UNCOMFORTABLE WARS:
TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM

by

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We in the military often are accused falsely of "preparing to fight not the next war but the last." That criticism is not well placed: we are not, for the most part, obtuse enough to fight yesterday's war—but we might be doing something worse still. When we think about the possibilities of conflict we tend to invent for ourselves a comfortable vision of war, a theater with battlefields we know, conflict that fits our understanding of strategy and tactics, a combat environment that is consistent and predictable, fightable with the resources we have, one that fits our plans, our assumptions, our hopes, and our preconceived ideas. We arrange in our minds a war we can comprehend on our own terms, usually with an enemy who looks like us and acts like us. This comfortable conceptualization becomes the accepted way of seeing things and, as such, ceases to be an object for further investigation unless it comes under serious challenge as a result of some major event—usually a military disaster.

THE GRINDSTONE

One reason we have accepted the comfortable vision of war is that we keep our noses to the grindstone of bureaucratic business and don't look up very often. We are led away from the important tasks by the exigencies of day-to-day operations—husbanding sophisticated equipment, doing the housekeeping and administration, balancing this year's budget while justifying the requirements for next year, answering the mail. In naval terms, we are keeping things shipshape; what we are not doing is reading the stars and charting the course. We could say, I suppose, that this kind of distraction always must be overcome, that such things as budgets and maintenance and paperwork have been part of the environment in which soldiers live from time immemorial. The difficulty begins, however, when these activities cease to be distractions and instead become the focus of all our efforts.

Things are changing. Think about today's lieutenant, and compare him and his challenges with those that confronted lieutenants in the past. The categories of knowledge are basically the same—leadership, weapons, tactics and techniques, administration—but there is a monumental difference in what he needs to know about each. He must contend with an amazing assortment of weapons, vehicles, and supporting technology. He is required to keep his platoon at a high state of readiness for combat. This demands his full commitment to individual and collective training, maintenance of his large stock of equipment, and unit administration, in addition to taking care of his soldiers. The lieutenant is consumed by all of this, and while no doubt it is a great education for him, we may be developing a leader who does little thinking about the abstractions, the principles of his trade, the doctrinal foundations of his profession.

The preoccupation with day-to-day concerns is not just characteristic of lieutenants; it is true as well of the lieutenant's higher leadership. Colonels and generals fill their

time with day-to-day work while professors and journalists are left to think and write about doctrine and strategy. Yet the atmosphere of East-West confrontation and the level of violence throughout the world make it imperative that we consider whether our military leaders are truly developing professionally or merely performing, working out daily problems.

It is a convenient argument that the normal routine of military life constitutes sufficient training and development, that the leader "learns best by doing." This notion must be challenged. We must go beyond routine and develop, through continual training and education, leaders capable of adapting to a changing environment. The great 18th-century marshal of France, Maurice de Saxe, recognized the danger of failing to do so. "In the military," he wrote in his *Reveries*,

> very few men occupy themselves with the higher problems of war. They pass their lives drilling troops and believe that this is the only branch of the military art. When they arrive at the command of armies they are totally ignorant, and in default of knowing what should be done, they do what they know.[1]

THE FORTRESS-CLOISTER

As a group we have sought a life not only of proud service to country, of challenge and adventure, but also one which is a microcosm of tradition, order, hierarchical structure, predictability, and unequivocal response to clear demands. There is an element of the cloister in this, our life of dedication and sacrifice, full of the satisfactions of early rising and hard work—our carefully structured life, routinized, homogenous, full of universally understood symbologies.

In this highly satisfying environment, however, we should recognize implicit limitations. Ours is a protected and isolated existence, hemmed in by the grindstone work schedule, lulled by predictability. But what is salutary in the cloister is not good for the Army; isolation and protection make it

difficult to conceptualize, to question conventional wisdom, to look at things another way. Changes do occur within the walls of our military cloister, but usually only when preceded by the long process of consensus-building, in which more time is spent overcoming resistance to change than in examining new ideas. The grindstone work schedule and our cloistered existence too frequently suppress our creativity, and over time have fostered generally unquestioning acceptance of a vision of conflict that has not kept pace with the expanding environment of modern warfare. We remain with our comfortable, confident vision of the wars that we might have to fight.

INTRUSIONS

Intruding on this vision, however, are realities that make us uneasy, raising questions not adequately addressed within the existing paradigm. For example:

• Why did the governments of Haiti and the Philippines collapse so quickly? (Substitute Cuba, South Vietnam, Iran, or other countries that have recently undergone rapid political change.)

• Why does the frequency of internal conflict, with its political turmoil, civil disorder, guerrilla warfare, and indiscriminate violence continue to grow?

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• Why have we seen the rise of terrorism over the last decade? Has the overall level of fanaticism somehow increased?

