

TECHNOLOGICAL CHANGE & WAR'S NATURE

Profession at the Crossroads

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The late General Donn A. Starry (1925–2011), former Commanding General of the US Army Training and Doctrine Command (1977–81), wrote this insightful essay in 1966 while he was attending the US Army War College. It offers an engaging look at how the US Army profession viewed itself in the late 1960s. It also reveals how officers, many as talented as Starry, viewed the “nature of war” in an era of tremendous technological and socio-cultural change. Note how Starry wrote of war as potentially shifting “from total, to limited, to back to total in a completely different sense.” Can the US Army of today manage such a shift as fluidly as it might be required to do?

As competing worlds seek to expand and promote their respective ideologies under the nuclear shadow, the very nature of war itself changes, and with this change come different notions about the purpose of military force, proper military strategy and tactics, and the correct goals for military action in the new international arena. On all sides, there is increasing concern with national security, with the involvement of civilians in military strategy, and the place of the military in political affairs. In reflecting this concern, political scientists reanalyze civil-military relations; social scientists examine the military profession; business managers and scientists propose new decision making and management disciplines for government and military organizations; and scientists and academicians propose new strategies for national defense.

So the defense of the United States, and the military profession itself, long relatively isolated from national affairs except in crisis, are today experiencing many of the effects of the changing world.

Changing Patterns of Leadership

The story of the American military profession in modern times has been described by Janowitz as a struggle between the heroic leader, embodying the tradition of the mounted warrior, and the military manager, concerned with the rational and scientific conduct of war. Since the turn of the century, and more especially since World War II, technological developments have been so comprehensive as to create an organizational revolution in the military profession.

As war and war machinery have become more complex, the heroic traditionalism of the military man has taken root in an organizational conservatism; a resistance to change based largely on the uncertainties of war, and the imponderables of planning for the employment of untried technological advances.

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The increased destructiveness of military weaponry, a contribution of technology, weakens traditional distinctions between the role of the military and that of the civilian. Not only do mass destruction weapons broaden the menace to the country and society by equalizing in a sense the risk between soldiers and civilians, but complex technical and logistics tasks also tend to increase the civilian character of the military establishment. Involvement of military personnel in highly technical research and development tasks completes the civilianizing trend of the non-heroic requirements for modern military leadership.

The ultimate requirement for combat, however, provides an outer limit to these civilianizing tendencies. Among the platoons, companies, and battalions of combat divisions, the persistence of the fighter spirit is an essential characteristic of life. So long as this is the case, the heroic leader image cannot be cast away. On the other hand, as today's professional officer moves from command to staff, from field to research program, he continually is torn between the traditional hero image of the warrior class, and the manager-technician demands of burgeoning science and technology in his profession.

Changing Patterns of Decisionmaking

The complex nature of today's military problems taxes the capabilities of traditional methods of military analysis and problem solving. Problems of which weapons systems to develop, how many of what weapons to buy, and where to deploy what forces involve so many complex considerations from cost to national policy, that new decisionmaking tools are required. In response to the need for new tools, the academic community has provided a set of systematic, and where possible, quantitative tools for the solution of complex military management problems.

Involvement of the academic community in the solution of military problems is one of the significant aspects of recent times. This involvement grew out of such events as the World War II participation of scientific groups in development of operational techniques for employment of radar in air defense.

Not only were new weapons developed and introduced by scientists and academicians; but the deployment and employment of the weapons also were subjected to new analysis techniques—matters long considered solely as problems for the military professional to solve. This work was known initially as operations analysis—later operations research. As time went on, operations research techniques were applied to many management and strategy problems of the military establishment. How many bombers should be purchased for the new bomber fleet? Which of two competing missile systems is the better? Should bombers or missiles be the main defense? Where should air defense interceptor units be stationed for best utilization? Such work, including not only operational matters but also costs, the effectiveness of competing systems, and many other factors, has come to be known as systems analysis.

As the purely military ingredient of an equation increases, and a tactical problem of combat is to be solved, systems analysis, as yet, has limited application. When such factors as terrain advantage, beach and sea conditions, state of morale, and the training status of troops must be weighed and a decision reached quickly, systems analysis, at present at any rate, is too cumbersome to be useful. On the other hand, caution must be exercised in propounding this viewpoint dogmatically. What is immeasurable today may be measurable tomorrow. As science learns more about conflict in war games, game theory studies, the science of cybernetics, and related activities, new paths will be opened for analytical treatment of military combat.

