

Fourth Generation Warfare

Excerpt From:

Dear Mr. & Ms. IRP:

Welcome to the 21st Century

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EVOLUTION OF MODERN CONFLICT

FOUR GENERATIONS

Although war is evolving, in response to changes in the world's social, political, and economic condition as well as to the introduction of new technologies, it is important to keep in mind that it is still war, that is, an attempt to coerce another group of people into doing something they would rather not do. One of the most influential strategists of the 20th Century, the late USAF Colonel John R. Boyd, observed that in order for one group to accomplish its goals, it may become necessary for them to:

- Diminish their adversaries' capacities for independent action
- Deny them the opportunity to survive on their own terms, or
- Deny them the opportunity to survive at all.¹

When this situation occurs, which might be for any of the reasons noted above or because of competition for limited resources, conflict erupts, and if one side attempts to resolve it with violence, then we call it "war."

In a famous 1989 paper, a group of military officers and defense analysts concluded that armed conflict – war – had evolved through three stages since the dawn of the nation state system in the mid-1600s and appeared to be on the verge of a fourth.² The first generation was the era of the smoothbore musket, when armies used line and column tactics to make the most from the musket's limited range and firepower. Clausewitz was describing and prescribing for first generation warfare.

By the time of the American Civil War, firepower had gained the upper hand. Rifled muskets, then breech-loading clip-fed rifles, machine guns, long-range indirect artillery, and barbed wire dominated the battlefield. Tactics were still linear, although most armies entrenched when given the chance, since direct exposure to second generation firepower could destroy any unit. Armies attempted to win battles by pounding enemy trenches into impotence with artillery (the preparation for the Battle of the Somme, which began July 1, 1916, lasted a full week and expended a million rounds) and then following with waves of infantry assaults. Casualties soared, reaching more than a million in the Battle of Verdun (21 February – 18 December 1916).

The third generation attempted to mitigate this firepower by dodging it. A short barrage to keep the defenders' heads down, not to try to annihilate them, would be followed by fast moving storm troops who would break through the line of trenches. Once this was accomplished, exploitation forces would force a deeper penetration and breakthrough.

Although these tactics achieved only limited success in World War I, when the Germans combined them with tanks, close air support aircraft, and modern wireless communications at the start of World War II, the result was the *Blitzkrieg*.³ During one two-week period in May, 1940, the Blitzkrieg destroyed the fighting ability of the French and British armies, a feat neither side had been able to accomplish during four years of horrific battles a generation earlier.

Careful readers may have noted that first, second, and third generation warfare represented increasingly sophisticated ways for state armies to fight other state armies. This changes when we move on to fourth generation warfare, where one of the opponents is something else. This form of warfare is not new, per se, since irregular fighters, that is, not members of a state army – guerillas – have been around since the dawn of time. Until after World War I, however, guerillas were usually adjuncts to conventional first, second, or third generation armies, or they were insurgents operating against and largely within a single country.

Beginning with Mao Tse-Tung, and continuing to the present day, insurgency and other forms of non-state warfare have become more potent and much more dangerous in at least two ways:

- Groups other than states – that is, multinational organizations ranging from al-Qa'ida to the narco-trafficking cartels – are beginning to acquire high levels of sophistication in organization and in the information technologies that allow them to plan and conduct operations while widely dispersed.⁴
- These same groups increasingly have the financial wherewithal to acquire virtually any type of weapon, from small arms to chemical and biological to nuclear, that they need to carry out operations. The only exceptions are conventional weapons such as tanks, combat aircraft, and fighting ships that require large facilities to support them, but are primarily of use only against other military forces armed with the same types of weapons.

They are using their new capabilities not only to fight local governments, as was the case with traditional insurgencies, but to attack distant superpowers as well.

FOCUS OF FOURTH GENERATION OPERATIONS

*He will try to submerge his communications in the noise of the everyday activity that is an essential part of a modern society.*⁵

Because they can't field sizable amounts of conventional military hardware, fourth generation (4GW) forces will never try to achieve victory by defeating the military forces of a state in stand-up battles. Instead, they will try to convince their state opponent that it is simply not worth it to continue the fight. Successful 4GW campaigns in modern times would include those against the French in Algeria, the US in Vietnam and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, where the insurgents never defeated the foreign armies in any major battle, but eventually persuaded the governments back home to withdraw them. In

a well run 4GW campaign, everything the 4GW forces do – including fighting and usually losing the occasional major battle – will support this goal.

Persuading governments to withdraw forces, rather than defeating them on the battlefield, is an “information age” goal.⁶ To achieve the necessary level of persuasion, practitioners of 4GW will use every information tool they can find to spread their messages to the enemy population and decision makers:

- Our cause is just and no threat to you
- There’s nothing here worth your effort and sacrifice
- Your troops are becoming brutal and your tactics ineffective
- If you keep it up, you’re going to bleed for a very long time
- So why not just leave now?

