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The Immutable Nature of War

LtGen USMC (Ret) Paul Van Riper



Paul Van Riper believes that no amount of new technology will ever change the basic nature of war, which he calls a “terrible, uncertain, chaotic, bloody business.”

In Millennium Challenge 2002, a \$250 million war game designed to test the new technologies and concepts of transformation and network-centric warfare—in which U.S. forces are data-linked with one another as never before—Lt. Gen. Paul Van Riper, former president of the Marine Corps University, was asked to command the "enemy" forces. In the first days of that mock battle, he used unconventional methods, including a preemptive attack that featured air-, sea-, and ground-launched cruise missiles to sink 16 American ships. After the American forces decided to refloat the ships and restart the game, Van Riper stepped aside from his role, contending that the rest of the game was scripted for American victory. In this interview, Van Riper explains the peril of placing too much faith in technology at the expense of a deeper understanding of the nature of war. (For another view on transformation, see [Transforming Warfare.](#))

Technology's impact

NOVA: How has technology changed the nature of war?

Van Riper: When I look at any of the modern technology—whether it's precision-guided munitions, some of the automated command and control, the use of space, the overhead surveillance systems, and so on—I appreciate that technology. But I try to take a long view. Look back over the course of history. There are many moments that could have been called break points because of technology. People at the time thought the world would be fundamentally different because of that technology. Gunpowder would be an example. Use of gas in World War I. Atomic and nuclear weapons.

In reality, the fundamental nature of war hasn't changed, won't change, and, in fact, can't change. The nature of war was probably best explained and articulated by the Prussian general and theorist Carl von Clausewitz, who wrote the classic *On War*. In the book, he lays out the nature of war, which is, first of all, fundamentally uncertain. There is no way to predict how any war will turn out. As he said, it has its own dynamics as it unfolds.

You have the element of friction on the battlefield, for example. You can't account for friction. It just occurs. It's everything from a fuel tank that leaks and causes an airplane or a vehicle not to be able to perform its function, to an accidental discharge that a young soldier makes, to weather conditions. All of these have an interplay that causes the friction that leads to uncertainty.

So if you understand the fundamental nature of war, you realize that it's not going to change. What is changing—in fact, is always changing—is the character and form of war, and the technology is what influences that character and form. We need to understand that and be careful of it, but it's not what should drive us.

NOVA: Isn't the current revolution—transformation, network-centric warfare—supposed to change how war is fought?

Van Riper: We hear many terms, whether it's "transformation," "military technical revolution," "revolution of military affairs," all indicating something revolutionary has happened that's going to change warfare. Nothing has happened that's going to change the fundamental elements of war. The nature of war is immutable, though the character and form will change. The difficulty is that those who put forth this argument believe that something fundamentally has changed, and you can change very quickly without thinking your way through it. They want to apply the technology without the brainpower.

NOVA: You don't think that transformation and network-centric warfare are powerful ideas?

Van Riper: My experience has been that those who focus on the technology, the science, tend towards sloganeering. There's very little intellectual content to what they say, and they use slogans in place of this intellectual content. It does a great disservice to the American military, the American defense establishment. "Information dominance," "network-centric warfare," "focused logistics"—you could fill a book with all of these slogans.

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What I see are slogans masquerading as ideas. In a sense, they make war more antiseptic. They make it more like a machine. They don't understand it's a terrible, uncertain, chaotic, bloody business. So they can lead us the wrong way. They can cause people not to understand this terrible, terrible phenomenon.

NOVA: But technology evolves. Is it vitally important to continue to pursue new technology?

Van Riper: Anyone who understands war would never deny the place of technology. It has a very prominent place, a very important place. The American nation needs to invest all that it can afford in new technologies for the military. It just needs to be very careful that that investment supports an operating idea or concept. It's not technology for technology's sake. Worst of all would be for technology to lead the military instead of the ideas leading the development of the technology.

The first thing you have to understand is how you plan to fight in the future or in a particular engagement, a particular war. And once you understand how you're going to fight, then you bring the technology to it. If you lead with the technology, I think you're bound to make mistakes.

NOVA: You're talking about the difference between the art and the science of war.

Van Riper: Yes. The art of war and the science of war are not coequal. The art of war is clearly the most important. It's science in support of the art. Any time that science leads in your ability to think about and make war, I believe you're headed down a dangerous path.

