Understanding Fourth Generation War

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RATHER THAN commenting on the specifics of the war with Iraq, I thought it might be a good time to lay out a framework for understanding that and other conflicts. I call this framework the Four Generations of Modern War.

I developed the framework of the first three generations during the 1980s, when I was laboring to introduce maneuver warfare to the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC).[2] The Marines kept asking, "What will the Fourth Generation be like?" The result was an article I co-authored for the *Marine Corps Gazette* in 1989: "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation."[3] (Our troops reportedly found copies of the article in the caves at Tora Bora, the al-Qaeda hideout in Afghanistan.)

Modern Warfare

The Four Generations began with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, the treaty that ended the Thirty Years' War. With that treaty, the state established a monopoly on war. Previously, many different entities had fought wars—families, tribes, religions, cities, business enterprises—using many different means, not just armies and navies. (Two of those means, bribery and assassination, are again in vogue.) Now, state militaries find it difficult to imagine war in any way other than fighting state armed forces similar to themselves.

The First Generation. The First Generation of Modern War, war of line-and-column tactics, where battles were formal and the battlefield was orderly, ran roughly from 1648 to 1860. The relevance of the First Generation springs from the fact that the battlefield of order created a military culture of order. Most of the things that distinguish military from civilian—uniforms, saluting, careful gradations of rank—were products of the First Generation and were intended to reinforce the culture of order.

The problem is that, around the middle of the 19th century, the battlefield of order began to break down. Mass armies, soldiers who actually wanted to fight (an 18th-century soldier's main objective was to desert), rifled muskets, then breechloaders and machine guns, made the old line-and-column tactics at first obsolete, then suicidal.

The problem since then has been a growing contradiction between military culture and the increasing disorderliness of the battlefield. The culture of order that was once consistent with the environment in which it operated has become more and more at odds with it.

The Second Generation. Second Generation War was one answer to the contradiction between the culture of order and the military environment. Developed by the French Army during and after World War I, Second Generation war sought a solution in mass firepower, most of which was indirect artillery fire. The goal was attrition, and the doctrine was summed up by the French as "the artillery conquers, the infantry occupies." Centrally controlled firepower was carefully synchronized (using detailed, specific plans and orders) for the infantry, tanks, and artillery in a "conducted battle" where the commander was, in effect, the conductor of an orchestra.

Second Generation war came as a great relief to soldiers (or at least their officers) because it preserved the culture of order. The focus was inward, on rules, processes, and procedures. Obedience was more important than initiative. In fact, initiative was not wanted because it endangered synchronization. Discipline was top-down and imposed.

Second Generation war is relevant today because the U.S. Army and USMC learned Second Generation war from the French during and after World War I, and it remains the American way of war, as we are seeing in Afghanistan and Iraq. To Americans, war means "putting steel on target."

Soldier, UK Ministry of Defence

British paratroopers on patrol in Northern Ireland. Note that protective screens on the center vehicles are similar to those added to Stryker combat vehicles in Iraq.

Aviation has replaced artillery as the source of most firepower, but otherwise (and despite the USMC's formal doctrine, which is Third Generation maneuver warfare), the U.S. military today is as French as white wine and cheese. At the USMC desert warfare training center in California, the only thing missing is the tricolor and a picture of General Maurice Gamelin in the headquarters. The same is true at the Army's Armor School at Fort Knox, Kentucky, where one instructor began his class by saying, "I don't know why I have to teach you all this old French crap, but I do."

The Third Generation. Third Generation war, also a product of World War I, was developed by the German Army and is commonly known as blitzkrieg or maneuver warfare. Third Generation war is based not on firepower and attrition but speed, surprise, and mental as well as physical dislocation. Tactically, in the attack, a Third Generation military seeks to get into the enemy's rear areas and collapse him from the rear forward. Instead of "close with and destroy," the motto is "bypass and collapse." In the defense, it attempts to draw the enemy in, then cut him off. War ceases to be a shoving contest, where forces attempt to hold or advance a line. Third Generation war is nonlinear.

