



The Fallacies of Fourth and Fifth Generation Warfare

by Derek K. Barnett

In evaluating current warfighting trends (and reconciliatory attempts to understand said trends), it appears the conceptual model of Fourth-Generation Warfare (4GW) (and, by extension, Fifth-Generation Warfare (5GW)) has achieved a level of dominant preeminence to the point of doctrinal establishment. Granted, there are frequent (and cogent) counterarguments against inherent 4GW precepts, but said arguments appear to face an almost uphill battle as 4GW/5GW concepts have permeated through the irregular warfighting spectrum, becoming established as “common knowledge.” As these terms have become commonplace, frequently spoken with self-assured absolutism, it is rather troubling that these concepts of future warfare, intended to reveal (as proponents argue) the myopic stasis of “conventional” understanding, have themselves become a closed and limited paradigm. Thus, the inherent problem with 4GW/5GW (and the difficulty in countering these concepts) is the nature of their own conventionality.

One of the single greatest misconceptions of the theory of 4GW is the overly-simplistic reconciliation of the history of warfare into four, distinctly delineated (and linearly evaluated) categories (or five, as 5GW has conceptually developed), the first culminating just two centuries ago.¹ Such a view provides only the most superficial of treatments regarding the history of warfare, any deep examination of which reveals those elements of each “generation” appear/disappear/reappear on the world stage as circumstances dictate. Of course, the tools have changed and it appears that proponents of 4GW/5GW theory placed too much weight on the value of said tools (i.e. the tools dictate the concepts). While it is true that tools can augment concepts, those basic attributes of any discipline, the most “core” of concepts, don’t change and arguably dictate the development and implementation of said tools.

Furthermore, a great deal of value is placed on the seeming modernity of 4GW’s underlying theory, to include its conceptualization. As Hammes states: “Fourth generation warfare uses all available networks – political, economic, social, and military – to convince the enemy’s political decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit... The only medium that can change a person’s mind is information. Therefore, information is the key element of any 4GW strategy.”² However, any student of Sun Tzu can see these same arguments within his overarching strategic view. For but one example, Sun Tzu placed inordinate value on spies,³ demonstrating his understanding of the value of

¹ The Strategist, “The Architect and Fifth Generation Warfare,” *The Strategist* (04 June 2006; accessed 11 January 2010); available from <https://online.apus.edu/educator/temp/ds1253/mils583k001fall09/RequiredReadings/9.mht>; Internet.

² Colonel T. X. Hammes, USMC (Retired), “Fourth Generation Warfare Evolves, Fifth Emerges” *Military Review* (May/June 2007; accessed 11 January 2010); available from <https://online.apus.edu/educator/temp/ds1253/mils583k001fall09/RequiredReadings/.mht>; Internet.

³ Sun Tzu and James Clavell, *The Art of War* (Concord, CA: Delta, 1989).

information, not solely as a commodity in warfare but a politically powerful force in its own right. Granted, development of information-based technology puts one into a position of re-elucidation when evaluating historical strategic philosophy but both “crusaders” and “conservatives” (as conceived by Bacevich,⁴ particularly when considered within the context of 4GW/5GW theoretical environment) can find value in these arguments of antiquity. Furthermore, historic examples abound illustrating the practice of this theory (without necessarily codifying it), particularly as demonstrated through a precursory conceptualization articulated by Arreguin-Toft: direct attack and *barbarism* vs. direct defense and *guerrilla warfare strategy* [emphasis mine],⁵ both of which are illustrations of exactly what Hammes states, using all available resources to convince decision makers on both (or all) sides that their strategic goals are unachievable (e.g. The [little-known] Lusitanian War).

In addition to value being placed on its relative modernity, there appears to be a great deal of focus on its seeming uniqueness. As Captain Bellflower states: “Although some commentators would argue that this term is misleading...its resurgence as a primary method of engaging in conflict with world powers is new.” Captain Bellflower further provides refinement of his assertion: “4GW insurgents seek to combine guerrilla tactics with a willingness to fight across the political, economic, social, and military spectrums to convey a message that will achieve the strategic goal of change the minds of the enemy’s policymakers.”⁶ Such an argument, though, fails to consider the myriad examples of the manifestation of this same phenomenon throughout antiquity. The development and utilization of ninja within Japan during the period of clan warfare (assassination being a most powerful tool to “change the minds of enemy policymakers”) where politics transcended the definitive hierarchy normally, regressively applied serves as a most cogent illustration of this,⁷ as does the employment of mercenaries throughout the history of European warfare [the size and scope of “global” engagement matters not as these polities concerned themselves with what they believed the loci of their worlds to constitute]. Even 4GW’s “unrestricted” extension, 5GW, is not unique, for the concepts addressing its current (still as of yet fully defined) understanding can be found within Sun Tzu, Machiavelli and other historic strategic philosophers.

While speaking in 4GW/5GW terms provides conceptual convenience given its aforementioned preeminence, the underlying theory of 4GW/5GW is far too often taken for granted as an absolute. Perhaps, then, the biggest problem with 4GW/5GW is related to the mantra “change merely provides the illusion of progress.”⁸ As has been stated, 4GW/5GW reconciles a most complex topic far too simplistically, attempting to conceptually organize a basis of understanding in order to counter an enemy that, by 4GW’s very definition, defies conceptual organization. In doing so, 4GW falls into the conventional future-centric (sans historical context) logic that it (falsely) claims to be antithetical to. 5GW then focuses on total-resource exploitation, with an emphasis on digital tools, which is not all that dissimilar to the net-

⁴ Andrew J. Bacevich, “The Petraeus Doctrine” The Atlantic Online (Atlantic Monthly, October 2008; accessed 11 January 2010); available from <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/print/200810/petraeus-doctrine>; Internet.

⁵ Ivan Arreguin-Toft, “How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict” International Security (accessed 11 January 2010); available from <https://online.apus.edu/educator/temp/ds1253/mils583k001fall09/RequiredReadings/4.pdf>; Internet.

⁶ Captain John W. Bellflower, USAF, “4th Generation Warfare” Small Wars Journal (SWJ Magazine, February 2006; accessed 11 January 2010); available from https://online.apus.edu/educator/temp/ds1253/mils583k001fall09/RequiredReadings/War_mht; Internet.

⁷ Derek K. Barnett, “Special Nature of Warriors of Japanese Antiquity” (June 2009; accessed 11 January 2010); available from <http://djdaddyfish.blogspot.com/2010/02/special-nature-of-warriors-of-japanese.html>; Internet.

⁸ Colonel Robert Blevins, USA, Interview by author, 20 January 2008, Ft. Leavenworth, KS.

centric cyber-warfare concept already developed that 4GW/5GW advocates have been incredibly critical of. Thus, 4GW/5GW theory is an inherently conventional argument masquerading as the “next new thing.” Ultimately, 4GW/5GW allows proponents to engage in critical theory: they argue against the “status quo” without presenting a true alternative. And, if the strategic/doctrinal community continues to constrain itself within such apocryphal thought traps, regardless of their intent, it will continue to be surprised and stymied by the activities of insurgents, terrorists and otherwise.

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