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The Changing State of War

The past few decades, from Vietnam to America's more recent adventures in the desert (and including the attacks America has suffered at home) have written a message on the wall of the world that we, as a global power have been slow to read, and perhaps it is because the letters are too large or because we are too close. The message is something like “War Has Changed.”

Whether that change in war is an evolution born out of necessity or something that has morphed into being as power has been redistributed or simply a child of Thomas Friedman's “flattening of the world” (where new tools have made wars not only easier to prosecute but have changed their objectives and blurred border lines, demanding a response) is not completely clear. I am inclined to think that all of these factors and more have contributed to the change. The important thing is that America take a step back and notice the change and act on it, before we are in the position of *reacting* to the attacks of others. Again.

What exactly has changed? Everything, really. The nature of war, in the wake of Mao's transformative progress into 4th Generation warfare, has changed, certainly. The new objectives are different and often ill-defined from the offices of the leaders down to the grunts in the field. (Since 1989 and the fall of the Soviet Union, American foreign policy can be said to be if not

rudderless, at least working without proper maps.) The places in which wars happen are no longer predictable places filled with soldiers, and there may not be a clear field of battle. Sometimes these are cities and villages, and sometimes there are drones in the air. Cyberspace is now a field of battle. Tactics have changed, but arguably not fast enough to keep up, and all of these changes dictate responsive (but not reactive) changes in manpower, technology, and implementation.

One of the central questions of the class was, “Did Gulf War I (Desert Shield & Storm) prepare us for the nature of future conflicts?” I would posit the answer as a resounding “no.” The first Gulf War was anodyne for the post-Vietnam soul of America, but it was also morphine for the patient that needs antibiotics. We won the hearts and minds (mostly at home), but we have always been good at that, from the Berlin Airlift candy to the MREs and gum thrown to Iraqi kids. But a conflict without mission creep, a low casualty level, and fought in a place where all we had to do was kick out an invading force and maintain? I do not mean to minimize the achievement, but this is not how other wars were being fought even then, and certainly not how they would continue to be. (Thomas 2)

According to Thomas Hammes, the biggest change is in the nature of the war itself, beginning with Mao, who passed the baton of 4th Generation warfare to Ho Chi Minh who in turn used it successfully against the French and American occupying forces. (Hammes 74) Faced with what they saw as David and Goliath-type situations (hence the title of Hammes book) where they simply could not achieve victory through conventional means (Hammes 3), these leaders took to the tactic of solidification (as opposed to promulgation) and galvanized their people into hardcore ideologues. (Hammes 129) It has long been the case (though perhaps not universally

accepted) that wars fought by convicted patriots and “true believers” will be more zealously prosecuted, so it makes sense that the first tool of a non-conventional (or perhaps neo-conventional?) mode of war would be to make the people's belief in the cause a weapon of war. Once again, it would be a mistake to undervalue the importance of “hearts and minds.”

Hammes makes the straight-ahead argument that “political will” beats superior numbers and firepower these days due to this changing nature. People who have a vested interest – and ideologies crystallize that better than almost anything for an individual – will fight harder than those who do not. (Hammes 40) This is why America's sometime role as the “world's policemen” (fighting in places where our ideological vested interest is either unclear or nonexistent) does not work, and leads to observations like those of USMC Gen. Smedley Darlington Butler, who at the end of his career asserted that he had been nothing more than a paid thug for corporate interests, and that “war was a racket and always has been.” (class notes)

The change of nature causes the engagements to change also – what used to be characterized as “low-level engagements” or skirmishes now are the primary battles of this kind of war. An invasive force is no longer repelled by the army of that land, or even up against an oppositional invader (like in the Meuse-Argonne) but instead is facing “the insurgent,” who is baptized with blood and ideology, fighting for his home and who brings a list of problems along with him, all of which change the nature of engagement.

The insurgencies of the present day have been a long, slow lesson for larger occupying forces, but the lesson is this; the age of the classic ground offensive is over (Thomas 4), and “*kurtz und vives*” is no longer an achievable reality – the very nature of the conflict demands a protracted war of attrition. (Hammes 152). Do we have tools to deal with what the “insurgent”

brings to the fray just by existing? He *lives* there. He knows the lay of the land, the best places to hide, where the food and bunkers and weapons and ammo are, and who to hide behind. More civilian casualties are a natural consequence of this kind of engagement (Hammes 209) and it remains to be seen if America can stomach a protracted war of this kind in a 24 hour news cycle. “The Mother of All Briefings” was media magic in 1991, but in a 2013 news cycle, wars of attrition will seem to be artificially lengthened by the coverage of every conceivable detail. This “micro coverage” causes citizen fatigue in every story – wars are no different.

One solution to this problem is to alter the nature of the attack – in reality, to alter the objective of warfighting itself. Instead of the classic “taking and holding of territory” – which may not be useful in an age when many resources used by armies such as their wealth and intel are not in fixed geography (Naim 69) – it could be that larger powers can use the tools that smaller unconventional forces use now – disruptions to economy, information and media, if reclassified as acceptable tools of war (and one suspects, simply brought from the darkness where we and everyone else use them anyway) then they could be employed the way insurgent forces employ them, simply on a larger scale. (Haass 4)

The recent sequester-created furloughs of airline employees created massive layovers and a huge public outcry. The recent ricin letters mailed out of Mississippi demanded a manhunt and a quarantine of the facility that processes the mail. It would not take much imagination to imagine these reinterpreted as acts of organized disruptive terrorism. The recent disinformational Twitter messages by the self-styled pro-Assad “Syrian Electronic Army” resulted in billions lost (and then recovered) on Wall Street in minutes. Is this new war?