The Changing Nature of War

In spite of its violence and horror, war historically has been an essential institution of relations between states. In particular, the nation state system has relied on war as the final arbiter between states that have irreconcilable grievances. Presidents Polk and McKinley deliberately used war as an instrument of American policy, unpleasant but necessary. President Wilson, without really planning participation, became engulfed inextricably in World War I as a foreign policy response. By Franklin Roosevelt's time, war had been magnified to awesome totality; an instrument of defense in the extremity of a total struggle for national survival.

What then is war today? Is it a useful arbiter among nations? Or is it a destructive terror to which heads of state no longer will resort even in extremis? These are some of the questions raised by the presence of nuclear weapons in modern war.

Almost since the beginning of this century, the American military professional has regarded war with the same outlook as that of General Douglas MacArthur when he said:

The general definition which for many decades has been accepted was that war was the ultimate process of politics; that when all other political means failed, you then go to force; and when you do that, the balance of control, the balance of concept, the main interest involved, the minute you reach the killing stage, is the control of the military. . . . You have got to trust at that stage of the game when politics fails, and the military takes over, you must trust the military, or otherwise you will have the system that the Soviet once employed of the political commissar, who could run the military as well as the politics of the country.

Total war, resulting from a total failure of the political processes between states, traditionally has meant total involvement of the military in the conduct of the war, with the ultimate goal total victory. Again General MacArthur, this time speaking of victory, said:

Yours is the profession of arms, the will to win, the sure knowledge that in war there is no substitute for victory, that if you [the military professional] lose, the Nation will be destroyed. . . .

The author of these classical, traditionally military words was the first victim of the fact that war's nature had changed with the introduction of nuclear weapons. Political reluctance to precipitate national disaster in nuclear war, among other considerations, limited the geography, weapons, and operations, and changed the goals of the war in Korea, not once, but several times in the course of the conflict.

Total war had clear goals—total victory, destruction of the enemy, the appeal of a crusade; all under military control for military ends. Virtually all the forces which have motivated modern democracies in war have tended to sublimate political aims of the conflict to the military goals of destroying the enemy.

The war that General MacArthur fought in Korea on the other hand, had other aims, less total, without the appeal of a crusade, changing as the military situation developed. Furthermore, that war was terminated inconclusively. Out of the Korean experience, however, came the idea that war indeed could be limited, that it no longer had to be total in the traditional sense. With that realization, some deep-rooted prejudices were swept away.

Scarcely had the new character of war become apparent, when the nature of war began to change once again. Insurrectionary violence emerged as the dominant characteristic of conflict. Wars no longer were fought between states, but within states. Wars between governments became wars inside governments, inspired by insurrectionary movements, cliques, parties, and other groups seeking power. These wars were characterized by a breakdown of the controls of public administration, outlawism, banditry, terror and assassination, against which full scale military action was required to achieve control of a country.

This new kind of war in a sense is total, but in a completely different sense than before. The war in Indochina virtually was total to Indochina. The war in Algeria was total to that country—total in resources, population, and involvement of every facet of the community. Insurrectionary war, in many respects, is war for the minds of men, war for control of the organs of local government and administration; a war of public administration where votes are cast with rifles.

This changing nature of war tugs at the roots of military professionalism. When war still was thought to be total in the nuclear sense, dependence on long range bombers and missiles as the primary instruments of war upset the very basis of traditional military training, and brought into question the ultimate usefulness of military forces other than the nuclear delivery forces. Before World War II, the maneuvers of the destroyer squadron, the armored regiment, and the aircraft wing credibly could be translated into combat operations. Target practice, bombing, and fleet maneuvers developed skills whose mastery spelled victory or defeat in battle. In the total war of the nuclear exchange, however, an air of unreality and lack of convictions has surrounded the bomber alert force, and the missile silo crew. They know that their

weapons will never be used unless the entire political and military structure of the country has failed in its task.

Korea denied the validity of the great nuclear threat as a lever in conflicts between states where objectives, goals, and the scope of military action could be limited, without total destruction on both sides, and where truly vital national interests (survival) were not at stake. The role of conventional armed forces in modern war of this kind thus was confirmed.

