bank accounts of Mexican politicians and the U.S. government, which can tell the rubes back home we are “fighting the drug war” in what amounts to shadow boxing.

Our continued fixation on just one 4GW threat, that from Islam, in a geographically remote part of the world has left our back door wide open. Like an aviator who doesn’t check six, we have set ourselves up to get hosed. In effect, to borrow from General Patton’s famous metaphor, we have grabbed our own nose and presented our tail to our opponent for a good kicking. Anyone with the misfortune to live on or near our southern border, or have responsibility for security in that area, will attest that it hurts.

All this and much more is the price we are paying for our twin Syracuse Expeditions, the quixotic crusades to force “democracy” (really Brave New World) on Iraq and Afghanistan. America desperately needs leadership that will at least attempt to reconnect with reality, including the fact that the U.S.-Mexican border does not presently exist. Those who insist on keeping their head in the clouds will find their ass on the ground, shot down in flames.

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May 27, 2008
When the world was young and hope dared live in Washington, a small group of people put together something called the Military Reform Movement. Its purpose was to measure defense policies and programs by the standard of what works in combat rather than who benefits financially. Launched in the 1970s, it peaked in the early 1980s and was gone by 1990. Why did it fail? Because in a contest between ideas and money, the money always wins.

Two authors, Winslow Wheeler and Larry Korb, recently published a history of the Military Reform Movement, Military Reform: A Reference Handbook. Win Wheeler was in the thick of it at the time as a staffer to several members of the Congressional Military Reform Caucus. Larry Korb was at most on the periphery, one of Washington’s innumerable unemployed jockeys looking for a horse to ride.

To make my own position clear, I was a staffer first to the Senator who started the whole thing, Bob Taft, Jr. of Ohio, then to Secretary Gary Hart, who gave the movement its name and founded the Caucus (with Congressman Bill Whitehurst of Virginia). I was also part of the informal “Reform Group,” which included John Boyd, Pierre Sprey, Jeff Record and Norman Polmar, that did the intellectual work for the Caucus.

The book’s stronger chapters are those by Wheeler, who pulls no punches when discussing the ways various members of Congress betrayed the reform cause. The “Washington Game” is to create an image with the public that is a direct opposite to what the Senator or Congressman actually does behind closed doors, and the Caucus saw plenty of that game. Standouts were Senator Bill Cohen of Maine, who attended Caucus meetings while busily working with Senator John Tower to block any reform of the Navy (he went on to be perhaps the most ineffectual Secretary of Defense in the Department’s history); Newt Gingrich, who really “got” reform and played a big role in the early history of the Caucus, then did nothing to advance its ideas once he gained power; and Dick Cheney, who also used reform to generate an image and now, as Vice President, does nothing.

As I said years ago to a Marine friend who was trying to get a job on Capitol Hill, working as Hill staff is the post-doctoral course in spiritual proctology. Wheeler’s chapters dissect many an ass.

He does an equally good job on the press, which did what it always does: build something up (which creates news) and then tear it down again (which creates more news). What drew many members of Congress to the Reform Caucus was the opportunity it offered to get some good ink. When the wind started blowing the other way, those illustrious legislators blew with it. But the corruption of the press itself is a story told less often, and it needs telling. Why do defense companies buy full-page ads in major newspapers? Not because anyone buys a
fighter plane based on a newspaper ad, but because the six-figure price for a full page buys the newspaper.

Larry Korb's most important chapter is on “Defense Transformation,” and he makes something of a hash of it. “Transformation” is the latest buzzword for what started out (in the Soviet military) as the “Revolution in Military Affairs,” the notion that new technology would magically eliminate war's confusion, uncertainty and friction. Reform always took the opposite view, namely that to be effective in war, technology must be used in ways that conform to war's nature. Korb fails to see Reform and Transformation as opposites and enemies, although in the end he does lay out how Transformation failed in Iraq.

Wheeler's last chapter defines reform, with the hopeful purpose of renewing it and making its ideas available to a new President. The fiascos in Iraq and Afghanistan, coupled with Federal spending that is endangering the country's financial stability, should put military reform back on the political front burner. But that “should” means nothing in Washington, where all that counts is helping the usual interests feed off the nation's decay. The only Presidential candidate who might pick up the reform agenda is Bob Barr, if he gets the Libertarian nomination.

The book concludes with four important appendices, including a condensed version of the FMFM-1A, Fourth Generation War, and a superb piece by Don Vandergriff on improving military education. The last alone is worth the price of the book.

It may be that the Military Reform Movement remains nothing but a historical footnote, one of many vain attempts to rescue a decaying empire from its appointment with history's dustbin. But as Win Wheeler makes clear in Military Reform: A Reference Handbook, it was also the source of some important ideas on how to win wars and, for those of us who were involved in it, a hell of a ride.

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On War #259: Evaluating 4GW Missions

By William S. Lind

I spent last week with the Royal Marines in Plymouth, England, at a conference where they were trying to prepare intellectually for deployment to Afghanistan’s Helmand province. Inspired perhaps by the atmosphere of historic Stonehouse Barracks, where Marines who served at Trafalgar once drilled, I came up with an
approach to one of 4GW's most difficult theoretical challenges, namely the relationship between the three traditional levels of war – tactical, operational, and strategic – and John Boyd's three new levels of war, the physical, the mental and the moral. The seminar that wrote the FMFM 1-A, Fourth Generation War, wrestled endlessly with this problem with little success. If what I will lay out here works – which I leave to others to judge – it may represent a step forward.

The major general leading the conference asked for two products, a “Why We're There” statement and some sort of graphic that could serve as an evaluative tool over the long term. Thinking about the second, it seemed to me the place to start was with a mission-type order that would encompass the whole British effort. The commander’s intent is clear: restore order in Helmand province. 4GW theory suggests the Schwerpunkt should be de-escalation, because that is what promises to be decisive in restoring order. What we need is a “mission generator” that permits us to evaluate missions in terms of supporting the intent and the Schwerpunkt.

I suggested a simple grid, three boxes across and three down. Those across would be labeled “Physical,” “Mental” and “Moral;” those down, “Tactical,” “Operational” and “Strategic.”

* How would the grid work to evaluate possible missions? Let’s consider three examples, looking just at the basics; in a column, I don’t have the space to fill in every box. First, killing the enemy: physically it reduces threats to order, mentally it makes some potential enemies afraid to fight us, but morally it turns us into Goliath and also obligates the relatives of those we kill to fight us in their blood-feud culture. Going down, it counts as a win tactically, offers little but attrition operationally and works against us strategically because every fight is an escalation that diminishes order. Since a higher level dominates a lower, on both scales killing the enemy is a net negative.

Next, consider capturing the enemy. Physically, it is harder and riskier than killing him. Mentally, it may be less frightening and thus less effective. But morally it works in our favor because the strong appear merciful (assuming prisoners are treated well) and a suspicion of cowardice hangs over anyone who surrenders. Looking down, a capture is equal tactically to a kill as a win, operationally it is still just attrition but strategically it is a plus because captives are useful chips in bargaining de-escalatory deals. Net result: missions should put a premium on capture vice killing.

Let's look at one more example, this time originating at the operational level. How might our grid help us evaluate moving out of FOB’s into villages, towns and cities? Physically, the risk to our troops goes up. Mentally, we may be more apprehensive but the people become less frightened of us as they get to know us. Morally, it is a huge plus because we are now protecting the people instead
of living in isolation in order to protect ourselves. Going down, tactically we may have to suffer more casualties than we inflict in order to de-escalate, which puts high demands on the self-discipline of the troops; operationally, it is a plus because when we establish order locally we are serving the intent; and strategically, the spread of order is what leads to mission accomplishment and our return home.

As the boxes fill and as we evaluate many potential missions, we begin to be able to do what John Boyd called many-sided cross-referencing. Of course, in considering the grid we must never forget the intent and the Schwerpunkt, which are the first touchstones for any mission evaluation.

The Royal Marine major general who led the conference said the grid may be useful for considering second-order effects. I think that is true. But it is important that we not consider effects at the mental and moral levels to be secondary (which is different from second-order). A Second Generation military will be tempted to do so, because it still thinks of the physical level as dominant. We see that error repeated daily in a hundred ways in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Just as the operational and strategic levels dominate the tactical, so the mental and moral levels trump the physical. I think the Royal Marines get that, as do many U.S. Marines. Both countries’ armies are another question.

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On War #258: A Confirming Moment

By William S. Lind

When Iraqi Prime Minister al-Kerensky sent his “army” to fight the Mahdi Army in Basra, President Bush called it “a defining moment.” It turned out instead to be a confirming moment. It confirmed that there is no state in Mesopotamia.