As we enter the 21st Century, 4GW organizations are becoming adept at spreading such messages through new channels, such as global news services (CNN, Al Jazeera) and of course, web sites, blogs, and mass e-mailings. What you may not be aware of is that 4GW organizations are also using the latest information tools to communicate with each other and to share information, particularly about what is and is not working (what the military calls “lessons learned.”)⁷ Messages may be encrypted, or sent using code phrases, or even hidden in web site images, a practice called *steganography*. As with so many information age techniques, instructions for encryption and steganography are floating all over the Internet.

Information age techniques are ideal for loose networks of highly motivated individuals, which is a typical form of organization for 4GW groups. Modern information warfare places a higher premium on creativity and innovation than it does on things 4GW organizations typically don’t have, like massive forces, volumes of regulations, and expensive hardware.⁸ By emphasizing speed and innovation, 4GW groups can often invent new techniques faster than more structured and bureaucratic organizations such as the Pentagon.⁹

First responder organizations themselves may be targets of information warfare operations. The information systems of 1RP organizations, including operational systems as well as payroll and administrative, might make attractive targets in coordination with a physical attack. This is a real threat: Many members of al-Qa’ida and affiliated groups are from the educated classes in their countries, were technically trained (Osama bin Laden is a civil engineer), studied and lived in the West, and are capable of conceiving and managing such attacks.

WAR AGAINST NETWORKS

*The one thing the terrorist will certainly not do is stand up in an open fight.*¹⁰

There are other advantages to the non-state player from operating in a loose social network. Obviously a social network is harder to find than an organization that requires a

fixed infrastructure and wears uniforms. But perhaps most significant in wars of the weak against the strong, networks are highly resilient, so killing their leaders and destroying portions of the network can leave the rest to regenerate under new leadership in different locations.¹¹¹² So long as enough of the network survives to pass along the ideology and culture, along with lessons learned, the new network will likely be more dangerous and more resilient than its predecessor, much like the more resistant forms of bacteria that can emerge as a result of mis-use of antibiotics. In fact, the European resistance movements during World War II exhibited just this kind of toughness and survivability.

In addition to its networked structure, there are other attributes of 4GW that should concern the IRP (*editor's note: First Responder*) community. The first is its transnational nature. An operation can be approved in Afghanistan, planned in Germany, funded in the Middle East, and carried out in the United States, as was the 9/11 attack. There is no one state we can retaliate against, nor one nationality we can profile against. Further, because it is transnational, it can involve networks of networks, such as al-Qa'ida attempting to cooperate with narco-trafficking organizations in Latin America to trade access to potential base areas and help in infiltrating the US for assistance in distributing narcotics.¹³ The upshot is that the lack of identifiable 4GW activity may not be an indication that an attack is not in the works, if the surveillance is being conducted by someone else.

One of the more unpleasant aspects of insurgencies that will likely carry over to 4GW is their use of disguise, camouflage, and the other tools of deception. Because they are militarily weak, 4GW groups survive not by confronting superior firepower but by staying out of its sights. Those that have survived have become masters of concealment and deception, making it even more difficult to pick up early warning signals. This is why simple ethnic or national profiling will not work – 4GW teams will go to great lengths not to be identified as members of the groups in question. Skin color, eye color, and hair color are trivially easy to change, and the criminal infrastructure that already exists in most developed countries makes it simple to get drivers licenses or other means of identification (as any victim of identity theft can attest.) In a pinch, one can always recruit a member of a non-targeted group, such as the “shoe bomber,” Richard Reid, and it would be a mistake to assume the next batch will be as poorly trained. If we're going to let Icelanders (or grandmothers or parents with toddlers, or whoever) through with less security screening than Saudis or Pakistanis or Jordanians, see if you can guess what the next aircraft hijacker will look like.

Another unpleasant fact of 4GW is that like insurgency from whence it sprang, 4GW will be a protracted struggle.¹⁴ As Henry Kissinger once noted, if the guerillas don't lose, they win, so they have all the motivation they need to keep going for as long as they think it will take.¹⁵ First responders should not draw comfort from what seems like a pause in attacks – operational cycles can stretch over several years, and a fourth generation war can span decades.¹⁶

But the most unpleasant fact of 4GW is that in it, we have finally reached the level of total war.¹⁷ *In the eyes of the 4GW attacker, there are no civilians and no non-combatants.* A concern for public relations offers the only reason for limiting the scope or violence of the attacks. *What seems like “terrorism” to us, or senseless, random*

violence, may appear to the 4GW network as a legitimate way to persuade the foreign state government to withdraw, that is to stop the war. Such a strategy is nothing new. It was what Sherman had in mind during his marches through the South after the fall of Vicksburg (July 1863).¹⁸ In its local areas, the 4GW organization will spread the message that the foreign state has killed many civilians, which in a war of an advanced state versus a Third World country will often be true and will always be believed.