Moises Naim would further argue that crippling an enemy's war economy, at least, may

be nigh-impossible here in the information age, as these warmaking efforts are often funded illegally through international drug or arms (Naim 69) or logistics trades pulled off with “ghost planes,” (Naim 64) or the money is kept in neutral countries, cyberspace, and/or laundered to unrecognizability. (Naim 133) Of course, it is not just the money, it is the proliferate cloned and black market weapons (Naim 127) and other knock-off resources produced by cheap slave labor that make the cutting off of resources (a primary goal of much conventional warfare) implausible to impossible. There is no “black market” anymore (Naim chapter 5) when the black markets are parts of the acknowledged economies they buoy to such a great degree that the “white” markets would collapse without them. How many companies have pulled their garment manufacturing from Bangladesh? How can we demand that Mexicans do more to fight “the drug war” when the American President admits that it is necessary largely because of American demand for product? The rules that run the world are different; they have evolved beyond our collective ability to simply put a stop to them.

As the rules have changed, our attentions have “pivoted” from areas of the world where we have not had much success in recent decades (Haass 1) like the Mideast (where, Haass with his wonderful phrase “local realities trump American interests” suggests it simply may not be worth the blood and treasure), to the Asian sphere, upon which much of our trade rests (Haass 6), and where perhaps, steps can be taken to secure the area and keep a tenuous balance, unlike the more volatile Arab world. The Thomas piece from *Foreign Affairs* asserts that this influence could be extended with aid of Army-maintained ground missile systems (Thomas 3). This acknowledges the problems of an invading force detailed above, while still providing them a “door opener” (Thomas 8) and would lead to an examination of the personnel changes

recommended by Hammes (289) and the “neither ally or adversary” relationships suggested by Richard Haass (Haass 5). It would use available technology to establish a stabilizing force without redrawing political lines (which might be pointless anyway) and hopefully creating a useful balance in the region.

Balance, no matter how fragile, may be all that is required; borders are porous these days, and patrolled by non-military forces; the INS, Customs, and border cops are not the people who will stop illicit activities and good from crossing borders. They cannot. Borders don't matter to wealth, which is moveable and may have no fixed address, requiring no physical protection (Hammes 11). Additionally, in a flat world, there is the argument that sovereignty is not only eroding (Naim 263) but is near obsolete. How much sovereignty is there in America when one of our largest companies is a “wholly-owned subsidiary of the People's Republic” (as a wise mustachioed History teacher once put it)? Finally, some nations don't even require borders – the crime nation of Transdneister (within the borders of Moldova) defies classification (Naim 58) but is a powerful non-state actor. Or is it?

Regardless, the Thomas argument for implementation of new ground missile systems in Asia (Thomas 2) is a good one inasmuch as it stays ahead of the bleeding edge of war tech. The new technology does not come along to serve the old ways of making war, it creates the new ways of making war simultaneous to its birth – as Hammes puts it; “emerging technology favors the new generation of war rather than the old.” (189) Much as I summarized at the end of my last paper, “One should not send last war's army to fight the new war,” the same can be said for technology – trying to fight the current war with last war's tech is not only unworkable, but it guarantees you will be fighting a different war than an opponent who is more tech integrated.

The new tech will determine the new tactics, and the new tactics will require new training and people who are themselves bleeding edge, which may require an abandonment of the nineteenth-century system of military promotions. (Hammes 289)

It seems like such an obvious point, but the world has changed and warfare must change with it; in a positive, non-reactive way. America should fight wars when it has to, and those wars should be connected to our interests (material *and* ideological) in a concrete and provable way. That message should be gotten out to the media, and if we are going to fight protracted wars of attrition in faraway places, embedded reporters seems like a step back from Stormin' Norman giving a briefing that until five minutes ago lived entirely inside his head. Arguably the biggest loss of Vietnam was that no one sold the American people on why it was a good idea, or even if it was. Hearts and minds again. Neither LBJ or Nixon were great stewards of these, but at this point in history, we should know how to get people behind our wars, and inventing WMDs does not cut it unless satellites and enhanced surveillance bear you out. Colin Powell expended his last bit of credibility figuring that one out.

Once the step of selling the American people on it has been done, then the emergent neo-conventionalism will dictate the tech (like advanced missile systems in the hands of Army outposts instead of simply within the purview of the Air Force and Navy) and objectives that do not necessarily include body counts or territories or maybe even battle lines, but instead projections of power. Not sabre-rattling, to be sure, but a demonstrable commitment to war, and long war, war with a defined set of parameters. War as an ongoing state of affairs. We may become a more militarized society because of this as war (and its implication) is fully accepted as a tool of diplomacy by people outside of those made to read Clausewitz.

That may already have happened. Given the nature of such conflicts and the inability of most people (myself included) to understand them in this relatively new context, they may happen (or almost happen) all the time. 5th Generation warfare may be where war is not recognizable, because it is always ongoing, what we used to think of as conflict or skirmishes which (as I mentioned) are now the primary engagements of the always ongoing war.

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