One of the most common signs that America’s leadership is clueless about 4GW is the language they use. Fourth Generation war has few if any defining moments. Nor does it have “turning points,” another common Bushism. In his testimony on Tuesday, General David Petraeus revealed the limits on his own grasp of 4GW when he said, “We’ve got to continue. We have our teeth into the jugular, and we need to keep it (sic) there.” 4GW opponents have no jugular. 4GW is war of the capillaries. What we have our teeth into in Iraq is a jellyfish.
If we are to see Iraq and other Fourth Generation conflicts as they are and not through the looking glass, we need to use words more carefully. Because there is no state in Iraq, there is also no government. Orders given in Baghdad have no meaning, because there are no state institutions to carry them out. The governmental positions of Iraqi leaders have no substance. Their power is a function of their relationship to various militias, not of their offices. (Mr. al-Maliki has no militia, which means he is a figurehead.) The Iraqi “army” and “police” are groupings of Shiite militias, which exist to fight other militias and which take orders from militia leaders, not the government. Government revenues are slush funds militia leaders use to pay their militiamen. All of these phenomena, and many more, are products of the one basic reality: there is no state.

The failure of Mr. al-Maliki’s “big push” into Basra put Iraq’s statelessness on display. Ordered to do something it did not want to do, the Iraqi “army” fell apart, as militias usually fall apart when given unwelcome directives. Iraqi “soldiers” and “police” went over or went home, in considerable numbers. Those who did fight had little fight in them; the affair reportedly ended with the Mahdi Army controlling more of Basra than it did at the beginning. Mr. al-Maliki, desperate for a cease-fire, had to agree in advance to any conditions Muqtada al-Sadr cared to impose.

American policy proved even more reckless than that of Mr. al-Maliki. To win in Iraq, we must see a state re-emerge. That means we should stay out of the way of anyone with the potential to recreate a state. Muqtada al-Sadr is at or near the head of the list. The al-Maliki “government” isn’t even on it.

So what did we do? Why, we went to war against al-Sadr on behalf of al-Maliki, of course. Our leadership cannot grasp one of the most basic facts about 4GW, namely that the splintering of factions makes it more difficult to generate a state. Should we have the bad luck to “win” this latest fight and destroy the Mahdi Army, we will move not toward but further away from that goal.

In the end, the Administration’s (and the Pentagon’s) insistence that the Iraqi state, government, army and police are real blinds only themselves. Iraqis know they are not. The American public knows they are not. The average Hottentot probably knows they are not. Do the members of the Senate Committees on Armed Services and Foreign Relations know less than the average Hottentot? So last week’s hearings might suggest, and such is the power of empty words.

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On War #257: Die Panzerwaffe

By William S. Lind

Bruce Gudmundsson, author of the best book on the development of modern tactics by the German Army in World War I, Stormtroop Tactics, has a new book out. Its title is On Armor (link is to the 2004 edition on Amazon), but thankfully it is not another book about tanks. Most books about tanks, like most books about fighting ships and combat aircraft, fall in the category of children’s literature. Their invariable theme is “Look at the big tank/cruiser/fighter go bang/boom/splat.”

In contrast, what On Armor offers is tanks and other armored fighting vehicles in multiple contexts. The contexts, not the tanks make this book valuable and important.

One context is combined arms. That tanks fight as one element of combined arms may seem obvious today, but as Gudmundsson notes, it was not obvious to many early tank theorists. Much of On Armor is devoted to discussing the evolution of armored units and the many types of vehicles other arms required if they were to work with tanks. Armored personnel carriers, mechanized Sturm and anti-tank artillery, and armored cars all share the limelight here with tanks. More important than the vehicles are the functions other arms performed when working with tanks. Gudmundsson correctly writes that in World War II the Germans always made an initial breakthrough with infantry, saving the tanks for exploitation. Furthermore, when they tried breaking through with tanks, they failed.

Particularly good is On Armor's discussion of the evolution of the Sturmeschutz and Panzerjager in World War II. In the 1970's, in a small group discussion with General Hermann Balck, someone asked him how, on the Eastern Front, he had used these two vehicle types compared to the way he used tanks. He replied, “I used them all the same way.” When he was asked about the utility of motorcycles, another vehicle type covered by On Armor, he said, “Their only problem was that I could never get enough of them.”

Another context that runs through On Armor is the tension between two characteristics armored vehicles require if they are to be effective, operational mobility and tactical combat power. Gudmundsson establishes this context at the outset, on the book’s first page:

On Armor is not just another book about tanks. Rather, it is an attempt to make sense of nearly a hundred years of interplay between the two definitive characteristics of armored fighting vehicles – tactical utility and operational
mobility. (The former is the ability to fight. The latter is the ability to rapidly travel over long distances in the absence of significant enemy forces.)

The U.S. Army, which has only the most rudimentary understanding of operational art, has designed its tanks, especially the M-1 Abrams, for tactical utility with little thought for operational mobility. This is typical of Second Generation, French-model armies. The Abrams is essentially the latest version of the French Char B.

In contrast, German and Soviet tanks were designed to serve a doctrine of operational mobility. Not many years ago, a friend of mine was being shown over the German Leopard II tank by a German officer, who kept stressing the tank’s wide tracks. Puzzled, the American finally asked, “What’s the big deal about wide tracks?” The German officer replied, “The Pripet marshes!”

On Armor concludes with an especially thoughtful discussion of the future of armor. Gudmundsson writes,

At the beginning of the story, these two characteristics (operational mobility and combat power) are embodied in very different classes of vehicles. Light armored vehicles (initially armored cars and trucks) had operational mobility while tanks had combat power…In the middle of the story, which also coincides with the middle of the twentieth century, the two principle virtues of the armored vehicle are embodied in a single class of vehicle: an all-purpose tank such as the German Panzer III, the Soviet T-34, or the American Sherman. It was not long, however, before the two lines began to diverge again. By the end of the twentieth century, it was no longer possible to combine both operational mobility and first-class combat power in a single vehicle.

I am not sure it is no longer possible, and I would probably use the German Panzer IV with the long-barreled 75 mm gun rather than the Panzer III as the German example, but Gudmundsson is correct about the divergence. The U.S. Marine Corps’ wheeled Light Armored Vehicle was originally conceived as a way to give some Marine units operational mobility at a time when the M-1 Abrams was taking it away from tank battalions. On Armor is a fine book, one that is essential to understand many of the developments in land warfare in the 20th century. Fourth Generation war renders much of the history that and nothing more; in 4Gw conflicts, all tanks in effect become Sturmgeschutze.

Operational art is practiced on the mental and moral levels of war as great sweeps of armored formations deep in the enemy’s rear become militarily meaningless.

But history remains important as a history of how people thought through the problems of earlier times. On Armor offers that history of armored warfare better than any other book on the subject.
Most wars move not at a steady pace but in a series of fits and starts. For about half a year, we have been enjoying something of a lull in the war in Iraq. Anything that reduces casualties is to be welcomed. But the bulletins’ claims that the downward trend in violence will continue should be seen more as political vaporizing than military analysis. Events begin to suggest that the lull is ending and Mars is in the ascendant.

To make a prognosis, we first must understand why we have enjoyed a period of relative quiet. There are four basic causes. In order of importance, they are:

1. Al Qaeda’s alienation of much of its Sunni base, to the point where many Sunni insurgents changed sides. As I have pointed out before, al Qaeda in Iraq made a common error of revolutionary movements: it attempted to impose its program before it had consolidated power. As best I can see from Olympus, it seems to be persisting in that error, perhaps because its loose discipline does not allow it to do otherwise. That is good news for us. But we dare not forget that in 4GW, all alliances are temporary. The Sunni Awakening militias like our money but they don’t much like us.

2. Muqtada al-Sadr’s decision to order his Mahdi Army to observe a truce, now extended to August of this year. The truce remains in his interest, because he needs to husband his strength for a winner-take-all final gambit.

3. Moving many U.S. troops off their FOBs and into neighborhoods where they can try to protect the population.

4. Last and least, the “surge.” This usefully added some additional troops for #3, but without the former move it would have simply created more Fobbits. A
question I have not seen addressed is what percentage of the troops for #3 were already in the country. My bet is a large majority.

If we look at where each of these is now going, we see rough water ahead:

1. Al Qaeda in Iraq and other anti-U.S. forces (there are many) are both attacking and penetrating Sunni militias now working with U.S. forces; the latter is likely to prove more effective. U.S. forces are also killing Sunni militiamen who are working with us, by accident of course, but sufficiently often to strain relations. Much of this results from our counter-productive and just plain stupid continued use of air power in a country we occupy. American attack aircraft are al Qaeda’s (and the Taliban’s) best friends. The most powerful alienating factor is the irreconcilable hostility between most Sunnis and the Shiite government in Baghdad. The Sunnis know we created the government and remain allied to it. The government fears any armed Sunnis. We are left with one foot on the boat and one on the dock, a position that is difficult to sustain indefinitely.

