



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

A Response to “A Shot in the Dark: The Futility of Long-Range Modernization Planning”

Joseph Purser

A response to *A Shot in the Dark: The Futility of Long-Range Modernization Planning* by Lieutenant Colonel Eric A. Hollister, published by the Institute for Land Warfare, Association of the US Army.

If we are truly in an era of persistent conflict, it makes little sense to spend time determining what capabilities will be needed for an unseen and unknowable future, predictions that almost certainly would not be acted upon by either a wartime Congress looking at immediate needs or a peacetime body looking to trim the budget. What is needed, then, is to incrementally develop the current Army based on the operating environment, near-term future trends and realistic expectations. The nation's strategic documents, which are supposed to guide our force development, can tell us what we should do.

--Eric Hollister

The premise of *A Shot in the Dark* is that the operating environment of the future promises to be so complex it will overwhelm any attempt to anticipate it, especially in the long term. Therefore, argues the author, strategic planners should avoid attempts to describe the future and instead pursue incremental improvements to the force based on what they can understand now and in the near term. This attack on long-range force planning is in fact misguided, as it misidentifies the true root cause of previous Army major acquisition program failures – institutional bias. Put another way, the article unintentionally makes the point that Service bias for and against certain military missions overwhelms the ability to objectively develop long term futures studies, and prevents logical force development based on those predictions.

To be blunt, this opinion piece proves this point in a very convincing manner. Every case study presented points out how the traditional US Army bias for large scale, maneuver warfare has repeatedly resulted in the downplaying of other, “lesser cases” of warfare (notably counter-insurgency [COIN] operations), or the complete suppression of discussion about those lesser cases of war, such as Vietnam. The Army is not alone in this approach to future studies and acquisition. The same can be said for US Air Force's bias for nuclear warfare and independent conventional air campaigns, and the US Navy's preference for blue water, fleet on fleet battles. All three would prefer not to “muddy the waters” by having to deal with other, lesser cases of warfare.

Where the basic premise of the article truly goes awry is its completely contradictory comparative analysis of the futures predictions found in Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) 2010¹ and Secretary Melvin Laird's 1972 "Strategy for Peace: A National Security Strategy of Realistic Deterrence". According to the article the QDR 2010 analysis is fatally flawed due to its lack of specificity. In fact, the QDR is actually quite specific when describing future missions for the Department of Defense (DoD). A better argument can be made that this QDR avoids making choices in a resource constrained environment. What Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said through the QDR 2010 report is that DoD must basically be prepared for all of the missions described within it. Secretary Laird said exactly the same thing in his strategy paper 40 years earlier: be prepared for large scale warfare with a peer competitor, maintain forces and expertise for low intensity conflict, help our partners to defend themselves, and do this through a whole of government approach. Interestingly enough, the article goes on further to laud the 1972 strategy for doing exactly what the author said futures studies are not capable of doing. That is, "Laird had laid out almost an ideal force construct for the next 30 years, but the trends of the day prevented its adoption."

An ideal force construct? That would have been good for 30 years? Such a construct would have to be based on the creation of an accurate vision of the long term future that the title of this article clearly claims is impossible to do.

How could something as prescient as the Laird study not be adopted? What the author very accurately identifies as the problem is Service bias. To quote, "That the Secretary of Defense could not gain any traction for this plan speaks volumes to how decisions were made and money was spent by the services prior to the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986." The complexity of the operational environment did not defeat Secretary Laird's analysis and strategy, service bias did. The question must be asked, as we look to the future, is this article describing a case of "déjà vu all over again?"

A further criticism could be made that the QDR 2010 report should have better described how DoD would be prepared to accomplish each of the missions it prescribes. Secretary Gates could have dictated that the Services would maintain a small training cadre of experts on COIN who would train up general purpose forces as necessary, while maintaining a focus on large scale maneuver warfare. He could have also, as Secretary Laird did, set aside a portion of the active and reserve components for other missions. I would argue that the QDR was not the place to do this. Those decisions should be the result of consultation between the Services, the Combatant Commanders, and the Secretary of Defense as to HOW to accomplish those missions, and with what MEANS. This type of analysis is being done, for one, in the Joint Analytic Agenda.²

Finally, the author almost ends up at the right place with his conclusions. Yes, large capital programs, like fielding a new fleet of main battle tanks or aircraft carriers, come with a great deal of risk. Yes, we should be prepared to incrementally improve those capital assets as technology and changes in the operational environment allow or dictate. Yes, the Services should

¹The QDR is a legislatively-mandated review of Department of Defense strategy and priorities.

² The Analytic Agenda is the process for providing DoD a set of illustrative scenarios and Analytic Baselines that planners use as a starting point for further DoD analysis.

continuously scan the technology horizon for leap-ahead threats or improvements. But the basic argument that long term futures predictions should be avoided is the same myopic thinking the British inflicted on themselves during the interwar period with their, “no war in Europe in the next ten years” strategy. This lack of long term vision led to Britain’s abysmal preparation for war with Adolf Hitler and to their near occupation. Only the German single-focused air campaign using tactical aircraft (service bias?) saved Britain from invasion.

In today’s case, this strategy would sound like, “no new types of adversaries in the next ten years.” It should also be remembered that prudent planning requires anticipation of possible adversaries not just choosing the most likely course of action, but also the most dangerous. To argue that it is futile to prepare for the long term future, whether the most likely or most dangerous, is to tacitly acknowledge the inevitability of the strategic defeat of the United States.

Joe Purser is the Director of a small think tank in the Department of Defense charged with identifying future challenges to the joint force and implications for new concepts and capabilities.

The views presented here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Defense.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).

Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)