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H. R. McMaster

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On War: Lessons to be Learned

H.R. McMaster

Western societies have learned how to kill on an enormous scale, but they may still fight at a disadvantage against agrarian age armies who have not forgotten how to die and know well enough how to kill.

Sir Michael Howard, 1994¹

During the decade prior to the terrorist attacks against the United States in September 2001, thinking about defence was driven by a fantastical theory about the character of future war rather than by clear visions of emerging threats to national security in the context of history and contemporary conflict. Proponents of what became known as military transformation argued for a ‘capabilities based’ method of thinking about future war. In practice, however, capabilities-based analysis focused narrowly on how the United States would *like* to fight and then assumed that the preference was relevant.²

Self-delusion about the character of future conflict weakened US efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq as war plans and decisions based on flawed visions of war confronted reality. This self-delusion has not been limited to the United States; many of the difficulties that Israel experienced in southern Lebanon in summer 2006, for example, can be traced to conceptual flaws similar to those that corrupted US thinking about conflict. A thorough study of contemporary conflict in historical perspective is needed to correct flawed thinking about the character of conflict, help define future challenges to

H.R. McMaster is a US Army Colonel and a Senior Research Associate at IISS.

international security, and build relevant military and civilian governmental capabilities to meet those challenges.

As nations confront multiple sources of violence and threats to their security, understanding the character of future conflict seems difficult. Clausewitz argued that

the first, the supreme, the most far reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish the kind of war on which they are embarking, neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.³

Ensuring that conventional military forces are relevant to the contemporary security environment and capable of coping with threats from hostile states as well as non-state actors should begin with a thorough study of recent and contemporary conflicts to identify implications for how forces ought to be organised, equipped, and trained as well as how leaders ought to be educated. It is clear that many militaries, especially within NATO, have been infected with and have not yet rejected fundamentally flawed concepts concerning future conflict.

The revolution in military affairs

In the 1990s, flushed with the ease of the military victory over Saddam Hussein's military forces in the 1991 Persian Gulf War and aware of the rapid advance of communications, information and precision-munitions technologies, many argued that US and European competitive advantages in these technologies had brought about a 'revolution in military affairs' (a phrase that, once coined, acquired the acronym RMA). It was assumed that, based on the military technological advantages the United States already enjoyed, there would no peer competitor with US military forces until at least 2020. The RMA advocates 'validated' new operational concepts in constructive computer simulations based on attrition models against mirror-imaged future adversaries. These concepts separated war from its political, cultural and psychological context. Military campaigns in these simulations were

essentially reduced to targeting exercises. Influential organisations within the US military such as the US Army's battle labs and J9, the concepts development branch at Joint Forces Command, focused on how US forces might prefer to fight and then assumed that preference was relevant to the problem of future war.

The movement known as 'defence transformation' was firmly rooted in a widely accepted yet fundamentally flawed conception of future war: the belief that surveillance, communications and information technologies would deliver 'dominant battlespace knowledge' and permit US forces to achieve 'full spectrum dominance' against any opponent mainly through the employment of precision-strike capabilities. The language was hubristic. Concepts with such labels as network-centric warfare, rapid decisive operations, shock and awe, and various permutations of effects-based operations embraced what increasingly appeared as a faith-based argument that future war would lie mainly in the realm of certainty and therefore could be won quickly and efficiently, at low cost by small forces.⁴

'Defence transformation' was rooted in a flawed conception of future war

Afghanistan and Iraq

Some observers pointed to the initial campaign in Afghanistan as evidence that revolutionary technologies had indeed changed the character of war. Many of these interpretations of the campaign underestimated the role that a large Northern Alliance army played in the fight to defeat the Taliban. Others acknowledged the role of the Northern Alliance and suggested the possibility of applying to future conflicts the 'Afghan Model' of US-provided air and sea-based firepower combined with indigenous forces. Prior to the coalition attack into Iraq, some suggested that this Afghan model could also win that war cheaply and quickly.⁵