2. Muqtada al-Sadr is feeling increasing pressure from his “street” to respond to U.S. attacks (again, often by aircraft) on Shiite neighborhoods. He has quietly been using U.S. and Iraqi government forces to “whack” dissenters within his own movement. But this can easily blow back on him. At this point his “street cred” is or soon will be on the line, at which point he has to respond or see his militia fragment (which is the natural tendency of everything in 4GW). The Mahdi Army can send U.S. casualties soaring overnight.

3. Any rise in American casualties means politicians in Washington will want U.S. troops to head back to the FOBs. The absurd American definition of “force protection” means many within the military will want to do the same. Petraeus will stay the course (in this case, rightly), but he’s on his way out. Having gotten this right doesn’t mean we won’t get it wrong again.

4. The extra troops brought over by the surge will go home this summer. Again, this is far less important than what the remaining troops do, and points #1 and #2 also, but it is a factor.

The main story of the current lull is one of lost opportunity. Whether soon or in the more distant future, the war in Iraq will get hotter again. The lull gave us what might be our only opportunity to leave Iraq with some tailfeathers intact. Just as the Bush administration’s blindness got us into this war, so its rigidity made us pass over our best chance to get out. Like opportunity, Mars only knocks once. Next time, he blows the building.

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Admiral Fallon’s (forced?) resignation was the last warning we are likely to get of an attack on Iran. It does not mean an attack is certain, but the U.S. could not attack Iran so long as he was the CENTCOM commander. That obstacle is now gone.

Vice President Cheney's Middle East tour is another indicator. According to a report in The American Conservative, on his previous trip Cheney told our allies, including the Saudis, that Bush would attack Iran before the end of his term. If that report was correct, then his current tour might have the purpose of telling them when it is coming.

Why not just do that through the State Department? State may not be in the loop, nor all of DOD for that matter. The State Department, OSD [the Office of the Secretary of Defense], the intelligence agencies, the Army and the Marine Corps are all opposed to war with Iran. Of the armed services, only the Air Force reportedly is in favor, seeking an opportunity to show what air power can do. As always, it neglects to inform the decision-makers what it cannot do.

The purpose of this column is not to warn of an imminent assault on Iran, though personally I think it is coming, and soon. Rather, it is to warn of a possible consequence of such an attack. Let me state it here, again, as plainly as I can: an American attack on Iran could cost us the whole army we now have in Iraq.

Lots of people in Washington are pondering possible consequences of an air and missile assault on Iran, but few if any have thought about this one. The American military’s endless “we’re the greatest” propaganda has convinced most people that the U.S. armed forces cannot be beaten in the field. They are the last in a long line of armies that could not be beaten, until they were.

Here’s roughly how it might play out. In response to American air and missile strikes on military targets inside Iran, Iran moves to cut the supply lines coming up from the south through the Persian Gulf (can anyone in the Pentagon guess why it’s called that?) and Kuwait on which most U.S. Army units in Iraq depend (the Marines get most of their stuff through Jordan). It does so by hitting shipping in the Gulf, mining key choke points, and destroying the port facilities we depend on, mostly through sabotage. It also hits oil production and export facilities in the Gulf region, as a decoy: we focus most of our response on protecting the oil, not guarding our army’s supply lines.
Simultaneously, Iran activates the Shiite militias to cut the roads that lead from Kuwait to Baghdad. Both the Mahdi Army and the Badr Brigades — the latter now supposedly our allies — enter the war against us with their full strength. Ayatollah Sistani, an Iranian, calls on all Iraqi Shiites to fight the Americans wherever they find them. Instead of fighting the 20% of Iraqis population that is Sunni, we find ourselves battling the 60% that is Shiite. Worse, the Shiites logistics lie directly across those logistics lines coming up from Kuwait.

U.S. Army forces in Iraq begin to run out of supplies, especially POL [petroleum, oil, and lubricants], of which they consume a vast amount. Once they are largely immobilized by lack of fuel, and the region gets some bad weather that keeps our aircraft grounded or at least blind, Iran sends two to four regular army armor and mech divisions across the border. Their objective is to pocket American forces in and around Baghdad.

The U.S. military in Iraq is all spread out in penny packets fighting insurgents. We have no field army there anymore. We cannot reconcentrate because we’re out of gas and Shiite guerrillas control the roads. What units don’t get overrun by Iranian armor or Shiite militia end up in the Baghdad Kessel. General Petraeus calls President Bush and repeats the famous words of Marshal MacMahon at Sedan: “Nous sorrune dans une pot de chambre, et nous y serrat émerde.” Bush thinks he’s overheard Petraeus ordering dinner — as, for Bush, he has.

U.S. Marines in Iraq, who are mostly in Anbar province, are the only force we have left. Their lines of supply and retreat through Jordan are intact. The local Sunnis want to join them in fighting the hated Persians. What do they do at that point? Good question.

How probable is all this? I can’t answer that. Unfortunately, the people in Washington who should be able to answer it are not asking it. They need to start doing so, now.

It is imperative that we have an up-to-date plan for dealing with this contingency. That plan must not depend on air power to rescue our army. Air power always promises more than it can deliver.

As I have warned before, every American ground unit in Iraq needs its own plan to get itself out of the country using only its own resources and whatever it can scrounge locally. Retreat to the north, through Kurdistan into Turkey, will be the only alternative open to most U.S. Army units, other than ending up in an Iranian POW camp.

Even if the probability of the above scenario is low, we still need to take it with the utmost seriousness because the consequences would be so vast. If the United States lost the army it has in Iraq, we would never recover from the defeat. It would be another Adrianople, another Manzikert, another Rocroi. Given
the many other ways we now resemble Imperial Spain, the last analogy may be the most telling.

I have said all this before, in previous columns and elsewhere. If I sound like Cassandra on this point, remember that events ended up proving her right.

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On War #254: Dollars and Sense

By William S. Lind

At a recent book party for Winslow Wheeler’s new history of the Military Reform Movement of the 1970s and 1980s, I was asked for my views on the prospects for genuine reform. I replied that “So long as the money flow continues, nothing will change.” Chuck Spinney, a reformer who spent decades as a polyp in the bowels of the Pentagon, agreed.

Events on Wall Street suggest that the day when the money flow stops may be approaching. Despite President Hoover’s assurance that “Prosperity is just around the corner,” the American economy is in free-fall. After decades of frivolity, that economy now amounts to little more than a pyramid of financial pyramids, all requiring a constant inflow of borrowed money. The inflow is endangered by the developing Panic of ’08, where the junk mortgage crisis and the collapse of the housing market combine to dry up lending. What happens to pyramid schemes when money stops flowing in at the bottom? Maybe a recession; maybe a depression. That’s why pyramid schemes are illegal, unless the government runs them.

A tanking economy and world credit markets tighter than Scrooge’s sphincter will require large cuts in federal spending. That will include the Pentagon. If a new administration were to turn to the military reformers and ask us how to cut defense spending while still securing the country, what would we advise?

Here’s what I would propose:
First, adopt a defensive rather than an offensive grand strategy. America followed a defensive grand strategy through most of her history. We only went to war if someone attacked us. That defensive grand strategy kept defense costs down and allowed our economy to prosper. We do not have to be party to every quarrel in the world.

Second, scrap virtually all the big ticket weapons programs such as new fighter-bombers, more Aegis ships, and the Army’s Rube Goldbergian Future Combat System. They are irrelevant to where war is going.

We should not plan for conventional wars against hypothetical “peer competitors,” which can only be Russia or China. We should do our utmost to make Russia an ally, and we should make a fundamental, bi-partisan national strategic decision that we will not go to war with China. Regardless of who “won” such a war, it would destroy both countries, just as the two World Wars destroyed both Germany and Britain. The world needs China to serve as a source of order in what will be an increasingly disorderly 21st century. We should welcome the growth of Chinese power, just as Britain learned (reluctantly) to welcome the growth of American power in the 20th century. It is only a threat to us if we make it one.

Third, as we cut, preserve combat units. That means, above all, Army and Marine Corps infantry battalions. Cut the vast superstructure above those battalions, but keep the battalions. Infantry battalions are what we need most for Fourth Generation wars, which we should do our utmost to avoid but which we will sometimes be drawn into, even with a defensive grand strategy.