The art is the thinking. It is the intellectual underpinnings of war. It's understanding the theory and the nature. It's understanding how it is you want to bring combat power to bear, and what the operating concepts are. The science is represented by the weapons. It's represented by the ammunition. It's represented by the command and control, and by the communications, the space-based systems, for example.

Out of Afghanistan

NOVA: What lessons could be learned from the operation in Afghanistan? Was that a new kind of battlefield?

Van Riper: In the case of Afghanistan, I saw a unique combination, a new organization, in which special operational forces were working directly with what in the past would have been assets we would have identified as strategic air assets—B-52 bombers in particular. You had something nobody had envisioned before. The forces in theater and on the ground were able to adapt the tactics and techniques they used to what they faced. That's the magic of it: not to be locked into some sort of organization, some strict way of how you plan to do things, but to adapt in the face of an enemy. That was the encouraging thing—not the technology per se, but the ideas about how we're going to use that technology.

I think one of the fundamental lessons that should have been learned from Afghanistan is the ability to understand another culture. As Americans we're sort of arrogant in many, many ways about other cultures. We don't study them, we don't appreciate them. If we'd gone in there with units on the ground who didn't appreciate the culture, who couldn't immerse themselves in it and adapt to it, we'd have had a lot different outcome than we did. So if there's anything we need to look to in the future beyond continuing to develop the technology, it is to understand how we want to fight, and to become much more aware of the various regions and peoples of the world—how they think, how they understand the world, and how we relate to them.

NOVA: What is the response to the new ways America is fighting?

Van Riper: If I had watched what happened in Afghanistan and was an enemy of the United States, there are a number of things I would have been concerned about. And I would have wanted to have prepared myself not to be affected by them.

First, of course, is precision-guided munitions. It's clear that if the United States can locate you on the ground and identify you, its ability to take you out is pretty much above 80 or 90 percent. So how do I avoid being a target? There are a number of things you can do in terms of reducing your signatures or disguising who you are. If you had the means, for instance, you could bring the stealth technology that we're familiar with in aircraft to equipment on the ground. It's unlikely that anyone like Al Qaeda or the Taliban could do that, but some more modern enemies might.

If I couldn't do things like that, then I would certainly spread out. I wouldn't present a target in one location. I would take advantage of places where America's technology doesn't work: in the cellars of buildings or in caves, where some of this technology can't see or identify me. So I would focus on how to reduce my signature and take away the Americans' ability to surveil and have reconnaissance on my positions.

War is about adapting. Any potential enemy as well as we, the United States, if we didn't adapt, learn, and evolve from our past experiences, we would be a species or a nation that would not survive. And any enemy that wants to survive against the United States can't fight like some of our recent enemies have, or they won't survive.

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But just because the United States has overwhelming forces (or at least we Americans perceive that it does) and will for the foreseeable future, shouldn't make us believe that we're always going to dominate on that future battlefield. Many enemies are not frightened by that overwhelming force. They put their minds to the problem and think through: how can I adapt and avoid that overwhelming force and yet do damage against the United States? We've seen some of that in the latter stages of the war in Iraq, where an enemy that was defeated in a conventional battle is using some of the same techniques that the United States saw in Vietnam.

Critiquing a war game

NOVA: The U.S. military has learned some of its techniques in war games like Millennium Challenge 2002. What is the overall purpose of a war game?

Van Riper: War games are to learn a number of different things. Depending how they're designed, you could learn about a particular piece of equipment. You could learn about a new type of doctrine, the style that you want to incorporate some tactic or technique or procedure. Or you could have a new operating concept, a brand new idea of how you wanted to fight in the future. So war games can be for experimenting with new ideas, or they can be practicing current ideas to become more proficient or to gain greater insight into those ideas.

NOVA: What was your experience with Millennium Challenge?

Van Riper: I had a great deal of concern about the ideas that they were experimenting with in this particular exercise. I say that because I didn't think the ideas were intellectually worthy of being tested for that sort of money. Unfortunately, from where I sat, and I think I had a pretty good view, these ideas were never truly tested. Yet the conclusion drawn at the end of the exercise was that they had been and that they were worthy of adoption by our operating forces. I think they're very shallow. They are fundamentally flawed. They have no true intellectual content. And yet they're being, in my view, foisted on our operational commanders.