As Stephen Biddle and others observed, however, the initial military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, while revealing increased capabilities of special forces and precision munitions, revealed more continuities than breaks with previous conflicts.⁶ In both campaigns, surveillance and infor-

mation technologies failed to deliver the promised 'dominant battlespace knowledge'. In Afghanistan, at Tora Bora for example, surveillance of the difficult terrain could not compensate for the lack of ground forces to cover exfiltration routes. After a 16-day battle, many al-Qaeda forces, probably including Osama bin Laden himself, escaped across the Pakistan border. In Iraq, as the commander of the US Army's 5th Corps recalled, every mission during the attack to Baghdad was a 'movement to contact', meaning that units had to fight for intelligence and consistently encountered enemy forces about which they had received no advanced warning.⁷ Fedayeen Saddam forces that intermingled with the population surprised coalition forces with attacks on supply convoys. During the Third Infantry Division's crossing of the Euphrates, an Iraqi armoured brigade counter-attacked undetected in a failed attempt to regain control of crossing sites along the river.⁸ In both Iraq and Afghanistan enemy forces employed traditional countermeasures to coalition technological capabilities – measures such as dispersion, concealment, deception and intermingling with civilian populations.

Much of what Coalition forces needed to know about the enemy, such as the degree of competence and motivation among them, could be learned only after engaging in close combat. In Afghanistan, foreign al-Qaeda fighters proved very determined and many threatened to kill Afghan Taliban who refused to fight. During the offensive operation in Iraq, coalition forces faced a wide range of enemy forces, from Republican Guard forces to regular army units, to paramilitary forces, to unconventional militias. All exhibited varying degrees of commitment and skill that could be evaluated only after they were engaged in close battle.

Operation Anaconda, a March 2002 operation in Afghanistan, might have corrected the flawed thinking that would later underpin Coalition planning efforts in Iraq in 2003 and Israeli planning for operations in Lebanon against Hizbullah in 2006. When US intelligence detected a concentration of Taliban forces in the Shah-i-Kot valley, commanders deliberately planned an attack that would include two American infantry battalions reinforced with Afghan and other allied troops. Intelligence preparation for the operation spanned two weeks. US forces focused every available surveillance and target-acquisition capability, including satellite imagery, unmanned aerial vehi-

cles, and communications and signal intelligence assets on a 10×10km box that defined the battleground. Every landing zone for the aerial insertions received extensive unmanned aerial vehicle overflights. Enemy concealment techniques, however, were effective and the fight during *Operation Anaconda* involved a very high degree of uncertainty. On 2 March, infantry air-assaulted almost directly on top of undetected enemy positions. Soldiers came under immediate fire from small arms, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades and machine guns as their helicopters landed. Battalion and brigade command posts were pinned down and commanders fought alongside their men. *Apache* helicopters responding to provide direct fire support were hit and rendered inoperable. The planned second lift of soldiers had to be cancelled. Some units were pinned down by enemy fire during the first night of the battle and through the next day; they including many of the wounded, who could not be extracted until the following night. The unit had deployed with no artillery under the assumption that surveillance combined with precision fire from the air would be adequate. Even the most precise bombs proved ineffective against small, elusive groups of enemy infantry, so soldiers relied heavily on small mortars. As the fight developed over the next ten days, it became apparent that over half of the enemy positions and at least 350 al-Qaeda fighters had gone undetected. The enemy's reaction to the attack was also unexpected. American commanders had expected al-Qaeda forces to withdraw upon contact with the superior allied force rather than defend as they did from fortified positions. It took a combination of small-unit skill, soldier initiative and determined leadership for American forces to shake off the effects of tactical surprise, defeat al-Qaeda attacks on the landing zones, and then mount an offensive.⁹