In the Navy, keep the submarines. Submarines are today’s and tomorrow’s capital ships, and geography dictates we must remain a maritime power. Keep the carriers, too, though there is little need to build more of them. Carriers are big, empty boxes, which can carry many things besides aircraft. Mothball most of the cruisers and destroyers. Build lots of small, cheap ships useful for controlling coastal and inland waters, and create strategically mobile and sustainable “packages” of such ships. Being able to control waters around and within stateless regions can be important in 4GW.

Fighter-bombers are largely useless in Fourth Generation wars, where their main role is to create collateral damage that benefits our enemies. Keep the air transport squadrons and the A-10s, and move them all to the Air National Guard, which flies and maintains aircraft as well as or better than the regular Air Force at a fraction of the cost. Reduce the regular Air Force to strategic nuclear forces and a training base.

In all the services, vastly reduce the baggage train: the higher headquarters, the development commands, the education bureaucracies and the armies of
contractors. As Mark Twain said of the male teat, they are neither useful nor ornamental.

Finally, as we cut, undertake reforms that cost little but will make our remaining forces more effective. Reform the personnel systems to create unit cohesion, eliminate the surplus of officers above the company grades and reduce careerism by ending up-or-out. Reform tactics and doctrine by moving from the Second Generation to the Third, which is to say from French attrition warfare to German maneuver warfare. This requires a change in military culture, in education and in training. The adoption of Third Generation tactics, doctrine and culture must be real, not just words on paper as it has been in the Marine Corps.

A program of military reform along these lines could give us more effective forces for Fourth Generation wars and such minor conventional wars as we might face within a defensive grand strategy than the forces we now possess. It could do so for a defense budget half or less the size of the current budget. To the reigning Military-Industrial-Congressional Complex, that potential is a threat, not a promise. When the MICC’s money runs out, it will suddenly become a necessity.

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On War #253: Linearity

By William S. Lind

One of several dead hands the First Generation of Modern War lays on contemporary state militaries’ throats is linearity. Most state militaries both seek and expect linearity on and off the battlefield. Sometimes, this manifests itself in tactics that offer magnificent if unintentional tableux vivant. I recall a field exercise years ago with the Second Marine Division at Camp Lejeune where, rounding a bend, we found a lieutenant had built a perfect 19th century fortress wall across the road, complete with firing step. The Division Sergeant Major, in whose jeep I was riding, said, “My God, it’s the siege of Vicksburg!”

More often, linearity manifests itself in a military service’s culture, as a subtle but omnipresent mindset. It is easy to understand why this is so. Both on land and at sea, tactics became linear right at the beginning of the First Generation in the mid-17th century. In armies, that was when lines of infantrymen two or three deep replaced the square formations of the tercios. In navies, beginning with the
British Navy in the Dutch Wars, the line ahead replaced the general melee. The two developments were causally related: the line ahead was adopted when generals took command of the British fleet under the Commonwealth.

The First Generation lasted about two centuries, centuries in which the culture of state militaries was formed. Linearity on the battlefield carried over directly into that culture, where it remains today. In Second Generation militaries, such as the American, the tactics too remained largely linear. As late as the First Gulf War a battalion commander in the Second Marine Division was nearly relieved for “breaking the line” when he pulled his unit back to avoid an Iraqi fire sack.

The expectation of linearity lies behind much of the U.S. military’s misreading of the current situation in Iraq. If you look at its projections of success, they follow a line. It foresees a linear “building process” where its alliance with some Sunni militias in Anbar province and parts of Baghdad leads to similar alliances elsewhere, with no regression in “pacified” areas. Similarly, it expects the Sunnis to follow their acceptance of U.S. forces with acceptance of the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad and its army and police. These lines, which lead to improved security, then mesh with other lines such as economic and political developments that represent the re-emergence of a state in Iraq. It graphs nicely as a series of vectors on a chart, all pointing up. Linearity has marched from Waterloo to PowerPoint.

Unfortunately, Fourth Generation wars (and many other types of war as well) are not linear. Rather, they are chaotic, an unending melee of coming together and splitting apart that leaves an occupier running in place. Seemingly linear progress is matched or exceeded by non-linear regression. The state military perceives the former much more readily than the latter because linearity is what it expects. You find what you seek, whether or not it is there.

The reality in Iraq is that both Sunnis and Shiites are split along many different axes. Factions come together in temporary alliances of convenience, including with the foreign occupiers, only to split apart again and fight former allies. Reality for all parties is local and short-term. To the Iraqis, one alliance, such as with the Americans, does not imply any other alliance, such as with the central government. Arrangements that appear contradictory to us are natural to them. Linear progress toward a set of goals that represent a state is not what they expect. Our linearity and their non-linearity are ships passing in the night.

It will happen from time to time that the chaos shakes out into patterns in which we can see linear progress. But the reality remains chaos, which means the patterns will soon reform into other, quite different shapes. We cannot anticipate what those shapes might be. If we can be quick enough, we may be able to use some of those new shapes, as we have used the unexpected outbreak of fighting between local Sunni militias and al Qaeda. What we must not do, if our
orientation is to be accurate, is project these kaleidoscopic pattern shifts in linear terms.

Regrettably, that is what the U.S. military in Iraq is doing now. Given its First Generation heritage, it may not be able to do anything else.

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On War #252: Fools Rush In

By William S. Lind

If the Balkans had an anthem, it would be that 1950’s doo-wop hit, “Fools rush in, where angels fear to tread.” The latest Balkan fools are the United States and the European Union, which have rushed in to recognize what Serbian Prime Minister Vojislav Kostunica rightly calls the “fake state of Kosovo.” Why is it a fake state? Because there are no Kosovars, only Serbs and Albanians. Each group seeks to unite Kosovo with its homeland, historic Serbia or Greater Albania. An independent Kosovo has the half-life of a sub-atomic particle.

The action of the U.S. and the E.U. in stripping Serbia of Serbs’ historic homeland is both a crime and a blunder. It is a crime, first, because no one, not even the U.N., has a legal right to dismember a sovereign state, and second, because the narrative used to justify the illegal action is a lie. The stated justification is that the Serbs, under Slobodan Milosevic, were ethnically cleansing Kosovo of Albanians. As German courts have established, there was no ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo until NATO started bombing Serbia. After NATO launched its unprovoked attack on Serbia (Mrs. Albright’s splendid little war), the Serbs dumped the Albanians on NATO’s doorstep as a vast logistics sponge. That wasn’t terribly nice, but when you are a very small country fighting all of NATO, you do what you can. Ironically, after Serbia was forced to capitulate when Russia withdrew her support, NATO blithely presided over the ethnic cleansing of two-thirds of Kosovo’s Serbs by the Albanians.

In international affairs, blunders are worse than crimes, and two of the blunders contained in the recognition of Kosovo are likely to have consequences. The first is the creation of an irredenta, which guarantees another Balkan war. Serbia will never accept the wholesale alienation of one of her provinces. Like France after
1871, her whole policy will focus on recovering her lost territory as soon as the moment is ripe.

The second blunder is further alienating Russia, this time in a way she cannot ignore. If the U.S. and the E.U. are blind to the ghost of 1914, Russia and Serbia are not. The fact that Russia went to war to protect Serbia then puts pressure on Moscow to do so again, lest the Putin government look weak domestically as well as abroad.

Washington and Brussels scoff at the thought, but Russia and Serbia certainly have military options. A guerrilla war against European and American troops and police in Serb-inhabited portions of Kosovo is likely to occur spontaneously, at least at a low level. IEDs and sniper ambushes are easy enough to arrange. Belgrade can ramp it up by smuggling in shaped-charge anti-armor mines, dual-warhead RPGs and sniper rifles, along with Serbian special forces to make sure they are used effectively. If Europe responds with economic measures against Serbia, Russia now has enough petro-dollars to support Belgrade economically. If NATO threatens a new bombing campaign, Russia can up the ante too by sending Russian air defense troops and equipment to Serbia. The last time NATO bombed Serbia, Russia was too weak to respond. That is not true now, nor is President Putin for sale the way Mr. Yeltsin was.

The last thing the world needs now is a new Balkan war, with NATO and Russia caught in a contest of mutual escalation. Is there a way to walk this dog back? I think there is, if Washington and Brussels regain some sense of reality. They can do what Bismarck did in 1878 and call a conference. There, a solution could be negotiated that all parties might live with, even if none really liked it. One such solution would be to partition Kosovo between Serbia and Albania, with Serbia compensated for her loss of some of Kosovo by being allowed to annex the Serbian portion of Bosnia. The fact that both Kosovo and Bosnia are fake states would make such a deal all the easier. As the E.U. has already discovered, maintaining fake states is an expensive and never-ending business.

