

Why doctrine matters and how to fix it

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Not too long ago a bright war college student said to his instructor, "I know all this Clausewitz stuff is important, but I'm going to the Army Staff and what I really need to know is how to use PowerPoint." So Clausewitz or not, he signed up for the PowerPoint elective, which was the most oversubscribed elective at the school. That year, although no books were issued to students, the war college spent millions on upgrading classrooms with high-tech projectors and computer-supported briefing aids.

The point of this snapshot is not that PowerPoint is bad or that classrooms at war colleges shouldn't have briefing aids (although books might be better). The deeper problem is that, for the past decade or so, the war-fighting concepts of the military services have shifted away from basic reality toward ever more facile and simplistic definitions and approaches to war-fighting art, and the people in the services — senior leaders and midlevel strategy and doctrine staffs — have generally not detected the drift. PowerPoint — more properly the art of the presentation — gets a lot of tongue-in-cheek blame, unfairly. Briefings are the predominant form of dialogue between high-level officers and their staffs, who (naturally) aim to make the most of their limited time in front of the boss.

The overwhelming number of senior colonels, captains and generals in the ranks today are brave, practical, professional and dedicated people, working killing hours in staffs and schools, whose professional education has prepared them to captain ships, fly aircraft and lead soldiers and Marines in combat. Away from those things they are trained to do, however, and in the rush of daily business, they increasingly appear to lack foundations of professional principles and theory that would help them discriminate the practical from the impractical, good intentions from the possible, fact from fiction. Combat soldiers know that real war imposes stern reality checks. Although combat is in many ways more like blue-collar plumbing or carpentry than white-collar professional work, sound military theory is the cement that holds the structure together. In the end, pipes have to hold water, walls have to stand — and troops have to move, ships have to sail, planes have to fly. Facts have to be the basis of sound military principles and theory. Facts are important.

In part, the early stages of the Defense Department's transformation campaign reflected the attitude of American society in the go-go 1990s, when the explosion of information technology and e-business seemed to be writing revolutionary new rules for every facet of modern life. Does distance matter? With the Internet, not anymore. Need a brick-and-mortar schoolhouse? Not with distance learning. How does business make a profit? Profit? It's cash flow that matters! No surprise, then, with the rules being rewritten almost monthly, that facts — troublesome facts such as distance, physical plant and profit, for example — seemed to matter less and less.

In the military strategy and concept development business, and as long as actual hardware wasn't involved, facts could be altered with the stroke of a key or a persuasive briefing. With no bottom line other than meeting the tasking, selling a capability (in which the briefer believes deeply) or pleasing a boss who may or may not be fully engaged, expertise in PowerPoint may well trump facts. In the '90s, facts seemed outdated, and a generation grew up with an equivocal view of reality. In his provocatively titled book "On Bullshit," Princeton philosophy professor Harry Frankfurt points out that:

"The contemporary proliferation [of b.s.] ... has deeper sources, in various forms of skepticism which deny we can have any access to objective reality, and which therefore reject the possibility of knowing how things truly are. ... One response to this loss of confidence has been a retreat [from correctness to] an alternative ideal of sincerity."

The inevitable result of the infiltration of well-meaning but groundless sincerity into what is the business of war is all too often unpleasant surprise when specious assumptions made in peacetime planning — one is tempted to say comfortable assumptions — collide with facts on the ground: real weather, real distances, real enemies. So in the dash to Baghdad, long and overextended supply lines were — surprise! — vulnerable to Fedayeen attacks. Weather closes in, helicopters are grounded, vehicles stop. The enemy does not cooperate and reality intrudes.

Second, the pace of life in the armed services, as in American life in general, has accelerated tremendously, and senior commanders are often so busy they haven't time for basics or even questions that may be of first-tier importance. All too often, issues of fundamental importance are brushed aside or lost in the clutter of daily requirements. Overstretched management is not particularly a military problem; in a recent article titled "The perils of multitasking," The Economist commented that a new condition called "attention deficit trait" is showing up among senior managers in the civilian world.

It is caused by the sort of information overload that today's workers are increasingly subjected to — because of mobile phones, personal data assistants and wireless e-mail gadgets such as the BlackBerry.