Tactics change in Third Generation war, as does military culture. A Third Generation military focuses outward, on the situation, the enemy, and the result the situation requires, not inward on process and method. During 19th-century wargames, German junior officers routinely received problems that could only be solved by disobeying orders. Orders themselves specified the result to be achieved, but never the method (Auftragstaktik). Initiative was more important than obedience. (Mistakes were tolerated as long as they came from too much initiative rather than too little.) And, it all depended on self-discipline, not imposed discipline. The Kaiserheer and the Wehrmacht could put on great parades, but in reality, they had broken with the culture of order.

The Fourth Generation. Characteristics such as decentralization and initiative carry over from the Third to the Fourth Generation, but in other respects the Fourth Generation marks the most radical change since the Peace of Westphalia. In Fourth Generation war, the state loses its monopoly on war. All over the world, state militaries find themselves fighting nonstate opponents such as al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. Almost everywhere, the state is losing.

Fourth Generation war is also marked by a return to a world of cultures, not merely states, in conflict. We now find ourselves facing the Christian West's oldest and most steadfast opponent, Islam. After about three centuries on the strategic defensive, following the failure of the second Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683, Islam has resumed the strategic offensive expanding outward in every direction. In Fourth Generation war, invasion by immigration can

1st Armored Division soldiers on patrol in downtown Fallujah, Iraq, May 2003.

US Army

be at least as dangerous as invasion by a state army.

Nor is Fourth Generation war merely something we import, as we did on 9/11. At its core lies a universal crisis of legitimacy of the state, and that crisis means many countries will evolve Fourth Generation war on their soil. America, with a closed political system (regardless of which party wins, the Establishment remains in power and nothing really changes) and a poisonous ideology of multiculturalism, is a prime candidate for the homegrown variety of Fourth Generation war, which is by far the most dangerous kind.

Where does the war in Iraq fit into this framework? I suggest that the war we have seen thus far is merely a powder train leading to the magazine. The magazine is Fourth Generation war by a wide variety of Islamic nonstate actors, directed at America and Americans (and local governments friendly to America) everywhere. The longer America occupies Iraq, the greater the chance the magazine will explode. If it does, God help us all.

For almost 2 years, a small group has been meeting at my house to discuss how to fight the Fourth Generation war. The group is made up mostly of Marines, but it includes one Army officer, one National Guard captain, and one foreign officer. We felt somebody should be working on the most difficult question facing the U.S. Armed Forces, and no one else seemed to be.

Group members recently decided it was time to go public with a few of the ideas it has come up with. We have no magic solutions to offer, only some thoughts. We recognized from the outset that the whole task might be hopeless; state militaries might not be able to come to grips with Fourth Generation enemies no matter what they do. But for what they are worth, here are some of our thoughts.

Points to Ponder

If America had some Third Generation ground forces capable of maneuver warfare, we might be able to fight battles of encirclement. The inability to fight battles of encirclement is what led to the failure of Operation Anaconda in Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda stood, fought us, and got away, suffering few casualties. To fight such battles we need some true light infantry that can move farther and faster on its feet than the enemy can, has a full tactical repertoire (not just bumping into the enemy and calling for fire), and can fight with its own weapons instead of depending on supporting arms. We estimate that USMC infantry today has a sustained march rate of 10 to 15 kilometers per day; German World War II line, not light, infantry could sustain 40 kilometers.

Fourth Generation opponents will not sign up to the Geneva Conventions, but some might be open to a chivalric code governing how war with them would be fought. This is worth exploring.

How U.S forces conduct themselves after the battle might be as important in Fourth Generation war as how they fight the battle.

What the USMC calls cultural intelligence is of vital importance in Fourth Generation war, and it must go down to the lowest rank. In Iraq, the Marines seem to be grasping this much better than the U.S. Army.