Fools rush in, but sometimes even fools are wise enough to back out again. Berlin, are you listening? The Congress of Berlin of 2008 may be as successful as the Congress of Berlin of 1878 in averting war in Europe.

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On War #251: War or Not War?

By William S. Lind

Between February 8 and February 14, four American schools suffered attacks by lone gunmen. The most recent, at Northern Illinois University on February 14, saw five killed (plus the gunman) and 16 wounded. Similar attacks have occurred elsewhere, including shopping malls.

Is this war? I don’t think so. Some proponents of “Fifth Generation war,” which they define as actions by “superempowered individuals,” may disagree. But these incidents lack an ingredient I think necessary to war’s definition, namely purpose. In Fourth Generation War, the purpose of warlike acts reaches beyond the state and politics, but actions, including massacres of civilians, are still purposeful. They serve an agenda that reaches beyond individual emotions, an agenda others can and do share and fight for. In contrast, the mental and emotional states that motivate lone gunmen are knowable to them alone.

The whole “Fifth Generation” thesis is faulty, in any case. However small the units that fight wars may become, down to the “superempowered individual,” that shrinkage alone is not enough to mark a new generation.

Generational changes are dialectically qualitative changes, and those are rare. Normally, a dialectically qualitative change only occurs after time has brought many dialectically quantitative changes, such as a downward progression in the size of units that can fight. In effect, quantitative changes have to pool behind a generational dam until they form so vast a reservoir that their combined pressure breaks through in a torrent. I expect it will take at least a century for the Fourth Generation to play itself out. A Fifth Generation will not be in sight, except as a mirage, in our lifetimes.

This is not to say that the lone gunman phenomenon, and its increasing frequency, are wholly unrelated to Fourth Generation war. They have some common origins, I think.

At the core of 4GW lies a crisis of legitimacy of the state. A development that contributes to the state’s crisis of legitimacy is the disintegration of community (Gemeinschaft). Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of the powerful, highly intrusive state, community has increasingly been displaced by society (Gesellschaft), where most relationships between people are merely functional.

That progression has now gone so far that never before in human history have so many people lived isolated lives. I sometimes visualize a conversation between a Modern man and a Medieval man, where the proud Modern says,
“You poor man! It must have been terrible living without air conditioning, automobiles, washing machines and hot showers.” The Medieval man replies, “You poor man! It must have been terrible living so alone.”

Isolation and the alienation, anomie and rage that proceed from it fuel both lone gunmen and a broad sense of detachment from the state. Why give loyalty to the state if the society it governs offers nothing but alienation? In turn, alternatives to the state, such as gangs, offer alternatives to isolation as well.

The commonality does not stop here. Increasingly, people who are cut off from other real people fill the void with virtual people. They spend their lives immersed in television, video games, the internet and so on. As Dave Grossman has demonstrated, those technologies can do an excellent job of turning loners into killers, both by overcoming their inhibitions to killing and by giving them refined shooter skills. The same technologies spread alternate loyalties, such as Al Qaeda, Deep Green environmentalism, (which has spawned numerous acts of terror, both here and in Britain) and a variety of other virtual worlds.

In sum, the decline of the state and the disintegration of community march on together. So, through the video screen, do the rise of alternate loyalties and the generation of lone gunmen. Both are part of the end of the Modern Age, facilitated and accelerated by technologies that are Modernity’s penultimate achievements. As Ortega warned, civilized men are being replaced by technologically competent barbarians. Barbarians “act out” their emotions by killing, and they give their allegiance to chieftans, not states. Lone gunmen are not carrying on war, but the phenomena that create them also feed the Fourth Generation. The calamitous Twenty-First Century will give us more of both.

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On War #250: Counter Counter-Insurgency

By William S. Lind

Retired Air Force Colonel Chet Richards has published another short, good book: If We Can Keep It: A National Security Manifesto for the Next Administration. The “it” in question is a republic, which we are unlikely to keep since republics require a virtuous citizenry. But suggesting a rational, prudent defense policy for the next
administration is sufficiently quixotic we might as well also pretend the republic can endure.

Richards' first major point is that most of our armed forces are “legacy forces,” white elephants designed for fighting the Red Army in Europe or the Imperial Japanese Navy in the Pacific. They have little utility in a world where nuclear weapons prevent wars among major powers, wars with minor powers can be won easily and usually aren’t worth fighting, and legacy forces generally lose against Fourth Generation opponents. Although they are largely useless, these legacy forces eat up most of the defense budget. Richards would disband them, save the Marine Corps, some useful tac air (i.e., A-10s) and some sealift, and give the money back to the taxpayer.

That will happen when pork stops flying. But the point is a good one; most of what we are buying is a military museum. I disagree with Richards that the Marine Corps or any other major elements of the U.S. armed forces are Third Generation forces, forces which have institutionalized maneuver warfare. The Marines talk it, but it is not what they do. I would prefer to keep enough of the Army to face the Corps with some competition, rewarding whichever service actually makes it into the Third Generation. Bureaucratic competition is a good thing.

Perhaps Richards’ sharpest point is that DOD’s latest fad, counter-insurgency, is something of a fraud. He notes that whereas states have often been successful in defeating insurgencies on their own soil, invaders and occupiers have almost never won against a guerrilla-style war of national liberation. Not even the best counter-insurgency techniques make much difference, because neither a foreign occupier nor any puppet government he installs can gain legitimacy. Despite the current “we’re winning in Iraq” propaganda, both Iraq and Afghanistan are almost certain to add themselves to the long list of failures. If neither the U.S. Army nor the Marine Corps can do successful counter-insurgency, what can they do? That brings us back to Richards’ first point.

While all these observations are useful, there is one suggestion in If We Can Keep It the next administration desperately needs to follow, namely Richards’ recommendations on grand strategy. As Germany discovered in both World Wars, if you get your grand strategy wrong, nothing else you do well matters; you still lose. At the moment, America’s grand strategy suggests

we have the national character of a rich kid schoolyard bully. Somebody hit us pretty good from the back, so in retaliation, we’ve beaten up on some weak kids in the playground, one of whom had nothing to do with it but whom we had been wanting to thrash anyway. In the meantime, we’ve left the real perpetrators alone, even though everybody is sure we know where they are, and we’ve been careful not to pick on kids who look like they might hit back.
Not very attractive, is it?

The best passage in Richard's book prescribes the grand strategic antidote:

As a first step, therefore, the country needs to return to its roots. We need to restore our innate suspicion of foreign entanglements and concentrate on being the best United States of America we can be.

With the ghosts of our Founding Fathers, I reply, Hurrah! This is advice the next administration can take, should take and will take — if, and only if, our next President is Ron Paul.

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Mr. William S. Lind

On War #249: Die and Win

By William S. Lind

One of the more intriguing questions Clio poses is the degree to which great military victories were the fruit of smart plans as opposed to dumb luck. Did the North Vietnamese expect the Tet Offensive to be a tactical defeat but an operational victory? They now claim they did, but we will not know until their archives are opened.

The war in Iraq poses a similar question: to what degree was the Sunni insurgency part of Saddam’s plan, as opposed to a reaction generated largely by bad American decisions after his government fell? The January 26, 2008 Washington Post ran an article about Saddam Hussein’s main American debriefer, George Piro, which may shed some light on that question. According to the Post,

Hussein’s strategy upon facing the U.S. invasion was to tell his generals to try to hold back the U.S. forces for two weeks, “and at that point, it would go into what he called the secret war,” Piro said, referring to the Iraqi insurgency.

This “straight from the horse’s mouth” statement would seem to settle the issue. It doesn’t, because it was given after the fact. Just as we now claim the “surge” led to the improved security situation in parts of Iraq, so Saddam, in American captivity, might have sought to bolster his place in history by claiming the
insurgency had been his idea all along. The widespread caching of weapons and explosives lends credence to his claim, but until we find documentary evidence dating back before the campaign opened, we cannot be sure.

Why is the question important? Because if Saddam did plan to defeat America by going to guerilla warfare after losing the conventional campaign, we can be reasonably certain anyone else we threaten with invasion will adopt the same plan.

Saddam was neither a wildly popular nor a particularly secure dictator. Few Iraqis saw him as the father of their country, the way many Chinese saw Mao or many Cubans look on Castro. The Kurds hated him, the Shiites hated him, and he had to hide behind elaborate security measures even among Iraqi Sunnis. If Saddam can take the risks associated with preparing for guerrilla warfare, including spreading arms thickly all over the country and devolving much power of command downward, so can almost anyone.

That in turn creates a not insubstantial roadblock in front of neo-con or neo-lib plans to “liberate” other countries. Even if the American military triumphs in another “race to Baghdad” campaign, do the American people or Congress have the stomach (or wallet) to face another guerrilla war that drags on for years? Like any good defense plan, a plan for guerrilla war against a conventionally superior invader has deterrence value. No one in his right mind wants to get into the briar patch with the tar baby.