In the civilian world, as the author of the Economist piece suggests, victims of ADT can take a break. Military people, however, typically fill every minute of a 24-hour duty day and tend to be constantly at the beck and call of instant communications. In the '90s, military theorists suggested that, in the 21st century, change would be a constant process. (Of course, it always had been.) Today, however, one senses the result of too much change: a certain rootlessness in requirements that cascade down on overstretched senior leaders and their staffs, inadequate institutional memories shortened by wartime deployments and redeployments, frequent reorganizations, and the constant turnover of senior people as regular reassignments and retirements churn the services as always. Reinventing the wheel seems to happen more often nowadays.

But the primary cause of this drift from war-fighting fundamentals has been the near-decade-long publish-or-perish drumbeat for "transformational" concepts and doctrines that conflate lessons learned from real battlefields; ideas developed in the prewar world that stubbornly, like Frankenstein's monster, refuse to die; and entrenched, outdated management initiatives. Even as military manpower dropped in the '90s, demands on military staffs increased — including staffs charged with teaching, doctrine preparation, and research and development. When manpower available to do the work went down and the volume of work went up, defense contractors filled gaps, usually with recent retirees, in teaching, research and other staff work. The result has been a boom in concept papers and defense studies — all of which land on the desks of fewer active-duty staff officers, often less experienced than the retired colonels and generals who work for them. In fabric-partitioned sweatshops around the services and in defense industries, retired officers labor to put meat on concepts that, in many cases, make them roll their eyes as they search for the right adjective or noun. The nouns become briefings or staff papers (often on which a contract depends), the papers are rewritten with executive summaries (almost no one reads data), and the project goes forward. In this environment, quantity all too often tops quality, and the rush to meet a deadline can overwhelm deliberation. Quite often, futuristic war games or tabletop exercises will confirm a concept based on little more proof than a gut feeling, recalling Clausewitz's caution that "serious trouble arises only when known facts are forcibly stretched to explain effects, for this confers on these facts a spurious importance."

The drift away from rigorous analysis and hard fact is nowhere better captured recently than in the now-famous e-mail from retired Marine Lt. Gen. Paul Van Riper to the commandant of the Marine Corps and the chief of staff of the Army concerning the decay of operational art, in which he suggested that changes in military doctrines are justified only when there is a problem to be solved, and only then after hard-nosed and thorough research. Van Riper writes that "assigning our best thinkers to infuse content into vacuous slogans such as 'information superiority' and 'dominant maneuver,' is fruitless and wastes valuable resources. Even worse, such efforts are

potentially dangerous when they produce an empty 'concept' that is imposed upon our operating forces. I believe there is considerable evidence that the latter is happening."

For this reason alone, he goes on to say, recent claims of a "revolution in military affairs" or a "military transformation" ring hollow because there is little to suggest these movements were undertaken to solve clearly identified military problems. Merely to be transformational does not qualify as a specific military problem. Mostly, the names of the movements now serve as a mantra for those advocating advanced technologies.

Van Riper's concern about the integrity of operational art is an attempt, by a profound student of military logic, to put rigor back into discussions of service and joint doctrines. In the several decades since the rebirth in the 1980s of serious study of strategy and operational art, some of its basic tenets have been so corrupted by misuse, misunderstanding or willful modification that they no longer serve as useful principles for military planning — indeed, they may be doing more harm than good.

These cascading phenomena — the emphasis on enthusiastic briefings rather than facts, the hypercrowded agenda of senior officers and the "publish or perish" pressure to produce new concepts with little or no critical analysis — have produced an intellectual climate in the services that has come adrift from its roots in classic military art, in its own doctrine, and in the bureaucratic but necessary processes required to produce the kinds of fighting forces a constantly changing world requires. Three examples will suffice to show how far from the centerline the drift has become.

THE CENTER OF GRAVITY

Of Clausewitz's many insights into the nature of war, the idea of the "center of gravity" is probably the most profoundly "strategic." The rediscovery of the center of gravity (COG) was one of the more important foundations of the post-Vietnam doctrinal renaissance. Here is Clausewitz's original concept:

"One must keep the dominant characteristics of both belligerents in mind. Out of these characteristics a certain center of gravity develops, the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends. That is the point against which all of our energies should be directed."