The lessons of *Operation Anaconda* had no apparent influence on planning for *Operation Iraqi Freedom*. Senior US officials clung to the belief that new technologies and more tightly integrated joint capabilities would deliver increased situation-awareness and precision-fires capabilities such that lighter, smaller units could achieve disproportionate results. Similarly, before the war in southern Lebanon, the Israeli military had unrealistic expectations concerning armed conflict with Hizbullah and failed to estimate adequately its own requirements. As the former chief of the Israeli

Air Force recently observed, fixation with new technologies was ‘addictive and obscured thinking’.¹⁰ War plans envisioned small skirmishes, not a large-scale, conventional military campaign. Prior to the war, only a small

*The Israeli army
was not prepared
for the mission*

number of Israeli special forces received training geared to operations in southern Lebanon. Leaders failed to acknowledge that an operation against Hezbollah would be more than a retaliatory raid. No state of emergency was declared and there were severe delays in mobilisation of reserve forces. The Israeli army was not prepared for the mission.

Between November 2002 and March 2006 Israel Defense Forces conscript military service was reduced, as was reserve duty and training. Budgetary constraints led to a reduction in armoured units.¹¹ The US military was on a similar path prior to 11 September, as the Department of Defense considered a dramatic reduction in the size of the army based on the assumption that technological advances had reduced the requirement for land forces.

Beyond highlighting the limits of so-called transformational technologies, the principal lesson of the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq and southern Lebanon might be that military campaigns must be subordinate to a larger strategy that integrates political, military, diplomatic, economic and strategic communication efforts. The strategy must be grounded in social and cultural realities, focus on achieving clearly defined objectives, and call for resources adequate to achieve those objectives as well as cope with unanticipated conditions. Just as coalition plans for Iraq failed to anticipate the full extent of the collapse of the Iraqi state, the demands of post-conflict stability operations or the growth of an insurgency, Israeli plans did not subordinate military operations to political goals and objectives or fully consider likely enemy reactions. As a result, the Israelis encountered unanticipated military difficulties and performed poorly on the critical battleground of influencing public perception.

The United States, the United Kingdom and their coalition partners are engaged in conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq that advocates of defence transformation never considered: protracted counter-insurgency and state-building efforts that require population security, security-sector reform,

reconstruction and economic development, development of governmental capacity, and the establishment of rule of law. The disconnect between the true nature of these conflicts and pre-war visions of future war helps explain the lack of planning for the aftermath of both invasions as well as why it took so long to adapt to the shifting character of the conflicts after initial military operations quickly removed the Taliban and Ba'athist regimes from power. The disparity also helps explain why the overextension and strain on US land forces was described as a temporary 'spike', why senior military and defence officials resisted reinforcing forces in theatre, and why leaders repeatedly denied the need to expand the size of the army and marines despite the strain on these forces.¹²

Theory over practice

The fundamental question is whether experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq and southern Lebanon have improved our ability to think clearly about the demands of future conflict. It seems obvious that military forces should focus on improving their ability to fight conventional, counter-insurgency, counter-terrorism and stability operations similar to those experienced since 2001. In some quarters, however, theory continues to triumph over practice even as practice points in the opposite direction. For example, a US Air Force major-general argued recently that the difficulties in Iraq are not indicative of the true nature of conflict, but rather that the Iraq War is an aberration – an ill-advised 'hearts-and-minds campaign'. He went on to suggest that America should eschew conflicts like those in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon in favour of 'scenarios' that call for the destruction of an adversary's 'capacity to project power'. He argued that as for the problem of future war, 'air strikes to demolish enemy capabilities complemented by short-term, air assisted raids and high-tech Air Force surveillance' is the answer – not 'colossal, boots on the ground efforts'. He asserted that this approach to future war was more 'culturally compatible' because air power and long-range bombing are America's asymmetrical advantage. He essentially advocated a return to US defence transformation thinking of the 1990s. If America simply invests in its asymmetric technologies, he asserted, it will be able to fight future wars quickly, efficiently, at long distance and at

low cost.¹³ Others in the defence industry also cling to an ahistorical theory of war that experience disproves every day.