What kind of people do we need in Special Operations Forces (SOF)? We think minds are more important than muscles, but it is not clear all U.S. SOF understand this.

One key to success is integrating troops as much as possible with the local people. Unfortunately, the U.S. doctrine of force protection works against integration and generally hurts us badly. A quote from the minutes of one of our meetings says, "There are two ways to deal with the issue of force protection. One way is the way we are currently doing it, which is to separate ourselves from the population and to intimidate them with our firepower. A more viable alternative might be to take the opposite approach and integrate with the community. That way you find out more of what is going on and the population protects you. The British approach of getting the helmets off as soon as possible may actually be saving lives."[4]

What "wins" at the tactical and physical levels might lose at the operational, strategic, mental, and moral levels, where Fourth Generation war is decided. Martin van Creveld argues that one reason the British have not lost in Northern Ireland is that the British Army has taken more casualties than it has inflicted.[5] This is something the Second-Generation U.S. military has great trouble grasping because it defines success in terms of comparative attrition rates.

We must recognize that in Fourth Generation war, we are the weaker, not the stronger party, despite all our firepower and technology.

What can the U.S. military learn from cops [police officers]? U.S. Army Reserve and National Guard units include lots of cops. Are we taking advantage of what they know?

One key to success in Fourth Generation war might be "losing to win." Part of the reason the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are not succeeding is that our initial invasion destroyed the state, creating a happy hunting ground for Fourth Generation forces. In a world where the state is in decline, if you destroy a state, it is difficult to recreate it. Another quote from the minutes says, "[W]hile war against another state may be necessary, one should seek to preserve that state even as one defeats it. Grant the opposing armies the 'honors of war,' tell them what a fine job they did, make their defeat 'civilized' so they can survive the war institutionally intact and then work for your side. This would be similar to 18th-century notions of civilized war and contribute greatly to propping up a fragile state. Humiliating the defeated enemy troops, especially in front of their own population, is always a serious mistake but one that Americans are prone to make. [The] 'football mentality' we have developed since World War II works against us.'"[6]

In many ways, the 21st century will offer a war between the forces of Fourth Generation war and those of the Brave New World (BNW). Fourth Generation forces understand this, while the international elites that seek BNW do not. The minutes read, "Osama bin-Laden, though reportedly very wealthy, lives in a cave. Yes, it is for security, but it is also leadership by example. It may make it harder to separate (physically or psychologically) Fourth Generation war leaders from their troops. It also makes it harder to discredit those leaders with their followers. This contrasts dramatically with the BNW elites who are physically and psychologically separated (by a huge gap) from their followers. (Even the generals in most conventional armies are to a great extent separated from their men.) The BNW elites are in many respects occupying the moral low ground but don't know it."[7]

In the Axis occupation of the Balkans during World War II, the Italians in many ways were more effective than the Germans. The key to their success is that they did not want to fight. On Cyprus, the U.N. commander rated the Argentine battalion as more effective than the British or the Austrians because the Argentines did not want to fight. What lessons can U.S. forces draw from this?

How would the Mafia do an occupation?

When we have a coalition, what if we let each country do what it does best; for example, having the Russians handle operational art, the U.S. firepower and logistics, and the Italians the occupation?

How could the U.S. Department of Defense's (DOD's) concept of Transformation be redefined to come to grips with Fourth Generation war? If you read the current *Transformation Planning Guidance* put out by DOD, you will find nothing on Fourth Generation war, indeed nothing that relates at all to either of the two wars we are now fighting; it is oriented toward fighting state armed forces that fight us symmetrically.[8]

We asked, "Will Saddam's capture mark a turning point in the war in Iraq?" The conclusion?

Don't count on it. Few resistance fighters have been fighting for Saddam personally. Saddam's capture might lead to a fracturing of the Ba'ath Party, which would move us further toward a Fourth Generation situation where no one can re-create the state. It might also tell the Shiites that they no longer need America to protect them from Saddam, giving them more options in their struggle for free elections. However, if the U.S. Army used the capture of Saddam to announce the end of tactics that enrage ordinary Iraqis and drive them toward active resistance, it might buy us a bit of de-escalation. (But I do not think we will be that smart.)