Simple and elegant, Clausewitz is enjoining military professionals to discriminate the main point of the war from other less-important objectives, and then to focus their strategic energies against what really matters. Clearly, this is a strategic concept in the true sense of the word, because there is a single enemy COG that serves as a focus for marshalling a nation's ends, ways and means, and a corresponding single COG on the friendly side that has to be protected against attack. Compare the original Clausewitzian concept with current doctrine:

"Centers of Gravity: Those characteristics, capabilities or sources of power from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength or will to fight." — Joint Publication 1.

Centers of gravity for everyone! Rather than providing strategic focus, today's concept allows planners to designate anything on the battlefield a source of "freedom of action, physical strength or will to fight" — governments, airfields, signal stations, motor pools or troop concentrations. Why joint doctrine in the '90s moved to multiple centers — a logical contradiction to the original concept — is unknown; it may have been a result of the targeting-based air power theories popular in the interservice battles of the time. But the result has been to water down the original concept to encourage whack-a-mole operations at various levels of war and command — one war plan today has a "grand strategic" center of gravity and "strategic" and "operational" centers as well — rather than to focus national resources on the decisive point (and a fair argument can be made that that substantially handicapped planning in the first two years of Operation Iraqi Freedom.) In planning circles, it has become common to refer to a "military" center of gravity, as if military planning is somehow divorced from political objectives. Instead of providing a unifying

focus for national strategy, Clausewitz's concept has become license for lazy planning, saved from failure because the U.S. has a surplus of power and can afford — so far — to be wasteful.

LEVELS OF WAR

After the rediscovery of basic principles, probably the most useful output of the American military reform movement of the '80s to planners was the discovery, or rediscovery, of the levels of war. In American doctrine, the "strategic" level of war determines national or multinational security objectives and develops and uses resources (ends, ways and means) to accomplish the strategic objectives. Campaigns and major operations at the operational level of war connect battles and engagements at the tactical level to ensure that they lead to accomplishing the strategic goals.

Perhaps it was the use of the term "level," but since the appearance in doctrine of these useful categories in the late 1980s, they have been increasingly misunderstood and misused by senior officials and planners, often to the detriment of critical defense plans, either as an echelon of command or as a substitute for geography, e.g., "strategic" vs. "global," or a "joint force commander" who establishes "strategic" goals. An excellent Air Force lieutenant colonel recently commented that (his four-star joint headquarters) functions at the "strategic" level and subordinate commands function at the "operational" level.

Well, no. Everything a four-star headquarters does is not automatically "strategic" (although sometimes one could wish that it were), nor does a theater or joint task force commander always operate at an "operational" level. The lieutenant colonel's four-star commander often focuses and operates at lower levels of warfare, where his attention is required and, one hopes, where he connects the dots between strategic objectives and whatever operational or tactical problem he's addressing. Make no mistake: Modern technology gives very senior commanders the ability and often the incentive to intervene tactically at the lowest levels. Central Command's Gen. Tommy Franks' detailed management of airstrikes in Afghanistan is a negative case in point (as described in the June 2006 AFJ). If senior officers and their staffs cannot relate the impact of tactical intervention with the strategic results they expect to achieve, then four-star generals will in the future become little more than forward air controllers. This is why:

The levels of war are not intended to be straitjackets to effective command or planning but rather to convey relationships in war. "Strategic" means, roughly, a comprehensive approach to a problem using ends, ways and means. A sergeant can have a strategy to clear a building (cordon it off, put surveillance on it, put a squad in overwatch and another to clear), tactics to do the work (blow a hole in the wall and clear room by room), and operational techniques to link the two (clear a floor at a time, mark cleared rooms, prevent re-infiltration.) Thus, the four-star who desires to operate within the strategic sphere balances many resources to achieve a comprehensive solution, not just to cut off a road or even to wage a campaign but also to ensure that all efforts drive toward an end. He may take control of a critical event, a subordinate may enter the strategic sphere, tactical events may drive strategy. The planning and execution of global strategy can have various levels of commands woven together at various times and on different planes in a comprehensive approach, provided the commander's intent and going-in concepts are correctly understood and communicated. Today, however, planners (and commanders) all too often skip the conceptual part and categorize by level or geography — "strategic" winds up meaning "a long distance," as in a "strategic" move from the U.S. to Europe. Inevitably, what was groundbreaking doctrine in the '80s has gotten stale with misuse.