It is perhaps only natural that institutions and corporations that stand to benefit from a flawed concept of future conflict would find it difficult to divest themselves of marketing a concept that has been successful and profitable in the past. Yet even the US Army, despite having fought for six years under conditions that run counter to the body of ideas that drove defence transformation, is finding it difficult to cut completely loose from years of wrongheaded thinking. A recent Association of the United States Army pamphlet portrays the army transformation efforts of the late 1990s as completely consistent with the experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. The army brigade organisation, based mainly on computer simulations to validate a smaller, lighter, more efficient organisation that could ‘see first, decide first, act first, and finish decisively’, has not undergone any significant revision. This so-called ‘doctrine of firsts’, based on the assumption of dominant knowledge in future war, has gone largely unchallenged.¹⁴ Indeed, the doctrine of firsts, despite being continually exposed as unrealistic by recent and ongoing combat experience, continues to provide the primary conceptual justification for large acquisition programmes such as the army’s Future Combat System.

How does theory continue to triumph over practice when practice points in the opposite direction? Correcting the persistent flawed thinking about future conflict requires overcoming significant obstacles and acknowledging

that adversaries will force real rather than imaginary wars upon modern military forces until those forces demonstrate the ability to defeat them.

*How does theory
continue to
triumph over
practice?*

First, military forces must abandon the dangerous and seductive illusion that technology can solve the problem of future conflict. Even a cursory examination of conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon should debunk the myth that technology is capable

of ‘lifting the fog of war’ and delivering a high degree of certainty in combat. Recent combat experiences confirm that war on land is fundamentally different from war in the air or at sea; military leaders ought to recognise that

technologies that permit naval and air forces to dominate the fluid media of sea and air do not have a similar effect on land. Indeed, leaders must recognise that war on land will remain fundamentally in the realm of uncertainty due to the human, psychological, political and cultural dimensions of conflict as well as the immanent interaction with adversaries able to use terrain, intermingle with the population, and adopt countermeasures to technological capabilities.

Military forces, their governments and coalitions need to develop improved inter-departmental capabilities for planning and executing state-building and counter-insurgency operations. Indeed, military operations not connected to a fundamentally sound comprehensive strategy are unlikely to succeed even if the stakes are low and the objectives modest. The right organisations and the right people must conduct truly integrated planning and direct integrated operations.

Leaders should also abandon the belief that wars can be waged efficiently with a minimalist approach to the commitment of forces and other resources. The belief that progress toward achieving objectives in Afghanistan and Iraq could be achieved by doing just enough to establish security and help nascent governments and security forces assume responsibility for ongoing conflicts betrayed linear thinking, neglected the interaction with determined enemies, ignored other sources of instability, and was based on a misunderstanding of the nature of those conflicts. Consequences of linear thinking in Afghanistan and Iraq included overestimating indigenous forces' capabilities, underestimating the enemy and the associated expectation that the coalition could soon reduce force levels and shift to an exclusively advisory effort. A short-term approach to long-term problems generated multiple short-term plans that often confused activity with progress.

So-called capabilities-based approaches to force development and constructive simulations that validate those approaches ought to be abandoned in favour of clear-headed thinking about contemporary and future conflict. Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon reveal the need for balanced joint capabilities and additional capacity in other agencies to assist in post-conflict stability and counter-insurgency operations. At the operational level, forces must be capable of conducting counter-insurgency, stability or

state-building operations. At the tactical level, forces must be able to fight under conditions of uncertainty and be employed in sufficient force and in the right combination to establish security and overwhelm the enemy in their area of operations.

Leaders should understand how informal relationships between and among the 'iron triangle' of defence contractors, military establishments and governments can undermine the ability to think clearly about future conflict. In particular, military professionals should be careful not to surrender their intellectual responsibility to think about war to contractors whose interests can easily corrupt their judgement.