• Why do the news media seem consistently antagonistic?

• How involved are international drug traffickers in the conflicts internal to many Third World states?

Surrogate war, general violence, subversive activity, multiplication of small wars, widespread training of terrorists—each of these has intruded on our vision of war. As they have become more noticeable, however, we have tended to view them as being on the periphery of warfighting, at the limits of our set of beliefs about the nature of conflict. They do not fit into our image of war, so we search for ways to categorize and then dismiss them or relegate them to theoretical pigeonholes where they can be dealt with, hopefully by someone else, while we fight the main battles. What we know and understand—to a large degree—is what we have come to call high-intensity warfare. Therefore these other phenomena come to be called "low-intensity conflict" in our books, a kind of appendage, an add-on, a lesser thing.[2] This reaction, while unfortunate, is not new; regulars have demonstrated their disdain for irregulars, partisans, or guerrillas throughout the history of warfare.

But what kind of war will we be called on to fight? We continue to show our fascination with the ever-increasing conventional and nuclear power of the Soviet Union—focusing almost exclusively on our potential opponent's capability to fight a massive high-intensity war in Western Europe. But there is no conflict in Western Europe; in fact that part of the world has enjoyed 40 years of peace, the longest period since Europe came of age. The Soviets will continue to threaten Western Europe—but where are the Soviets and their surrogates moving today?

They are moving in the Third World, attempting to outflank the industrialized democracies by concentrating on developing nations around the globe.

Winston Churchill has been quoted as saying, "However absorbed a commander is in the elaboration of his own thoughts, it is sometimes necessary to take the enemy into account."[3] Our doctrine and strategy too must take account of the enemy: to respond to the worldwide situation we must first see that situation clearly. A hard and professional look at low-intensity conflict is warranted. Why, we should ask ourselves, does this concept—low intensity conflict—continue to crop up? Why is it so hard to define? Is it a mere appendage to "real war" or is there a closer relationship?

In reality the concept has been present for centuries, and a direct relationship has existed frequently between armed forces engaged in the conventional form of warfare and those fighting in an irregular manner.

Is there some new dimension here, some situation that we do not entirely comprehend? We know that there have been times in the past when far-reaching political change was brought about by a few men under arms. The forces of Harold and William at Hastings, for example, where the Crown of England was at stake, numbered under 20,000 men. At Agincourt, Henry V destroyed the power of France with 5000 men on a battlefield only a quarter of a mile wide. At Waterloo, Wellington's 86,000 men covered only about three miles from flank to flank. (Today the British Army of the Rhine occupies over 50 miles of front.) Yet by the time of World War II, the situation was different. Political change could no longer be brought about by a few armed men. One hundred million soldiers fought a global war in which 15 million of them were killed. Not only was the physical scope of the war much greater, but such mass involvement resulted in 34 million *civilians* killed—more than double the number of soldiers that died.

THE SOCIETAL DIMENSION

Warfare is thus no longer fought simply by the military. It now encompasses entire populations, large or small, sophisticated or developing, and its outcome depends more and more on their collective will, what Clausewitz termed "the popular passions," the compelling motivation and defiant attitude of the people upon whose commitment and readiness to make personal sacrifices

military power ultimately depends. We soldiers are accustomed to thinking about defeating our enemy by bringing combat power, primarily firepower, to bear on him. For us, the utilization of any other form of power against an adversary is secondary and supplemental, a lesser consideration. We must recognize, however, that in fighting an enemy today and in the future, even in high-intensity conflict, the situation has changed.

We can see this change in at least three ways. First, the distinction between soldier and noncombatant has blurred to the point of being unrecognizable. The advent of strategic bombing during the Second World War showed the difficulty of distinguishing between the military figure and the non-combatant, the strain that this situation can place on social cohesion within a country, and the important role played by public opinion. Second, ideological mass in-doctrination has become an important part of combat power, particularly (but not ex-clusively) in lesser developed societies where some common belief system is a dominant part of the culture. Third, and closely related, the aspirations of the civilian combatants have exerted an increasingly powerful in-fluence on the military outcome. As British military historian Michael Howard reminds us, if this influence is not recognized or if the sociopolitical struggle is not conducted with skill based on a realistic assessment of the social situation, "no amount of operational expertise, logistical backup, or technical know-how could possibly help."[4]

Douglas Pike noted the increased im-portance of the societal dimension of modern warfare in a recent examination of the Vietnam War. He described two differing perceptions—one view that saw the war as an orthodox (though limited-scale) conflict, another that saw it as primarily revolutionary guerrilla warfare. Vietnam, he wrote, could also be viewed as "something new in history," a "people's war" that

> erased the line between military and civilian, between war and politics, between com-batant and noncombatant. Its essence was a trinity of organization, mobilization, and

motivation in the context of protracted conflict.[5]

It is that form of war, a synthesis of con-ventional and guerrilla warfare, with greater importance accorded the societal dimension, that appears a likely model for the future.