In the late 1950s, however, a new concept was introduced. A policy decision was made that conventional forces would be equally capable of conventional and nuclear war and that they would be equipped with small yield nuclear weapons; thus the professional dilemma brought on by the nuclear weapon reappeared, Training and readiness for conventional war fully were within the ken of the military profession, but what tactics and techniques would be required by a nuclear war that was designed to be less than total in the traditional sense? How was such a war to be fought? If there was doubt that nuclear weapons of any kind would ever be used at all, was the requirement for dually capable forces debilitating conventional strength to achieve an unnecessary duality?

The changing nature of war, from total to limited, back to total in a completely different sense, all under the shadow of a nuclear threat that might never materialize, has brought considerable confusion to the professional viewpoint of what war is supposed to be about.

Changing Concepts of Victory

Total war, in the American tradition, was a military war for military ends. In the early years of the cold war, however, came a dawning realization by the American military profession of the inseparability of political aims from military action, General Omar N. Bradley reflected this changing awareness when he wrote:

The American Army has also acquired a political maturity it sorely lacked at the outbreak of World War II. At times during that war we forgot that wars are fought for the resolution of political conflicts, and in the ground campaign for Europe we sometimes overlooked political considerations of vast importance. Today, after several years of cold war, we are intensely aware that military effort cannot be separated from political objectives.

From a recognition that the nature of the ultimate end of war itself had changed, came changing concepts of victory. If war was no longer total, if its goal no longer was to be the annihilation of the enemy, what then was the meaning of victory? Out of the Korean experience came certain knowledge that winning a war no longer includes traditional patterns of clear-cut goals, defeat of the enemy, surrender, and final victory. The nuclear weapon was the prime contributor to this change.

The rise of insurrectionary war as the modern form of total war further confuses the issues of war's aims, and the ultimate meaning of victory. At the outset the existence of insurrection suggests political

failure, for if the organs of political control are effective, insurrection is unlikely to begin. Containment of insurrectionary war within the bounds of one country only serves to add to the confusion. How does the American military fight wars to restore political stability in someone else's country? If the ultimate goal of the American military is the defense of the American state, what are the goals of American military action in insurrectionary wars in other states?

Paradoxically, the American liberal society, long suspicious of standing armies and the use of military force, has been quick to call on the military establishment as an instrument of foreign policy to support a national strategy that is designed to contain communism. The acceptance of this mission has required the military establishment to become involved in special force structures, special schooling activities, and above all in operations aimed at achieving governmental stability in countries that have widely differing social, cultural, economic, and military value judgments.

The broader challenge is one to liberal society itself, as it struggles to define more clearly its traditionally ambiguous goals. The ambiguity in overall goals makes the military task even more difficult. The military professional, face to face with a real problem in the field, indeed is in a dilemma. Any kind of victory is difficult to achieve when the criteria for winning are ambiguous.

As the pattern of insurrectionary war has developed, it increasingly has become obvious that to be able to wage a war for stability in public administration the military requires new skills—skills that are commensurate with these new responsibilities. These skills must reflect the blending of the political-economic-social-military characteristic of insurrectionary action. The achievement of objectives in these areas is a task that liberal democracy heretofore has been reluctant to entrust to its military forces. Now, however, it demands that the military forces become involved, and that they win.

A similar development occurred in France. Ambiguity of national goals, and deep involvement of the military in the non-military demands of insurrectionary war, led to a deep schism between the French military and the French state during the Indochinese and Algerian campaigns. Ultimately, this ambiguity spelled the downfall of the French military profession, which lacking clear definition of what was to be won, pursued political, social, psychological, and cultural aims in the context of the totality of the new war. Eventually, so they felt, the French military came to see national goals and what was to be won more clearly than the vacillating French government. The military appealed to the nation over the government, and lost the appeal. While there were a great many dissimilarities between the French and American military professions, thus making it difficult to contemplate the occurrence of a like situation in American democracy, the French experience highlights the dangers of ambiguous goals and aims, especially in insurrectionary war.

