

### To Whom Should our Generals Listen?

*Or who should control the debate on the nature of future conflicts*

**David S. Maxwell**

Today there is much being written, discussed and even passionately argued over the nature of future conflicts that the US will face. This debate is critically important as the military enters a new QDR period and develops the future operating concepts for the military and (as US leadership has now fortunately come to realize) the whole of government approach to US National Security challenges. One might ask why this important or perhaps more pointedly, is it really that important?

Experts and pundits will say that understanding the nature of future conflict is important because it must be understood so the proper organizations can be designed, manned, trained, and equipped to operate and if necessary fight in these future environments. Multi-billion dollar budgets will be determined by the requests for future force structure. The US Joint Forces Command recently published the Joint Operating Environment (JOE) which provides useful insights into the nature of future conflicts and conditions the US could see; however, that document has by no means put an end to debates and arguments on the nature of war. In addition, the Capstone Concept for Joint Operations should also put to rest the debates for the time being and form the basis for future operating concepts and resourcing the future force. One could rightly ask that if these are the views of the Joint Forces then the Combatant Commands and the Services should take these documents as the foundation for our future joint force and get on with resourcing the force to operate in this environment and support the concepts called for in the documents.

As leaders (military and senior civilian) read the national security journals and blogs, and attend the multitude of government, academic, and think tank sponsored conferences a pattern should be evident: Although some might argue that focus on the War on Terrorism simplified the world because it provided a focused threat, a counterargument could be made that after September 11, 2001 the US National Security community has made a very complex world even more complex by trying to define the nature and characteristics of war and conflict and the accompanying emerging concepts developed to deal with what were perceived as new types of threats. And more to the point, a select few national security pundits, academics, think tanker researchers have controlled a debate as to the nature of future wars. This debate has at times been described by some as a conflict between the traditionalists versus the crusaders; the “manueverists” versus the “COINdistas”; the major combat operations crowd versus the “irregular warriors”; the conventional soldiers versus the special operators. Regardless of which side one comes down on, all are searching for what can almost be termed the “holy grail”: the unifying concept on the

nature of future war and then the linkage to future operating concepts that support resourcing decisions. And what is really interesting in this debate is that they are all probably partly or even mostly right. But too often they are seen talking past each other, defending their ideas as the right ones and not being willing to take into account that there is more in common, with sometimes the only differences being that they have “coined” a new term.

Future theorists can never get it exactly right, planners, doctrine writers, and concept developers need to get it “about right.” Rather than trying to identify the perfect theory of future conflict and the perfect operating concept of the future it should be recognized that the nature of war is immutable, with two or more sides trying to impose their will on others (whether they be nation states, non-state actors, or networks and of course the population). The underlying emotions that cause conflict that Clausewitz identified (hate and enmity) and the interplay of chance to be hopefully tempered with rational control will always continue to play the defining roles in any conflict. As theorists look at the future of war fighting it should be understood “that war is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to a given case.” The fact that the characteristics of war are ever evolving should be understood even if the nature of war is constant. It is because of the changing characteristics of war that it should be realized that no one can ever “get it right” for the future and that the guiding principle must be to get it “about right” so that flexible and agile concepts and plans can be adapted as the characteristics of conflict evolve. Debate is good at the right time and place. Identifying new and possibly unique characteristics and forms of conflict is important. But trying to develop the perfect concept of future conflict is counterproductive and stifles the development of practical solutions that may allow the military and national security structure to be ready to deal with uncertainty and complexity that the future holds.

For both academics and think tank researchers, published work is a measure of merit. Published research is augmented by the widest possible exposure at conferences and symposia to promote name recognition and career success. Unfortunately there are pundits who also participate in these conferences and symposia and publish their opinions without the same rigor as academics and professional researchers. A select few members of this ad hoc and informal community can be seen as peddling the same ideas over and over again as the answer to all the future US national security problems: from Complex Operations to Full Spectrum Operations, to Hybrid and Irregular Warfare, and a multitude of “designer” organizations and agencies such as Advisor Corps and Theater Military Advisory and Assistance Groups. Fortunately there are many, many important theorists and professionals whose ideas should be studied and debated and do not fall into the above category. Unfortunately, the ones with the loudest voices get the most recognition and visibility.

Making the current security environment even more complex has been the introduction and adoption of many new, often overlapping and even redundant concepts and terminology. This has served to confuse civilian government partners; foreign friends, partners, and allies; policy and decision makers and worst of all the individual Soldier, Sailor, Airman, Marine, and Coast Guardsman. Fortunately there are troops on the ground who are not distracted and they are doing tremendous jobs in this complex environment despite the confusion caused by these debates and all the confusing terms being developed.