Military men, however, feel uncomfort-able with warfare's societal dimension and tend to ignore its implications. Societies are hard to understand—let alone predict—and difficult to control. Conflict on this plane does not fit our current beliefs about military success or failure; therefore, it is not a subject that we are, for the most part, anxious to pursue. At the same time internal war—in which the societal dimension takes on crucial importance—has become a dominant form of conflict throughout the world. Of the 125 to 150 conflicts that have taken place in the past four decades, 90 percent occurred in developing regions and are best characterized as internal wars.[6]

There are many indicators that we are moving into a world in which subversive activities, civil disturbances, guerrilla war-fare, and low-level violence will grow and multiply. A number of factors contribute to this growth of violence at the low end of the spectrum of conflict, among them: the Marxist-Leninist ideology, which calls for political and psychological warfare as fundamental to Soviet success on a global scale; changes in traditional authority relationships; the maturation of thought-influencing techniques in such fields as marketing and telecommunications; the rediscovery of "war-*cum*-negotiations"; and the general historical trend toward the type of war that involves more and more of the populations of the warring factions. Although these trends have been obvious for a long time, there is little indication that we (or indeed anyone else, including the Soviets) have understood the need for adapting our doctrine to take into account the whole spectrum from low to high intensity.[7] We have not grasped the new environment—the high-low mix—and its new conditions.

French author Jean Larteguy vividly captured the difference between traditional

warfare and the situation we confront today. In his compelling novel *The Centurions*, he portrays French officers turning from defeat in Indochina to face an apparently similar struggle in Algeria. A protagonist in a Viet Minh prison camp contrasts the French and Viet Minh methods of waging war:

> It's difficult to explain exactly, but it's rather like [the card games] bridge as compared to belote. When we [the French] make war, we play belote with thirty-two cards in the pack. But [the Viet Minh's] game is bridge and they have fifty-two cards: twenty more than we do. Those twenty cards short will always prevent us from getting the better of them. They've got nothing to do with traditional warfare, they're marked with the sign of politics, propaganda, faith, agrarian reform . . . . What's biting Glatigny? I think he is beginning to realize that we've got to play with fifty-two cards and he doesn't like it at all . . . those twenty extra cards aren't at all to his liking.[8]

The dimension beyond traditional warfighting, the 20 extra cards, can best be understood not by focusing on the guerrilla and his tactics, but by examining the structure of the struggle itself. It then becomes apparent that indeed we are experiencing something new in warfare, something that requires us to restudy our doctrine, tactics, organization, and training.

THE TRIANGLE

The dimension beyond traditional warfare recognizes the triangular nature of any struggle today. In each case in high- or low-intensity conflict, the struggle involves the interaction between three elements: the government (with its armed forces), the enemy, and *the people*. This triangular relationship is easier to visualize, and more relevant, in revolutionary warfare: in this situation a government, with its police and military, and an insurgent movement, with its terrorist arm, compete principally for the support of the national population. The insurgent movement—at the outset too weak militarily to seize political control of the country—focuses first on destroying civic responsiveness to the state, and then on eroding the effectiveness of the military and administrative establishments. Meanwhile, the insurgents seek to develop their military arm to the point where it can effectively challenge the regular forces in conventional battles supported by guerrilla operations and terrorism.

During the early stages of the struggle, violence is less an instrument of destruction than a psychological tool to influence the attitudes of specific sectors of the population. The conflict becomes a form of political education that forces a reluctant, basically neutral civilian populace wanting only to be left alone to take a stand in support of the insurgent. Such a strategy is not easily pursued. It takes time. But the insurgent retains the initiative and pushes relentlessly to gain support by discrediting the government.

To counter this sociopolitical challenge, the government must first recognize what is happening and then be willing to acknowledge that its civic support is fragile and its control over the populace contested. To reestablish its political legitimacy, the government must address contentious, long-ignored, but popular issues tied to key facets of national life—sociopolitical, economic, educational, juridical—as well as engaging the guerrillas on the battlefield.[9] The resulting burden on the military institution is large. Not only must it subdue an armed adversary while attempting to provide security to the civilian population, it must also avoid inadvertently furthering the insurgent's cause. If, for example, the military's actions in killing 50 guerrillas cause 200 previously uncommitted citizens to join the insurgent cause, the use of force will have been counterproductive.