After his capture, Saddam played for a place in history, and he played that role well. If the Sunni insurgency was part of his plan for defeating the American invasion, he will have earned some credit as a military leader, despite his gross blunders in other wars. If, as I think inevitable, other countries faced with an American threat adopt the same plan, Saddam will have lodged a barb in his assailant whose poison will work for years. He died, but perhaps he also won. In the Arab world, at least, that is a respected combination.

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On War #248: My Master’s Voice

By William S. Lind
Yesterday I placed my annual call to my All-Highest War Lord and Sovereign Master, Kaiser Wilhelm II, to offer my usual felicitations on his birthday. His Majesty was laughing when he picked up the receiver, so after congratulating him I took the liberty of inquiring what Heaven found so funny.

“Democracy,” His Majesty replied.

“I take it you are watching this year’s Presidential election in the U.S.,” I said.

“The flea circus? That’s part of it,” said the Kaiser. “It nicely illustrates one of democracy’s contradictions, namely that no one who is willing to crawl and grub for votes can be worthy of the office to which he aspires. There’s no place for the nolo episcopari in democratic politics, it seems, nor for anyone with the slightest shred of character. Your Giulianis and McCains, Clintons and Obamas are happy to eat every toad in the public garden.”

“I think the American public is no happier with their options this year than is Your Majesty,” I replied.

“Thereby illustrating another funny aspect of democracy,” the Kaiser shot back. “Who do they think is responsible? They are, of course. No candidate who told them the truth could get above 10% in the polls. They want nostrums, bromides, comforting lies, and they won’t tolerate anything else. America speaks of citizens, but all it has are consumers whose heads are as fat as their bottoms. That too is where democracy leads, to an ever-declining lowest common denominator. It cannot do anything else.”

“The funniest aspect of the whole business,” His Majesty continued, “is that the lower America sinks, the more determined its politicians are to force democracy on everyone else. All but one of your Presidential candidates has pledged to continue crusading for democracy, despite the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan. By comparison, even the late Spanish Hapsburgs were models of realism.”

“The democracy advocates – and I trust Your Majesty knows I am not one – would reply that democracy is necessary to freedom,” I suggested.

“Another contradiction,” said the Kaiser. “Prussia in my day was far more free than America is today, because Prussians understood what freedom is. Freedom is not doing whatever you feel like. Freedom is replacing imposed discipline with self-discipline. No democratic office-seeker would dare say that, because the voters would not like it. They want to be told that they can do whatever they please – spend without saving, live immoral lives without degenerating, vote without thinking – and suffer no unfortunate consequences. If the public wants to square the circle, Presto!, a hundred politicians promise to do it.”
“I trust that Your Majesty’s preferred alternative to democracy in monarchy, as is mine,” I said.

“Yours, mine and Heaven’s,” the Kaiser replied. “As I have said before, Heaven is not a republic. Though there are, I think, two countries God intends should be republics.”

“And those are?”, I asked.

“Switzerland, to show that it can be made to work, and America, to serve as a warning to everyone else.”

“Were America to wake up to the virtues of monarchy – and God knows our current election campaign should wake us up – who would you recommend for the American throne?”, I inquired.

“An Austrian Hapsburg, I should think,” said the Kaiser. “They are accustomed to ruling over ramshackle, polygot, decaying empires. My old friend Emperor Franz Josef did so remarkably well.”

“One last question, if I may,” I said. “Should America continue on the unhappy road of democracy, what lies in our future?”

“Let’s just say that the combination of military defeat and economic depression is not a happy one,” the Kaiser answered. “And now I must ring off. I hear the band of the Garde du Corps playing, which means it is time to review the troops. I think the tune is, ‘And the World Turned Upside Down.’

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On War #247: Crossing the Channel

By William S. Lind

For centuries, Continental wars that included Great Britain tended to follow a pattern. The British would send an army to the Continent; it would be defeated by the French or Germans; the British would withdraw to their island; and their triumphant European enemy would draw up a superior force on the French or
Dutch Channel coast. There was little doubt about the outcome, should that army land in Britain. But it could never get across the English Channel.

A recent conversation over dinner with a Marine lieutenant colonel, formerly a battalion commander in Iraq, helped clarify the nature of our “crossing the Channel” challenge in Fourth Generation war. With a combination of good counter-insurgency tactics (tactics that de-escalate confrontations), a strategy of protecting the population and some luck in the form of blunders by our 4GW opponents, we may be able to restore some degree of order in places where the state has disintegrated. We may further be able to take advantage of the restoration of order to get things working again on the local level: open the schools, turn the power back on, create some jobs, see local commerce revive.

What we do not know how to do, either in theory or in practice, is move from these local achievements to seeing the re-creation of a state. Yet in 4GW, that is crossing the Channel, because unless we can do that we cannot win the war.

As I have said before, the restoration of some degree of local security, such as we now see in parts of Iraq, does not in itself mean we are winning. Restoring local security is necessary to win, but not sufficient. The valid measure of victory is whether or not a state arises anew out of statelessness. If it does, the non-state elements who define 4GW lose, regardless of the nature of that state. If it does not, we lose and they win. That’s the bottom line.

At present, the best we can do toward seeing a state resurrect itself is try to build some connectivity between areas where relative order has been restored and hope for the best. A previous On War column written by the Fourth Generation Seminar gave some examples of how we might do that.

But this is substituting hope for operational art. It is the equivalent to the French or Germans sitting with their army on the Channel coast, hoping that a lucky wind or a chance conjunction of fleets or the intervention of the Archangel Michael might let them get across. The precedent is not encouraging.

The worst we can do is what we have done in Iraq and Afghanistan, namely set up a puppet government under heavy American protection and pretend that it is a state. Such pretense fools no one, not even ourselves, as our deals with local sheiks in Iraq demonstrate.

Theory tells us what we cannot do, namely establish legitimate state institutions in occupied foreign countries whose cultures and traditions are very different from our own. Unfortunately, theory has no answer to the question of what we can do, beyond hope. As the old saying goes, hope makes a good breakfast but a poor supper.
The problem of crossing the Channel in 4GW is actually more difficult than it was for those French and German armies encamped on the Channel coast, hoping. They knew perfectly well how to cross the English Channel: in boats. They just could not do it in the face of the Royal Navy. As one admiral told the British cabinet during the French invasion scare of 1805, “I do not say the French cannot come. I only say they cannot come by sea.”

We have the boats and we have the superior fleet, in the form of complete material supremacy over our 4GW opponents. What we do not have is an understanding of how to employ that superiority to regenerate a state out of statelessness. Until theory can give us such an understanding – and it may find the problem insoluble – we, like yet another attempt to invade England, the Spanish Armada, will sail in expectation of a miracle.

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On War #246: Side Effects

By William S. Lind

As we observe the slow and increasingly certain disintegration of Pakistan, we should force ourselves to confront an uncomfortable fact: events in Pakistan are to a large degree side effects of our war in Afghanistan.

The January 12 Washington Times headline was “Pentagon spies al Qaeda in Pakistan,” as if this were somehow news. It quotes the JCS Chairman, Admiral Michael Mullen, as saying:

   There are concerns now about how much (al Qaeda) turned inward, literally, inside Pakistan…so (the Pentagon is) extremely, extremely concerned about that…

One can only respond, quelle surprise! Of course al Qaeda turned inward inside Pakistan. First, Pakistan is strategically a vastly more important prize than Afghanistan or Iraq could ever be. Second, when guerillas are put under pressure in one place, they go somewhere else. Third, we have allowed ourselves to be put in the position of fighting the Pashtun in Afghanistan, and
there are lots of Pashtun in Pakistan. War with the Pashtun is war with the Pashtun, to whom borders drawn in London mean nothing.

Our attempt to contain the damage in Pakistan instead set the wreckage on fire. We forced our friendly local dictator, General/President Musharraf, to line up publicly with George Bush, to the point where his local nickname is “Busharraf.” It is not intended as a compliment. Worse, we pressured him into sending the Pakistani Army into the Northwest Tribal Territories, where it has gotten its backside kicked at the same time that it has brought more tribesmen into the fight. Defeat plus destabilization plus de-legitimatization, most of it American inspired, has left Pakistan’s government teetering on the edge of disintegration, with a real danger that the disintegration could spread beyond the regime to the Pakistani state itself.