Changing Patterns of Strategy and Tactics

When it became certain that nuclear weapons threatened national survival, the scientific and academic communities quickly became interested in strategy and tactics for nuclear weapons, and in national policy consideration surrounding their employment. Arthur Herzog, a writer on military subjects, quotes an estimate that over 100,000 pieces of literature have been written on the subject of strategy since the end of World War II. Some of these writings have had a significant influence on the conduct of national affairs. Indeed, a study by Raymond L. Wilson, Jr. concludes that a small group of civilian intellectuals significantly influenced virtually all national defense policy decisions of the Kennedy Administration.

As might be expected, strategies proposed in these writings reflect a wide divergence of absolute opinion from pacifism and disarmament to preemptive war. They also reflect increased difficulty in separating national strategy from military strategy, and demonstrate that many segments of society, other than military, have become involved in a field formerly considered to be exclusively military. While the military may view civilian intrusion with alarm, the civilian looks upon military involvement in national policymaking with equal suspicion. Nevertheless, in terms of its size, cost, and its interrelation with almost every aspect of public affairs, the American military establishment now is in an unprecedented peacetime situation. It inextricably is involved in contributing to policymaking for the nation.

Liberal society clearly recognizes the new position and influence of the military. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., one of liberalism's most articulate spokesmen, expressed civilian reaction in this fashion:

We are very much aware of an increased military influence in our national life. . . . The novelty today lies not in having professional generals venture forth as free lances in political campaigns, but in having them as established authorities on policy, accepted in the highest national councils and held accountable in the most solemn national debates. . . . But in quantity and quality, the power and prestige of the generals constitute a new phenomenon. We have among us today, in short, a new political elite, whose future is likely to have a considerable effect on the future of the republic.

Size, capabilities, and deployment of the nation's military forces also have become day-by-day concerns of the diplomat; a fact that is causing the diplomat and the military to draw closer together. The political liberal, however, sees military participation in the shaping of national policy as inimical to the American political tradition. From this feeling flows a further question as to the competence of the military man in the broader aspects of political and military policy. What of the military's traditional, conservative, rigid "military mind"? Can it adapt to the less precise parameters of political-military decisionmaking? Again Schlesinger provides a clear expression of the civilian concern:

The quality of the military mind is hard to define. But it clearly has an extraordinary innocence. It approaches every question as if no one else had

ever tackled it before; it seeks to subdue every problem with military logic; it has no reserves of overtone or undertone. The answer to everything . . . is to estimate a situation and then take action. Everything is seen too clearly; and the complexities of history fall by the wayside. Above all, the military approach has trouble with the problem of ultimate goals; for life is something more than set problems in strategy. Under conditions of total war, the defense of the United States implies a whole series of value judgments on questions of economics, policy, and morality.

Aside from the concern of liberal society, Schlesinger's words highlight a concomitant problem for the military professional. Military science is a discipline in which skill is acquired by training and experience; its execution demands a decisiveness of action that is not required in any other discipline. The military professional usually is faced with a task that somehow has to be accomplished. To do it, he relies on a fairly reflex set of reasoned responses which, if not intellectually the best, quite often pragmatically are correct. There is no time to ponder abstractions at length in the fashion of the intellectual. Practical insistence on problem solution, to which Schlesinger refers, was born of necessity, not of intellectual poverty.

When he becomes involved in formulation of state policy, the military professional faces a whole new set of values which in a sense erode his conviction of the correctness of his military point of view. Huntington avers that "politics is beyond the scope of military competence, and the participation of military officers in politics undermines their professionalism." On the other hand, the real world about him has involved the military professional in just that sort of activity, and from it he cannot remain aloof. In the field, he is exposed to economic and social problems in a way best expressed by Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Edward L. Katzenbach, Jr., in these words:

The military [mind] today . . . has to be able to think in terms of training missions the world over, a more complicated problem than is faced by any other profession because he may be training at one time in South America, at another time in the Far East, and at still another in Africa or in Europe. He [the military professional] has got to know more than most economists in terms of international economics, and he must know village politics, and he must know the history of regions, theology of peoples, what motivates them, what they think about; he must know what they want to be so that he can help them. . . .

And in a broader view of the same problem President Kennedy charged the military profession in these terms:

You [military professionals] must know something about strategy and tactics and logic . . . economics and politics and diplomacy and history. You must know everything you can about military power, and you must also understand the limits of military power. You must understand that few of the important problems of our time have, in the final analysis, been solved by military power alone. . . . You must be more than servants of national policy, you must be prepared to play a constructive role in the development of national policy, a policy which protects our interests and our society and the peace of the world.