A fundamentally flawed and ahistorical understanding of future conflict continues to survive despite recent experience. The best way to correct this thinking is through a thorough study of contemporary conflicts that places those conflicts in historical perspective. We ought to examine the recent conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon the way that Michael Howard suggested one ought to study military history generally – in width, depth, and context. As he also observed, however, no matter how clearly one thinks, it is impossible to predict precisely the character of future conflict. The key is to come close enough to be able to adjust as new challenges to security emerge.¹⁵

Acknowledgements

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Notes

¹ Michael Howard, 'How Much can Technology Change Warfare?', in Michael Howard and John F. Guilmartin, Jr, *Two Historians in Technology and War* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute Monographs, 2004), pp. 5–6, available at <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/ssi/2hist.pdf>.

² 'The United States cannot know with confidence what nation, combination of nations, or non-state actors will pose threats to vital U.S. interests or those of our allies and friends decades from now ... A capabilities-based paradigm – one that focuses more on how an adversary might fight than on whom the adversary might be and

- where a war might occur – broadens the strategic perspective.’ Department of Defense, *Annual Report to the President and the Congress*, 2002, pp. 19–20, available at http://www.dod.mil/execsec/adr2002/pdf_files/chap2.pdf.
- 3 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp. 88–9.
 - 4 For background on defence transformation, see H.R. McMaster, ‘Crack in the Foundation: Defense Transformation and the Underlying Assumption of Dominant Knowledge in Future War’, US Army War College Center for Strategic Leadership, November 2003, available at <http://www.carlisle.army.mil/usacsl/Publications/S03-03.pdf>.
 - 5 For a list of these article and statements, see Stephen Biddle, ‘Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy’, Strategic Studies Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA, November 2002, pp. 1–3.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, p. 6. On Iraq, see Stephen Biddle et al., ‘Iraq and the Future of Warfare: Implications for Army and Defense Policy’, August 2003, US Army War College, available at http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/congress/2003_hr/03-10-21warcollege.pdf. It is interesting to note that this briefing and the paper on which it is based was initially suppressed by a senior officer on the US Army Staff.
 - 7 Interview with General William Wallace, available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/invasion/interviews/wallace.html>.
 - 8 See interview with Lieutenant-Colonel Ernest Marcone, PBS Frontline, available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/invasion/interviews/marcone.html#gap>.
 - 9 On *Operation Anaconda*, see Biddle, ‘Afghanistan and the Future of Warfare’; also Sean Naylor, ‘Operation Anaconda’, paper delivered at the MIT Security Studies Program, 22 March 2006, available at http://web.mit.edu/ssp/seminars/wed_archives_06spring/naylor.htm.
 - 10 Ephraim Inbar, ‘How Israel Bungled the Second Lebanon War’, *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 14, no. 3, Summer 2007, available at <http://www.meforum.org/article/1686>.
 - 11 *Ibid.* See also David Makovsky and Jeffrey White, ‘Lessons and Implications of the Israel–Hizballah War: A Preliminary Assessment’, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy Focus no. 60, October 2006, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/pubPDFs/PolicyFocus60.pdf>.
 - 12 See, for example, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld’s FY2005 budget testimony delivered on 4 February 2004: ‘The increased demand on the force we are experiencing today is likely a “spike”, driven by the deployment of nearly 115,000 troops in Iraq. We hope and anticipate that that spike will be temporary. We do not expect to have 115,000 troops permanently deployed in any one campaign.’ Available at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_moPAH/is_2004_Feb_4.
 - 13 Major General Charles Dunlap, ‘America’s Asymmetric Advantage’, *Armed Forces Journal*, available at

- <http://www.armedforcesjournal.com/2006/09/2009013>.
- ¹⁴ Mark Roche and David Fitchitt, 'Establishing Strategic Vectors: Charting a Path for Army Transformation', *The Association of the United States Army*, April 2007, available at <http://www.ausa.org/pdffdocs/special/may07.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ Michael Howard, 'The Use and Abuse of Military History', in Michael Howard (ed.), *The Causes of War and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 194–5.