Not content with mere disaster, the Bush administration ("Blunders are Us") wants to put out the fire it set by pouring gasoline on it. A story in the January 6 Cleveland Plain Dealer reported that

President Bush’s senior national security advisors (Larry, Curly and Moe?) are debating whether to expand the authority of the CIA and the military to conduct far more aggressive covert operations in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

Pakistan has publicly said no, but that won’t stop the Bushies. If the tribesmen soon have American captives to display, what little is left of Musharraf’s legitimacy will be beheaded along with them.

Again, the point to remember is that most of this is a side effect of the war in Afghanistan. Why is this important? Because it reminds us that the ill effects of bad strategy tend to spread. The bad strategy is invading, occupying and attempting to transform countries whose culture is vastly different from our own. That is the essence of the neo-cons’ neo-Trotskyite vision of the world revolution, which the Bush administration has made its own. Nor is George W. Bush the neo-cons’s only dupe: the same poisonous nonsense flows in the speeches of most of the Presidential candidates, from Obama on the left to McCain (nominally) on the right. Only Ron Paul and Dennis Kucinich have dared suggest we might serve ourselves better by minding our own business.

In statecraft as in war, side effects can prove fatal. If Pakistan collapses, turning into another stateless happy hunting ground for al Qaeda and numberless other Islamic 4GW organizations, our position in Afghanistan will quickly become unsustainable. Our grand strategic position in the whole Middle Eastern/Southwest Asian region will be reduced to a two-legged stool, not the most stable of platforms. Osama in his cave will be distinctly more comfortable than W. in the Oval Office.
How will the Bush administration respond to such a cascade of unfortunate events? By doing what it plans to do anyway: bomb Iran.

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On War #245: Kicking the Can Down the Road

By William S. Lind

A piece in the December 27, 2007 Cleveland Plain Dealer, “Vote on fate of Kirkuk postponed,” by Tina Susman and Asso Ahmed of the L.A. Times, reported that

Kurdish lawmakers agreed Wednesday to a six-month delay in a referendum on whether the oil-rich city of Kirkuk should join the semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan or remain under Iraqi central government control. …

Also Wednesday, the head of the Iraqi parliament’s constitutional review committee, Humam Hamoudi, said he would request a three-month delay in rewriting the national constitution. That would mark the fourth time the target date has been put off.

The delay in the constitutional revision could hinder progress on other issues.

As the Iraqis kick the can down the road, so do the Americans. The American-funded Sunni militia, aka the Concerned Local Citizens or the Awakening, has grown to 72,000 volunteers in nearly 300 communities in Iraq. They have been credited with reducing violence in some of Iraq’s most violent areas. But many people, including some Sunnis, worry that the groups could de-stabilize Iraq.

The concern is a valid one. With our usual charming naiveté, we seem to think the Sunnis have become our friends. But they are merely using us to help them get ready for the next round with the Shiites and, in the case of Kirkuk, the Kurds.

In fact, kicking the can down the road, more formally a strategy of delay, makes good sense in the face of Iraqi realities — provided we do something with the time gained. Regrettably, it appears we are doing little but sitting on our bayonets, waiting, like Mr. McCawber, for something to turn up.
What might we do with this pause between phases of the Iraqi civil war? Obviously, get out. Violence is not likely to diminish much further; at some point it will almost certainly start to rise again. What better moment can we hope for than the present to announce “Mission accomplished” and head for the door?

The Bush administration will not make a decision to withdraw no matter how favorable the opportunity. It has adopted the ugly baby approach, planning to hand the war off to its (probably Democratic) successor.

But what of the Democrats who control both Houses of Congress? Why do they keep funding the war, as they just did again?

The reasons are several, and none of them are pretty. Obviously, Democrats think they will garner more votes in November if the war is still going on with no end in sight. Running against “Bush’s war” appears more promising than ending it.

Most of the leading Democratic Presidential candidates are ambiguous, at best, about ending the war in Iraq if they win. Why? In part, because just as the neo-cons now dominate Republican circles, so the Democratic Establishment is in thrall to the neo-liberals. Both cabals of neos favor a world-dominating American empire, run of course by themselves. We are reminded once again that while there may be, at least on paper, two parties, there is one Establishment. It does not look favorably on ending the games off which it feeds.

Then there is the matter of a certain Small Middle Eastern Country which likes the war in Iraq, and hopes for a war on Iran as well. Said SMEC speaks with a loud voice in Democratic Party circles, the voice of campaign contributions. Never does money speak more audibly than in an election year.

So the politicians will sit and wait while the time we have so dearly bought in Iraq runs out. In no human activity is time more precious than in war. Frittered away, it can never be recovered. There is good reason why Napoleon said, “I may lose a battle but I will never lose a minute.”

If we are to make good use of the time kicking the can down the road has bought us, it falls to the senior military to do so. The moral burden of command demands that they go public and say, “If we are going to get out of Iraq, the time to do so is now.” Some of them may get fired for it, although General Petraeus is probably (again, for a time) untouchable. The Bush White House still will not be moved, but squirm as they might the Democrats in Congress would almost have to act or risk a revolt of their base, which is not very happy at the moment in any case.

Regrettably, as we saw throughout the war in Vietnam, American generals are more likely to step up to the trough than to the plate.
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On War #244: Major Wormwood Reports

By William S. Lind

From: Major Wormwood, III Section (Current Ops)
To: General Screwtape, Chief-of-Staff, Supreme Infernal Headquarters, Chateau de Malpense
Re: End of year net assessment

Sir:

Your Lucifership asked for a short report on the state of the world before the week of December 25, when all Hell is too weak to work. Please forgive my non-use of our wonderful invention, PowerPoint, but we are short of majors to make up the slides.

I am happy to be able to report that our net assessment is favorable. Fourth Generation war, and the disorder it represents, continue to expand their reach. The formerly Christian West, crippled by two of our favorite tools, hubris and ideology, flails helplessly before it. II Section, Intelligence, shares our view that the 21st century promises to be even bloodier than the 20th.

We have suffered what we believe will prove a temporary setback in Iraq. Our Glorious Ally on the Eastern Front, Marshal Mohammed – war be upon him – screwed the goat, to use one of our troops’ expressions. Al Qaeda’s premature enforcement of Sharia led Iraqi Sunnis to rebel, even to the point of making tactical alliances with the Americans. As a result, the level of violence is down.

This is, however, just a calm before the storm. The American leadership does not understand 4GW and persists in seeing the Iraq war in binary terms. It therefore misses the developments favorable to disorder: rising Shiite-on-Shiite violence, endemic crime of every sort, sectarian hatreds that grow ever more bitter and, most important, the lack of anything recognizable as a state. We assess that the current relative quiet in portions of Iraq is illusory and will be followed by further disintegration and stateless disorder. Let me add one minor but happy
assessment from Hell’s standpoint: the American invasion has virtually destroyed Iraq’s ancient Christian community.

Otherwise, the news is everywhere encouraging. Both NATO and the United States are getting bloody noses in Afghanistan and cannot adapt. Western governments’ devilish combination of ignorance and hubris prevents them from accepting the primary Afghan reality, namely that the Pashtun always win Afghan wars.

The spillover from Afghanistan, in turn, is pulling Pakistan apart. We assess that the Pakistani state will disintegrate in the near future, with strategic consequences far more Hellish than anything possible in Iraq. The potential combination of 4GW and loose nukes is one we view with delight.

Adding to the witches’ brew is the likelihood of an American attack on Iran, which we assess as unaffected by the recent American NIE. As you are aware, the American White House has fallen into one of Hell’s favorite traps, a closed system. With outside reality excluded and all decisions a product of court politics, the probability of blunders is almost 100%. The leadership’s erroneous belief that it is now winning in Iraq adds to its already towering hubris. Putting the two together, we assess a 60%-70% probability that American bombers will be hitting targets in Iran by the end of March.

Our optimism, however, is based less on what is occurring in the Islamic world, which we own anyway, than on the West’s internal folly. Here we see on a grand scale the consequences of the West’s abandonment of Our Enemy and its embrace of irreligion, which is another name for Our Father Below.

Having accepted and internalized the cultural Marxism of the Frankfurt School – please offer my most humble greetings to its distinguished members, on whom I know you dine regularly – Western elites embrace anything that promises the West’s destruction. From a military perspective, that includes invasion by millions of immigrants from other cultures, immigrants who regard the West and its traditions with loathing and contempt. Even as they spread Fourth Generation war from one Western country to another, the elites’ ideology forbids any honest discussion of what is going on. Defense is impossible, because no Western country dare acknowledge it is under attack. I beg you offer Hell’s propaganda department my deepest thanks for the wonderful goblin-words it has created to stop all discussion; my two favorites are “racism” and “fascism.”