THE FORCE-BUILDING BUREAUCRACY

One of the most pernicious bureaucratic legacies of the Cold War has been the shift away from threat-based force design to capabilities-based requirements, a product of the interval between the Cold War and today's long war when enemies were hard to find. The result has been the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System, a bureaucratic nightmare based on a capstone joint operating concept and layers of operating, functional, integrating and joint enabling concepts, due to be reviewed every two years, the existence of which is forcing the services to develop their

own, similar systems in response. What staff sections, joint or service, can maintain that pace as an integrated, effective process? As Van Riper says, Pentagon leaders cannot simply mandate the development of effective concepts; "for every concept, there has to be a problem in search of a solution." To take Van Riper's thought further, the idea that effective forces can be designed without reference to enemy threats — the problem — was difficult to sustain even in the '90s, and today that seems hollow indeed. One flag officer commented recently to the author that the use of war scenarios in force design and experimentation exposes the hollowness of "capabilities" planning; there's a threat hidden down there after all. Certainly, war plans have long been statements of national priorities and requirements, and war plans (thus far, anyway) address concrete threats. Additionally, the U.S. has not lacked for real enemies — not theoretical ones — for the past several years. The challenge is not to pile concept paper atop concept paper but to decide — correctly — what kinds of threats the U.S. is likely to face in coming decades, then build forces sufficient to deter or defeat those threats.

WHAT TO DO?

So what is to be done? Gen. George Marshall once observed, "The longer an army remains at peace, the more theoretical its plans become." The press of war — actual operations overseas — is beginning to trim some of the more excessively theoretical blooms of the first blush of transformation, some of which date back to pre-Sept. 11. The challenge is to keep what has proved useful while dropping unworkable concepts and overblown rhetoric. There are hopeful signs. The commander of Joint Forces Command, for example, recently disavowed the term "effects-based operations" after top Army and Marine generals complained that the concept is overly simplistic. Although at higher levels, effects-based planning and operations can be useful. Network-centric warfare, which so far seems to be working better for al-Qaida than for us, may become, simply, better-networked warfare, an effective tool of commanders and staffs working within the commander's intent and in harmonious coordination with one another. Critical thinking has become a key part of at least one service's staff college course. But more can be done.

The first step in reform is to reflect on how badly American military thinking failed in the early phases of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In Afghanistan, the spectacular early successes of special operations forces and air power bogged down when senior officials could not consolidate gains on the ground. The march up to Baghdad succeeded because of the tenacity, courage and skill of the troops and their leaders, but again, early success was not followed up — a second example of an almost textbook failure of strategy. With overwhelming materiel support over any adversary and the best-trained troops on the planet, it's increasingly obvious that military thinking has been the United States' most serious deficiency, and American military thought, as discussed previously, has become riddled with watered-down principles and misunderstood doctrines and overloaded with bureaucratic baggage. Although American positions in both Afghanistan and Iraq have been restored to a rough equilibrium, housecleaning is clearly in order to shore up the intellectual content of America's military art and its practice. Here are some possible fixes.

First, perhaps it's time to slow down the frenetic production of new concepts and take a deep breath. After all, during the last burst of innovative thinking in the '90s, we got future warfare almost exactly wrong, and our efforts to dig out of Iraq today reflect in some measure the wistful thinking of that period. We should worry about why the best efforts of some very smart, professional people were so off base. To try to mitigate future errors of this magnitude, an outside doctrine review process might be established, perhaps along the lines of the Defense Policy Board or some other disinterested body, to review the general direction of American military thought against historical, social, political and technological trends.