What this means is that when a 4GW group decides to directly attack the United States or another state involved in “their” struggle, no level of violence, even nuclear, is ruled out. They may calculate that the message they are sending to the state government, to the state’s population, to undecided elements in other parts of the world, and to their own members is worth any backlash from the scenes of horror and brutality that ensue.

WINNING FOURTH GENERATION WARFARE

WHAT DOES “WIN” MEAN

No competent strategist believes that we can ever eliminate attacks against civilians and non-combatants. These are frequent enough in conventional wars, and not all of these casualties are accidental: recall the Rape of Nanking, the London Blitz, the firebombings of Hamburg and Dresden, and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. National governments, even those of democracies, will deliberately target civilian populations when they convince themselves that such actions are needed to win the war, or shorten it, or just reduce the number of friendly casualties.

It is also difficult, especially in the early stages, to tell insurgent or 4GW activity from ordinary crime¹⁹, and there is a tendency for authoritarian governments to delude themselves that the violence is coming from criminals or gangs long after it has evolved into something much more serious. Good 4GW organizations encourage this as long as possible, since it forestalls effective countermeasures. What this means for the IRP community is that 4GW activity may be indistinguishable from street crime until the very moment it carries out a major operation, and arrested operatives will try to pass themselves off as ordinary criminals.

WINNING AGAINST “TERRORISM”

The concept of using death and destruction as the primary vehicle to influence the enemy’s will to continue characterizes “attrition warfare,” one of Boyd’s three categories of conflict.²⁰ As van Creveld noted, in 4GW, however, attrition is a one way street: the weaker can use it against the stronger, but if the state attempts to use attrition as its primary weapon, it will lose the moral high ground and soon the support of its own population – which is, of course, exactly what the 4GW force has in mind.²¹ This is one reason why goading national governments into bloody, indiscriminate attacks is a standard tactic for 4GW organizations (the other reason is that such attacks are great for recruiting.) You may have noted that when these occur, representatives of the mass media are rarely far away, and this is no accident.

So although “terrorism,” that is, seemingly gratuitous violence against civilians and non-combatants, is a common technique for 4GW groups, it is only that, *one technique*. Thus there can be no “global war on terror” any more than there can be a “global war on

ambushes.” *We must stay focused on much larger objectives:* Who is attacking us? Why? Who supports them? Why? How do we want the issues finally solved? If the situation in the Middle East, for example, results in the destruction of key allies, imposition of ideological and unfriendly governments, proliferation of nuclear weapons, and, oh yes, \$5.00/gallon gas at the pump – but no further “terrorism” was used against US civilians – would we have “won”?

As far as terrorism itself is concerned, the best the United States and other national governments can hope for is to keep casualties at an acceptably low level. This may sound callous, but suicide, homicide, and motor vehicle accidents *each* kill more than 10 times the number of Americans every year than died in the 9/11 attacks²² Certainly 3,000 deaths from 4GW attacks every year are unacceptable, but are 300? 30? How much of our limited national resources are we willing to spend to try to drive the number below, say, 100?

The key point is that to win against “terrorism,” we need to reduce its effects to the point where we can concentrate on the larger goal of winning a fourth generation war.

GRAND STRATEGY AND MORAL CONFLICT

To a large degree, “victory” against a 4GW opponent means denying them their goals until the tides of history change and they disperse or dissolve to such a low level that their actions return to incidents impossible to distinguish from ordinary street crime.²³ The key to doing this is what defense analysts and military historians call “grand strategy.” It is an extremely old idea. When Sun Tzu talked about attacking alliances as superior to battle or insisted that harmony between the general and his men was the key to military power, he was talking grand strategy.²⁴

At its core, grand strategy encompasses those actions that a side in a conflict takes to pump up its own morale – and so stay in the fight; degrade that of the opposition – and hopefully cause them to quit; and attract the uncommitted to its cause.²⁵ Enormous failures at the tactical and strategic levels of war can be offset by victory at the grand strategic, if the “winner” of the battles finally quits and goes home. This is the terrible attraction of protracted war.²⁶ As many have noted, if the United States eventually loses in Iraq, that is, withdraws before achieving its objectives of establishing a stable democracy, it will largely be because of failure of, or, which is the same thing, lack of grand strategy.²⁷ We will have failed to keep our population on board, to keep our alliance together, and to attract uncommitted peoples to our cause, while our opponents will have succeeded in their efforts to do likewise.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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²⁴ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. and with commentary by Thomas Cleary, Shambhala, Boston, 1988, 17-19.

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