I believe there were lessons that could have been learned from Millennium Challenge and applied in Iraq that weren't. Some of them were lessons that in the actual fighting might not have been lessons we needed; we learned them but didn't need to use them. Others we could have used, particularly, for example, in what would be called the low-intensity phase. That's the phase of insurgency that we found ourselves in after the supposed end of major combat operations. There were some things we saw but not in finite detail in Millennium Challenge that might have helped if we'd have thought a little bit more about them before Operation Iraqi Freedom.

NOVA: Was the game rigged?

Van Riper: There were accusations that Millennium Challenge was rigged. I can tell you it was not. It started out as a free-play exercise, in which both Red and Blue had the opportunity to win the game. However, about the third or fourth day, when the concepts that the command was testing failed to live up to their expectations, the command then began to script the exercise in order to prove these concepts.

This was my critical complaint. You might say, "Well, why didn't these concepts live up to the expectations?" I think they were fundamentally flawed in that they leaned heavily on technology. They leaned heavily on systems analysis of decision-making.

NOVA: So do you think Millennium Challenge 2002 was a waste?

Van Riper: I'm angered that, in a sense, \$250 million was wasted. But I'm even more angry that an idea that has never been truly validated, that never really went through the crucible of a real experiment, is being exported to our operational forces to use.

What I saw in this particular exercise and the results from it were very similar to what I saw as a young second lieutenant back in the 1960s, when we were taught the systems engineering techniques that Mr. [Robert] McNamara [Secretary of Defense under Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson] had implemented in the American military. We took those systems, which had good if not great utility in the acquisition of weapon systems, to the battlefield, where they were totally inappropriate. The computers in Saigon said we were winning the war, while out there in the rice paddies we knew damn well we weren't winning the war. That's where we went astray, and I see these new concepts potentially being equally as ill-informed and equally dangerous.

NOVA: Part of your victory in Millennium Challenge was based on your knowledge that the U.S. had a preemptive doctrine. How did you take advantage of that?

Van Riper: My belief at the outset of Millennium Challenge was that Blue believed it had a monopoly on preemption, and it would strike first. And, of course, in any war game I was familiar with up to that point, that had never been the case. The U.S. had only gone to war as a result of some aggression by an enemy, and so always had to react. Now that it was announced policy that we reserved the right to do that, the Blue force was going to take full advantage of it and plan to strike first.

"If it was going to be a fight, I was going to get in the first blow."

So I simply stepped back and said, "What advantage is there for Red to wait for Blue to strike?" There was none. And that led to the natural conclusion that if they're coming, and we can't persuade them not to diplomatically, then we will strike.

As I looked at an ultimatum that gave me less than 24 hours to respond to what literally was a surrender document, it was clear to me that there was no advantage in any of this diplomacy. I was very surprised that the Joint Forces Command personnel who had argued for using all of the elements of national power—the economic, the diplomatic, the political information—in some sort of coherent fashion, really came at Red with a blunt military instrument. So it was clear to me that this was not going to be negotiated, this was going to be a fight. And if it was going to be a fight, I was going to get in the first blow.

No surrender

NOVA: How could the military have planned for Operation Iraqi Freedom differently?

Van Riper: I have not been surprised by the things that have occurred since late spring, early summer in Iraq. It's not because I have any unique insights or had a premonition or understood it better. But I think I'm an astute student of history, and if you look at history and understand how people resist, how wars play out, this is not an unusual occurrence.

If you have a war that doesn't come to a very definitive conclusion, there are people who don't believe they've been defeated. One thing that we saw in this war, there was no surrender. There was no point in time where someone in authority said, "The government of Iraq surrenders to the Coalition forces."

NOVA: There is the famous question of "boots on the ground"—the size of the force that captured Baghdad. Was the small force size a vindication of transformational concepts?

Van Riper: There were sufficient forces to capture Baghdad. But what we call follow-up forces—exploitation forces and reserves—were not available. Imagine on the day that we seized Baghdad, if we had follow-up armed forces, exploitation forces, continue up into what we now know as the Sunni Triangle, go into Tikrit, instead of having that long lag time. If there had been a lot of so-called boots on the ground at the beginning, you might have convinced a lot of people that the war was over at that time. If you'd have thought about how you surrounded Baghdad, perhaps you could have caught some of these officials and had somebody who could surrender to you. Other than the actual attack on Baghdad, it was not very well thought through. ■