"Getting It"

When it comes to Fourth Generation war, it seems no one in the U.S. military "gets it." Recently, a faculty member at the National Defense University wrote to USMC General James Mattis, commander, 1st Marine Division, asking for his views on the importance of reading military history. Mattis responded with an eloquent defense of making time to read history, one that should go up on the wall at all of our military schools: "Thanks to my reading, I have never been caught flatfooted by any situation. It doesn't give me all the answers, but it lights what is often a dark path ahead."[9]

Still, even such a capable and well-read commander as Mattis seems to miss the point about Fourth Generation war. He said, "Ultimately, a real understanding of history means that we face *nothing* new under the sun. For the 'Fourth Generation of War' intellectuals running around today saying that the nature of war has fundamentally changed, the tactics are wholly new, and so on, I must respectfully say, 'Not really.'"[10]

Well, that is not quite what Fourth Generation intellectuals are saying. On the contrary, we have pointed out over and over that the Fourth Generation is not novel, but a return—specifically a return to the way war worked before the rise of the state. Now, as then, many different entities, not just governments of states, will wage war, and they will wage war for many different reasons, not just "the extension of politics by other means." They will use many different tools to fight war, not restricting themselves to what we recognize as military forces. When I am asked to recommend a good book describing what a Fourth Generation world will be like, I usually suggest Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century.*[11]

We also are not saying that Fourth Generation tactics are new. On the contrary, many of the tactics Fourth Generation opponents use are standard guerrilla tactics. Other tactics, including much of what we call terrorism, are classic Arab light cavalry warfare carried out with modern technology at the operational and strategic, not just tactical, levels.

Much of what we are facing in Iraq today is not yet Fourth Generation war, but a War of National Liberation fought by people whose goal is to restore a Ba'athist state. But as that goal fades and those forces splinter, Fourth Generation war will come more and more to the fore. What will characterize it are not vast changes in how the enemy fights but, rather, in who fights and what they fight for. The change in who fights makes it difficult to tell friend from foe. A good example is the advent of female suicide bombers. Do U.S troops now start frisking every Muslim woman they encounter? The change in what our enemies fight for makes impossible the political compromises that are necessary to ending any war. We find that when it comes to making peace, we have no one to talk to and nothing to talk about. The end of a war like that in Iraq becomes inevitable: the local state we attacked vanishes, leaving behind either a stateless region (as in Somalia) or a façade of a state (as in Afghanistan) within which more nonstate elements rise and fight.

Mattis is correct that none of this is new; it is only new to state armed forces designed to fight other state armed forces. The fact that no state military has recently succeeded in defeating a nonstate enemy reminds us that Clio, the patron goddess of history, has a sense of humor; she teaches us that not all problems have solutions. ***MR***

NOTES

1. This article is a slightly edited compilation of short commentaries published by William S. Lind on the subject of "Fourth Generation Warfare." Used by permission.
2. The word "generation" as used here is shorthand for "dialectically qualitative shift."
3. William S. Lind, COL Keith Nightengale, CPT John F. Schmitt, COL Joseph W. Sutton, and LTC Gary I. Wilson, "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation, *Marine Corps Gazette* (October 1989): 22-26. Published simultaneously in *Military Review* (October 1989): 2-11.
4. Seminar minutes are not available to the public.
5. Martin van Crevald, lecture, Norwegian Naval Academy, Bergen, Norway, 14 May 2004.
6. Minutes.
7. Ibid.
8. U.S. Department of Defense, *Transformation Planning Guidance* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, April 2003), on-line at <www.defenselink.mil/brac/docs/transformationplanningapr03.pdf>, accessed 22 July 2004.
9. GEN James Mattis, letter to a faculty member at the National Defense University. No other information given.
10. Ibid.
11. Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979).

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