Thus, the civilian intrudes into a field once considered purely military, and the military professional is called in to sit in councils that are debating social, economic, and political issues. This innovation forces him to develop a new depth and breadth of perception about his profession, his traditions, and his nation. Finally, in his new role of economic, social, political, and military adviser at levels from the seat of government to the primitive village, the professional must seek new strategies, new tactics, and new doctrines to meet the conditions that he finds in each place.

The Road Ahead

Is the American military professional ethic that was developed in the late nineteenth century out of date for the last half of the twentieth?

Fundamental as it was, reflecting a long period of thought and introspection, the American pre-nuclear military ethic probably was as useful and valid in 1945 as it was in 1914 on the eve of World War I. From nuclear weapons to the management of defense, however, science and technology in recent years have generated conditions which challenge the traditional role of the military in American society.

On the other hand, whatever its shortcomings may have been, the traditional military code still meets two essential requirements: first, it provides the rationale and disciplines for successful combat with an enemy on the field of battle; second, its underlying sense of devotion to a cause provides the motivation for men to seek and remain with the profession in the absence of traditional total war, performing often odious and increasingly hazardous tasks often for only token reward. If we are to construct a new philosophy—an ethic for the future, it must continue to meet these two requirements.

The traditional essence of military competence is leadership of men in battle. In the past, leadership by and large has been uni-service. Its development has been based on the idea that clearly defined objectives will be specified by a superior command. Its action programs—doctrine and tactics—have been oriented to military goals. It has been the product of extensive military education and training, and it has been directed by an organizational structure designed to tie the whole together in meaningful combat.

The essential character of modern war, however, seems quite different. First, it tends to be more and more joint in organization, deployment, staff, and command. Second, it embodies more comprehensive and centralized direction from the top; limiting, shaping, and even directing action in the field. Third, it embraces new leadership patterns, requiring greater technical-managerial competence on the one hand, yet demanding retention of traditional values on the other. Fourth, it increasingly is affected by decisionmaking and analysis techniques that question the utility of traditional staff processes, even of the staff system itself. Finally, it requires a new breadth and depth of

understanding and ability in a far broader group of skills—economic, social, political, military, from the Pentagon to the hamlet.

To achieve these skills, the military education system again must be summoned to broaden the base of joint knowledge and to expand the academic programs of the service and joint schools. The education system also must be looked to for interagency orientation. It must broaden the corporate sense of the military to include identification with other agencies that are seeking common goals in their implementation of the nation's policies. Education must provide a clearer understanding of management and leadership techniques in industry, in science, in business, and in battle. Finally, both education and organization must set to work to provide the strategy, the tactics, and the doctrine by means of which the military profession successfully can seek the nation's changing goals. If there are suitable substitutes for winning in modern war, these must be identified early, and communicated clearly to those who face the crucial task of deciding what the job is, how to go about it, and when the job is to be done.

Essentiality of the Military

The United States military profession is a product of the liberal society that it serves. Coming from the liberal social system of the democracy, changing in attitude as social attitudes in society change, the military professional reflects his background in the nation's education systems, as well as his professional military education and training.

The military professional often sees himself in the Hamiltonian heritage of nationalism; he has a strong sense of duty, bravery, and purposeful action for his nation. Traditionally, he regrets that these cherished values seem to have become obscured, and longs for their return. But he cannot restore them, he cannot revive them, he cannot win society to their call. For if he does, he has grown out of his role of service to the state, and may cease to exist.

Nonetheless, the professional military man, and even his traditional attitudes, are a necessary ingredient in American society. His is the voice of caution in the winds of idealistic international argument; the reminder that although domestically creative, the liberal tradition has a poor record in foreign policy and national security matters. His is the voice reminding the nation that wars are fought by people for the control of people; that men afoot, men on and in the sea, men aloft are the essential strength of the nation's security. Above all, in this time of crisis, he must strive to understand to be understood. Again and again he must reconsider what it is that makes him and his profession distinctly military; what he has that others have not. For only by so doing can he come to a deeper appreciation of the unique contribution that he and his profession can make to America, and ultimately to all mankind.