Military forces fighting a counterinsurgency must, therefore, use other yardsticks to measure success than the traditional indicators of enemy killed and terrain captured. In El Salvador, for example, the military has come to attach greater importance to the number of guerrillas remaining than to the number of guerrillas

killed. The Salvadorans recognize that reducing the size of the guerrilla force can often be pursued as effectively in ways other than just killing the insurgents—that is, pursued through actions that cause the guerrillas to desert their cause, return to their homes, or surrender. Though harder to measure than "body counts," other indicators of success have been adopted, such as the frequency of insurgent defections, the availability of volunteer informers, and the willingness of former insurgents to collaborate publicly with the established government. Such adjustments are essential if a government is to adapt to the triangular nature of an insurgency and accord proper emphasis to the societal element of such struggles.

CONCLUSION

The education and training of our young officers understandably will be based on our vision of modern warfare. Our current approach, however, does not go far enough. The realities of contemporary conflict challenge us to attain what the 1984 Kermit Roosevelt Lecturer, General Bill Richardson, called "the blend of enduring objectives and tradition together with a willingness to change in the light of changing times." Said in another way, an officer's effectiveness and chance for success, now and in the future, depend not only on his character, knowledge, and skills, but also, and more than ever before, on his ability to understand the changing environment of conflict.

Kermit Roosevelt was a soldier, an adventurer, an innovator, the kind of man who might enjoy a ramble such as this—one that included grindstones and cloisters and new paradigms. He would, I think, be very interested in the question of the societal dimension of war. As we prepare for the future, therefore, we should take note of his flexibility of mind and his versatility as a soldier. Above all, we should recognize that if war comes, we will continue to see involvement of the entire population; this will be true of all war, not simply of conflict at the low end of the scale.

I began with lieutenants, the source of our future leadership, and my theme has been a plea for flexibility and an open mind when it comes to our profession. The defense of our homeland and the protection of our democratic ideals depend on our ability to understand, and our readiness to fight, the wars of the future. Let us get our young leaders away from the grindstone now and then, and encourage them to reflect on developments outside the fortress-cloister. Only then will they develop into leaders capable of adapting to the changed environment of warfare and able to fashion a new paradigm that addresses all the dimensions of the conflicts that may lie ahead.

NOTES

1. Quoted in Bernard Brodie, *War and Politics* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 433-34.

2. I have no quarrel with this three-part division of warfare into low-, mid-, and high-intensity, or with the British method of categorizing war as civil disorder, revolutionary war, limited war, and general war. (The British manual also recognized that guerrilla war and limited war, and presumably civil disorder, all can occur at the same time.)

I would also be content with the old method used by the United States Marine Corps, in which the term "small war" described the lower end of the spectrum. (Eliot Cohen revives the use of this term in his "Constraints on America's Conduct of Small Wars," *International Security*, 9 [Fall 1984].) All such terms are useful (obviously one has to choose a set and stick to it). We all know that these rather simplistic gradations are needed because we have internal problems of how to divide the administrative work of budgeting and funding, research and development, procurement, and so forth. When it comes to actual conflict, however, we find that the simple classification into high- and low-intensity conflict can be dangerous if it inhibits our understanding of what the fighting is all about.

The classification into high and low may be harmful for other reasons. If the purpose is to find a convenient repository for all conflict that is not "high intensity," we may be in for some trouble in terms of our ability to see reality. In the case of Vietnam, for example, early in that conflict we may have invented a comfortable war and fought it instead of the real one. We complicated, and in the end frustrated, our own efforts by trying to bend the war to a doctrine that we understood.

3. Attributed to Churchill in Robert D. Heinl, Jr., ed. *Dictionary of Military and Naval Quotations* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute, 1966), p. 102.

4. Michael Howard, "The Forgotten Dimensions of Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, 57 (Summer 1979), 981.

5. Douglas Pike, "Conduct of the War: Strategic Factors, 1965-1968," in *The Second Indochina War: Proceedings of a Symposium Held at Airlie, Virginia, 7-9 November 1984*, ed. by John Schlight (Washington: US Army Center of Military History, 1986), pp. 101-02.

6. Caesar D. Sereseres, "Lessons from Central America's Revolutionary Wars, 1972-1984," in *The Lessons of Recent Wars in the Third World, Vol. 1*, ed. by Robert E. Harkavy and Stephanie G. Neuman (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1985), p. 161.

7. Although the Soviet Union has recognized and supported this kind of peoples' war as an opportunity to capitalize on discontent in the Third World, there is little indication (in Afghanistan, for example) that the Soviets themselves have made successful adjustments in order to combat insurgency.

8. Jean Larteguy, *The Centurions* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1961), pp. 181-82.

9. The government must also recognize the importance of managing information directed at three audiences: the public, the insurgents, and influential external actors. There is a facet of revolutionary warfare, in fact, that could be termed the "war of information"—the competition between the insurgents and the government to get facts (and propaganda) to the people and important outside principals.