So long as the West busies itself in sandboxes such as Iraq and Afghanistan and ignores what is happening on its own soil, we assess that Hell’s victory is certain. By the end of the 21st century, our most dangerous opponent for two millennia, the Western, Christian tradition, will be wiped off the earth and out of history. That will, we trust, be worth popping the corks in the Supreme Infernal Headquarters’ mess on more than a few bottles of warm goat urine.
We must put two qualifiers on this assessment. First, we assess a 10% probability that Western publics will rebel against their elites’ cultural Marxism and its demand for self-destruction. With cultural Marxists controlling virtually all Western institutions, including most churches, this is not something Hell need lose a day’s sleep over.

The other qualifier is that Our Enemy could intervene personally and restore “faith” in the West. As you know all too well, that is the sort of thing He has been known to do, often at great cost to Himself, just when things look brightest for us. I am happy to be able to say that assessing the likelihood of such an event requires access to black programs above my clearance level.

(Note: This will be the last On War in 2007. Hell notwithstanding, Merry Christmas! W.S. Lind)

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On War #243: Operationalizing Tactical Successes in Iraq

By William S. Lind

Fourth Generation Seminar

(Note: This On War column is a product of the Fourth Generation War seminar, whose earlier products include the fourth generation war manual FMFM-1A [237 KB PDF]. The seminar, which I lead, is currently composed of U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Army officers, mostly captains. W.S. Lind)

Recent tactical successes in Iraq, especially the reduction in violence in Anbar province and in Baghdad, have led some people to assume that we are now “winning the war.” However, for any tactical successes to add up to a win, they must be operationalized. That is, through operational art, they must be positively related to strategic success. While reducing the level of violence is no doubt necessary for strategic success in Iraq, it does not automatically lead to that goal.

If our enemies in Iraq (and elsewhere) are non-state, Fourth Generation forces, then strategic success is best defined as their opposite, i.e., seeing the re-emergence of a state in Iraq. While Iraq currently has a government, it remains 
largely stateless. Restoring a real state in Iraq requires not just a government but a government that is generally accepted as legitimate. No government created or installed by a foreign, occupying power is likely to achieve legitimacy.

This poses a serious operational obstacle for U.S. forces in Iraq, one that is common in Fourth Generation conflicts. While we can only win if a real state re-emerges, we cannot create such a state, nor be seen as doing so. When it comes to legitimacy, we have a “reverse Midas touch.” The operational question, therefore, is: how do we indirectly encourage and facilitate the re-emergence of a state in Iraq?

The basic answer, in the view of the seminar, is to facilitate a bottom-up re-creation of an Iraqi state by building connectivity among local areas that have achieved a reasonable level of security. There is no guarantee expanding connectivity will eventually lead to a state, but it seems to offer the best chance of attaining that decisive strategic goal.

The seminar’s specific ideas for developing increasing connectivity include:

* Recognize that increased economic activity which raises local living standards is likely to be welcomed by the Iraqi people, and that restoring economic connectivity is a promising tool to that end. Until the American invasion and subsequent dissolution of the Iraqi state, Iraq had a national economy. The basis for a national economy therefore still exists in the minds and experiences of Iraqis (which is an advantage over some other stateless areas). Actions by U.S. forces that could encourage the growth of economic connectivity include:
  o Establish safe roads for commerce between Iraqi cities.
  o Provide capital for businesses that function beyond the local level, e.g., regional banks.
  o Provide matching grants to fund local chambers of commerce, and increase the percentage of the match if the local chambers form regional and trans-regional chapters.
  o Restore the railroads and water transport. Railroads in particular further regional and national commerce.
  o Make traditional tourist and resort areas safe, along with routes to those areas from major cities.

* Beyond furthering regional and national commerce, ideas which could help the growth of connectivity include:
  o Fund the establishment and growth of regional and trans-regional educational institutions and sports leagues.
  o Go beyond traditional “sister cities” arrangements to create “sister state/province” relationships between American states and Iraqi provinces. Such a relationship between, for example, Anbar province and an economically powerful American state such as New York or California could provide multiple inducements to connectivity among local areas in Anbar.
Create something similar to the Boy Scouts. A national Iraqi youth organization that brought young Iraqi men from different sects and regions together could help reduce the recruiting base for sectarian and local militias.

These examples merely illustrate our point, the need and potential for using improved security in portions of Iraq to generate connectivity that may, in time and with luck, lead to the bottom-up creation of a genuine, legitimate Iraqi state, one that is accepted by most Iraqis. While working indirectly to generate such connectivity may seem like a strange approach to operational art to some military practitioners, we believe it does constitute a linkage between tactical successes and the strategic goal, which is the essence of the operation level of war. It should not surprise us that, in Fourth Generation war, operational art changes as much as traditional tactics must change if U.S. forces are to achieve what we can honestly call victory.

On War #242: Academics Awake!

By William S. Lind

Tom Lehrer sang of ivy-covered professors in their ivy-covered halls, and seldom indeed does anything worth reading come from academia. Between the stultifying effects of cultural Marxism, aka Political Correctness, and the narrowness demanded by über-specialization, academia offers only hard and stoney ground to the fragile seeds that are new insights.

Nonetheless, it seems that even academics are waking up to the concept of Fourth Generation war. A few have escaped the White Tower long enough to produce a new book on the subject, Global Insurgency and the Future of Armed Conflict: Debating fourth-generation warfare, edited by Terry Terriff, Aaron Karp and Regina Karp (Routledge, UK). Like most collections of essays, it has its ups and downs, but there are enough of the former to make the volume worth a look.

Global Insurgency begins by outlining the framework of the Four Generations of Modern War, first in a re-print of the original 1989 Marine Corps Gazette article and then in a chapter by Tom Hammes. I disagree with a number of Hammes’s characterizations of 4GW, including defining it as insurgency (that is true only if it is waged outside the state framework, which means Mao’s War of National Liberation was not 4GW), but together these two pieces set the stage well enough.

The next section, a critique of 4GW and the larger Four Generations framework, is disappointing. Most of the chapters fall into one of two categories, Clausewitz worship or complaint that the framework uses history selectively, which all theory
must. The Clausewitzian temple dogs at times work themselves into such a fit they become funny, i.e. denying that World War II was fought within the state system because it was war between alliances (of states, of course).

The better chapters come toward the end of the book, and several are very good indeed. One of the most informative is Paul Jackson’s “Fourth Generation Warfare in Africa: back to the future?” The state system has always been a fiction in most of post-colonial sub-Saharan Africa, which means it’s easy to find 4GW in its purest, pre-First Generation form. Jackson writes,

One of the central difficulties facing analysts and militaries in African conflicts is accurately identifying various groups involved in violence. This is exacerbated by a continuing flux of alliances and temporary agreements, as well as a cycle of group creation and disintegration…

The combatants themselves are difficult to define. Any cursory glance at the literature dealing with rebel movements leads to a number of different definitions: rebels, brigands, subversive elements, gangs, criminals, warlords, militia, etc…

This is encouraged by a an emphasis on a pseudo-feudal system of primitive accumulation, whereby territory is only valued for the resources it holds and those resources are granted as a means of paying subordinates.

Welcome to a world without the state.

Frank Hoffman also offers a fine chapter, “Combating Fourth Generation Warfare,” which he prefers to call Complex Irregular Warfare. Like the FMFM I-A, Hoffman recognizes that classical approaches to war which emphasize physical destruction may be counter-productive:

The traditional way to approach strategic options to impose our will upon an opponent is Delbruck’s two major options. One is the strategy of annihilation, which calls for the substantial if not the total destruction of the enemy force. The alternative approach, more common to the weaker side, is to employ a strategy of exhaustion…

“Incapacitation” may be more appropriate in many cases (in 4GW). We rarely intend or need to annihilate a rebel force, and may find it counterproductive to do so with respect to long-term political objectives.

One of the better ways to learn how to fight 4GW is to look at foreign practice, and Rajesh Rajagopal’s chapter, “Fighting Fourth Generation wars: the Indian experience” offers several suggestions. Under The Indian army’s 4GW doctrine,” he states,
Five elements make up the Indian army’s 4GW doctrine. The first is the limitation on the quantum of force used in operations…Indian forces engaged in 4GW operations get no artillery or close air support. And this principle has almost never been violated…

The third element in the Army’s approach is dominating the affected area…Thus the stress is on blanketing the area with troops more than conducting offensive operations…This approach is somewhat unique to the Indian experience, and it is premised on two important elements: a huge infantry pool…and an acceptance of the inevitable higher casualties.

The volume’s editors add thoughtful perspectives of their own to the collected essays, in the introduction and the conclusion. In sum, Global Insurgency offers enough of real-world, practical value to those stuck with fighting 4GW or helping prepare others to do so to make it worth reading. By the usual standards of academic works, that makes it a masterpiece.

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