The introduction of Irregular Warfare (IW) with Security Forces Assistance (SFA) and accompanying concepts of Train, Advise, and Assist (TAA); Building Partner Capacity (BPC); Organize, Train, Equip, Rebuild, Advise (OTERA); Stability Operations (SO or STABOPS); and Counterinsurgency (COIN), the Indirect Approach or Indirect Means just to name a few all serve to increase the fog and friction of the current operating environment. All of these concepts have been introduced (and in some cases reintroduced; an example being the rediscovery of the COIN theorists of the 1960's) since September 11, 2001 and have been added to the existing concepts of Foreign Internal Defense (FID); Internal Defense and Development (IDAD) and Security Assistance (SA) and related and accompanying activities of Foreign Military Sales (FMS), Foreign Military Financing (FMF), and International Military Education and Training (IMET). The argument is often made that the existing concepts are insufficient for today's security environment and therefore new concepts are required, despite the fact that in the case of SFA and FID probably 95% of the concepts are the same. If these new concepts are required then why do all these traditional security activities still exist? No one has identified these concepts as obsolete and directed that they be stricken from the doctrine and lexicon. This of course has led to fog and friction within the military and its partners.

Leaders should and, *in fact must*, listen to these researchers and academics but they must also consider the agendas of pundits who often have the loudest voices as they push their concepts and terminology. Rarely do any of these pundits call for a reduction and simplification of terminology, doctrine, and concepts. The "new ideas" they push are frequently recycled from past doctrine or accepted historical theories and simply repackaged – Counterinsurgency doctrine being a case in point. In the face of criticism of the perceived military mistakes in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom policy and decision makers believe that these new concepts are the answer to such criticisms. Anything new is good and anything that existed pre-9-11 is no longer relevant. If new doctrine is desired, then developed, accepted and approved, there should be a parallel or corresponding effort to remove obsolete redundant doctrine and concepts so as to reduce the fog and friction for both Soldiers and decision-makers. (The same case can be made for authorities as well with Title 10 and Title 22 funding and authority conflicts and the introduction of 1206 and 1207 funding concepts) Yet no one has taken action to remove the redundancies from doctrine. The only action that comes close is the elimination of the concept (that was not doctrine) called Effects Based Operations (EBO) when the Commander of Joint Forces Command made the decision to eliminate it even in the face of significant service opposition. Part of the rationale for this decision was that it was unhelpful to our tactical and operational units and did not add value to planning and conducting operations at the operational and strategic levels. While some redundancies may be necessary or even useful this should be a deliberate.

While leaders may pay inordinate attention to pundits as they argue about who is right and wrong about the future of conflict; one of the greatest military resources available today is overlooked. The military has its own intellectual and academics that are at least equal to and in many ways superior to today's pundits and civilian "think tankers." This military "think tank" is the informal network of US military professional military education (PME) institutions. A survey of the professional military journals reveals that there are US military officers from all services that are producing a tremendous body of warfighting knowledge today. These officers have two distinct advantages over their civilian counterparts. First, these officers have the most recent and

relevant experience fighting in today's conflicts and have participated in the evolutionary and at times revolutionary changes in the characteristics of conflicts. Second, and perhaps most important is that these officers have the most vested interest in getting "about right" the future concepts and understanding the changing characteristics of war (even while acknowledging that the underlying nature of war remains constant). They will be returning to the war(s) after their "sabbaticals" at these military institutions of higher learning and will have the opportunity to put into practice the concepts they develop and live the future characteristics of war they postulate. For these reasons alone these Captains, Majors, and Lieutenant Colonels and Warrant Officers and Senior Non-Commissioned Officers should be listened to and given the hearing that they have earned. Before accepting a theory or concept it should be critically reviewed by these men and women who will live with the implementation. Perhaps even "Napoleon's Corporal" should be consulted as well!! The real challenge is how to harness these professionals and benefit from their knowledge and experience.

However, there appears to be a tendency to listen to those that are not in uniform and it is also fashionable to listen to foreign advisors. As stated, all ideas should be examined but just because an advisor is a public figure or a foreign expert does not mean that theories and concepts produced by them should be automatically accepted. As has been shown in recent writings on Operation Iraqi Freedom, the majority of General Petraeus' "brain trust" were serving uniformed officers such as Mike Meese and Pete Mansoor. Yes, General Petraeus listened to non-uniformed personnel and foreign advisors but it should be remembered that his core of planners and advisors were in uniform.

As leaders ponder the characteristics of conflict and the development of future operating concepts, the default should be to listen to and read and trust the writings of those who are serving military professionals. The future Mike Meese's and Pete Mansoor's are currently thinking, writing, and debating the issues at Leavenworth, Quantico, Newport, Montgomery, Monterey, McNair, Carlisle, and Norfolk (and though lesser known, at Ft Bragg's Special Warfare Center and Hurlburt's Joint Special Operations University as well). These institutions are the major repositories for critical thinking and writing and the nation's leadership can and should benefit from the discussions and writings emanating from them. This is a de facto "military think tank" with great potential to inform and contribute to the debates and development of future operating concepts. This loose "network" of higher learning is the most important "think tank" available to the US military and the US National Security community. If the individual efforts of these institutions and their students could be harnessed and effectively linked, the members of this "network" could be the ones controlling the debates and developing future operational concepts. Recognizing that there are no "holy grails" for predicting the characteristics of future conflict and the development the perfect operational concepts, these institutions and students are producing the answers that are "about right." These officers/students have the highest motivation of all as they have to return to the wars of the future and live with and execute the future concepts they develop. The challenge for US military and civilian leaders is how to take advantage of of their thinking.

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