Second, the relationship between jointness and service equities needs to come to a better equilibrium. This is not about a 1960s winner-take-all version of "joint" vs. "service." That argument is over, and the need for effective joint operations is commonly accepted throughout the officer corps of all the U.S. services. The issue is balance. As Mackubin Owens and others have argued, there is a qualitative difference between joint operations that seek to maximize particular capabilities of the services against a specific challenge, and integration, which is an

across-the-board leveling of service capabilities toward one unified concept. This is an old argument, one that began with the first efforts to unify the services under a Defense Department in the late 1940s. For decades, the ability of the services to operate jointly suffered from too loose a confederation and little central authority. Since passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986, the pendulum has perhaps swung too far, with the services, despite their institutional and historical expertise, taking a back seat in the development of war-fighting concepts and effectively excluded from war planning. Although a little friction among the services and between the services and the joint community is probably a good thing, there is a sweet spot between joint command in war and the services that has not yet been found, especially with regard to maximizing the possibilities of service expertise and development of future concepts and doctrines.

Third, we should revisit the services' expectations of their senior officers, not because a kindly secretary of defense wants to take the pressure off, but because senior managers overloaded with minutiae — with action officers lined up outside their offices and weekend work stacked up on their e-mail accounts — are rarely going to be able to get the perspective they need to make good management decisions. Military officers come from a Type A culture exacerbated by unlimited opportunities to spend more hours on the job. As one colonel opined recently, it's not the smartest colonels who make general, but the ones with the most endurance. (He is now a serving general officer, having proved his point.) But for senior leaders, endurance should not be the only prerequisite. The joint Capstone course for newly promoted general and flag officers should focus less on a world tour and more on hard-rock senior management skills, including those necessary for critical thinking and effective communication at senior levels. Perhaps, now that the first flush of excitement over new technologies has passed, senior managers need to come off e-mail, or give their BlackBerry devices to subordinates. "Generalship" (or "admiralship") in the 21st century must obviously be ultimately about fighting, but it must also be about management that can separate the truly urgent or innovative from the trivial or the slick sales job associated with Professor Frankfurt's subject. Too often, senior officers today simply have to make do with a quick briefing before moving on to the next item on the docket.

Finally, of course, professional military education must keep pace with demands on the military profession. For generations, military officers' education has followed a four-tiered pathway: basic and intermediate specialty schools, midcareer staff schools for a selected half of the officer corps, and then senior service schools for a selected few destined for high-level staff or command. (The Army has recently begun sending all its officers to midcareer staff school.) Although there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the process — schooling has to happen sometime, and these breakpoints fall at the right times in an officer's career growth — the content and criteria for schooling should be reviewed. With regard to content, the war-fighting concepts and doctrines taught — particularly in the senior-level schools — should be wrung out, possibly by the independent Defense Department board suggested above, before they are taught to future Schwarzkopfs and Frankeses, whose academic standing at senior service college should be reflected in their service records. The whole point of military education, after all, boils down to a few senior people making the right decisions at critical times; education for colonels and generals is at least as important as Ranger School is for lieutenants.

Faculties and staffs, at present formed from a mix of civilian academics and retired and active-duty officers, should be gradually reformed with a majority of active-duty officers whose duties would include not only teaching but also researching and writing doctrine. A teaching assignment at a service school should — must — be once again a prestigious and career-enhancing assignment in the services. Assignment to civilian graduate study, particularly in the humanities, is on the upswing in the Army and perhaps in all the services, and should continue. Attendance at senior-level schooling should make provision for a mix of competitive application as well as board selection, to encourage gifted officers who miss a career brass ring or two but who would otherwise make brilliant high-level staff officers. Finally, service assignment policies should reflect not only attendance at service schools but also achievement therein, thus discriminating future Clausewitzians for assignment where their talents can be best used.

How long it's going to take to wash out a generation's worth of slipshod concepts and doctrine is anybody's guess. Certainly the reform of the joint bureaucracy and revision of shaky doctrinal concepts will be a generational project. Upgrades to service schools and to military professional education have begun, and they should be encouraged — and funded — to move the next generation of military thinkers beyond PowerPoint.

Whenever reform begins, its ultimate success will depend on the ability of the graduates of the services' own schools and colleges to carry it on, and to push well-grounded American military thought further into the future.

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