

THE WAR AGAINST TERRORISM:
A NEW GENERATION OF WARFARE

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“By declaring war on the Al-Qaeda network of terror—a non-state globalisation phenomenon—America and the nation-state system formally recognised they were in a new era.”—Harold Gould, Professor of South Asian Studies, University of Virginia, 9 October 2001

On the morning of September 11, 2001, a jetliner flew an unplanned course through the clear skies of New York City and slammed into a skyscraper; the resultant fire melted steel and caused the building to collapse a short time later. This and subsequent events of that fateful day were remarkable for their horror and their magnitude; their impact on American military doctrine and post-Cold War diplomacy has been immediate and profound. For the past ten years, military analysts had struggled to define warfare in the wake of the collapse of the Iron Curtain. Isolated incidents such as the attack on the USS Cole appeared to presage a new kind of enemy. A few defense analysts talked of a “fourth generation” of warfare that would inevitably supplant the era of conventional war epitomized by Operation Desert Storm. The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, however, mark a decisive change in the conduct of warfare as it is waged in the West. The best evidence of this change is the dramatic difference between the methods of conventional warfare and those of fourth generation warfare, in addition to the overwhelming response of the Bush administration and the international community in terms of a new military and diplomatic agenda.

According to Michael Klare, professor of security studies at Hampshire College, “the September 11 terrorist assaults on New York and Washington, no less than the 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the 1945 nuclear strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, have fundamentally altered the landscape of global conflict.”¹ Prior to that date some strategic analysts had theorized that the asymmetrical balance of power between a few superpowers and the rest of the world would lead weaker states or extraterritorial organizations such as terrorist groups and narcotic traffickers to use dramatic, unconventional methods to weaken the superpowers and accomplish their political and economic agendas. Yet, insofar as they had any substance, such views took the form of theoretical and difficult articles in obscure military journals.² The majority of analysts assumed that the next major American war would entail combat with the well-equipped armies of a modern state such as Iran or China. Now, all that has changed. What was regarded as obtuse theory is now reality: and United States forces

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are now engaged in a global struggle against a secretive, multinational terrorist organization. Quite simply, “the industrial-era fighting methods that prevailed in most of the wars of the twentieth century have been replaced by a different mode of combat: postindustrial warfare.”³

Variouly termed “postindustrial,” “asymmetrical,” or “fourth generation” warfare, the tactics used by terrorists on September 11 have characteristics that distinguish them from historical methods of waging war or even from earlier acts of terrorism. This does not imply that terrorism is a new phenomenon. Historians are quick to point out that the use of unconventional methods by “a handful of willing fanatics” has existed for centuries.⁴ Yet, the events of September 11 are not the imperceptible machinations of a disgruntled minority on the border regions of a superpower. Consider the terrible magnitude of the attack and the fact that it occurred on U.S. soil in the American cultural hearth. “The toppling of the twin towers... using hijacked jetliners... proves that henceforth there is no place to hide.”⁵ Our own technological advancements have been used by the enemy to wreak unparalleled havoc upon us. Quite clearly, the self-imposed and technological constraints which inhibited terrorism in the past are eroding.⁶ Ultimately, by creating universal outrage and galvanizing international response, the act has reshaped the character of international relations and forced the United States into a new war against global terrorism.⁷

Next, consider the military, political, and economic response to the attacks. Frank Spinney, a defense analyst who has done much to popularize the notion of fourth generation warfare, summed up the major difference between historical warfare and the new war against terrorism when he said, “It is a strange form of warfare, one where, for example, military force plays a much smaller (though still critical) role than in earlier generations, often supporting initiatives that are more political, diplomatic, and economic.”⁸ Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld underscored the reduced role of a conventional military force. In this “new kind of war... military force will be merely one tool used to defeat the enemy.” He spoke of stateless warfare in which the opponent is “a global network of terrorist organizations” rather than a single state, and the invasion of enemy space may take place in a number of states or even in cyberspace. “We have no fixed rules about how to deploy our troops; we’ll instead establish guidelines to determine whether military force is the best way to achieve a given objective.”⁹

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If we look at recent events in light of previous generations of war, a major evolution in warfare becomes plain. Gould and Spinney identify three generations of warfare that have occurred since the development of the European nation-state in the seventeenth century: (1) classical nation-state war culminating in the Napoleonic Wars, (2) the industrial wars

of attrition (the American Civil War through the First World War), and (3) maneuver warfare (German blitzkrieg, Air Land Battle, etc.) which emerged after the First World War.¹⁰ First generation warfare was response to improvements in firepower. Formations of soldiers moved across the battlefield in a linear fashion. The principal advance in second generation warfare was the use of artillery with massed firepower replacing massed manpower. Successful armies were those who had the most or best managed firepower, enabling them to wear down their opponent. In the First World War, the Germans, possessed with a comparatively weak industrial base, developed radically new, nonlinear tactics: the air-land battlefield was born. Emphasizing the rapid maneuver of armed forces rather than the use of massive firepower, this type of warfare was perfected in the Second World War with the German blitzkrieg, a rapid, precise, and devastating strike to destroy the enemy's resources and will to fight.¹¹

Since the Second World War, "the emphasis [in the U.S. military] has [continued to be] . . . on a doctrine of attrition and theater warfare against large, identifiable foes with professional standing armies."¹² The irony of the conventional and nuclear arms buildup that occurred throughout the twentieth century among the superpowers is that conventional warfare has been steadily decreasing in frequency in the last several decades. In fact, of the fifty armed conflicts in the 1990s, only one—the Persian Gulf War—involved all-out fighting between large numbers of air, ground, and sea forces. Conversely, internal conflict between "nonstate actors" has become quite common.¹³ Postindustrial warfare relies on irregular forces plus unconventional methods of fighting to inflict disproportionate damage on more powerful conventional forces. In place of traditional "heavy metal" weapons—tanks, combat planes, warships—it employs cheap, low-tech weapons and commercially available technologies (including biotechnology) to defeat an adversary.¹⁴ Viewed in the context of military history, fourth-generation warfare is highly irregular. "Asymmetric" operations—in which a vast mismatch exists between the resources and philosophies of the combatants, and in which the emphasis is on bypassing an opposing military force and striking directly at cultural, political, or population targets—are a defining characteristic of fourth-generation warfare. The United States will face "decentralized, non-state actors (perhaps supported by a rogue nation or two) who understand just how big an impact attacks on markets, communications, and cultural icons can have on the American psyche."¹⁵

The final evidence of a dramatic evolution in warfare is the U.S. response to the September 11 attack. Before that date the Bush administration sought to use its great wealth and influence to insulate itself from the troubles of the globe. But now, safety lies in engagement. The Bush administration now intends to make the war against terrorism "the central

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organizing principle of America's foreign and defense policies."¹⁶ The war on terrorism began with the arduous task of assembling a global anti-terrorist coalition, something never before accomplished. In addition, the defense establishment has placed unconventional, rapid response forces in the limelight. An array of special operations units and CIA operatives were at the forefront of a ground attack against Taliban forces in Afghanistan. The intelligence community also stands to undergo a major overhaul in the wake of a perceived failure to foresee the September 11 attack. On top of these military activities and the building of an effective international coalition against terrorism, the United States must take steps to improve homeland security. On September 20 President Bush announced a new Office of Homeland Security, with Pennsylvania Governor Tom Ridge as the director, reflecting a sea change in attitudes toward internal defense.

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Fourth generation warfare has undoubtedly arrived, and it changes everything. It poses a significant threat to the international community. Transnational terrorist organizations have breached long-standing defense mechanisms and will in all likelihood continue to do so. Political violence and organized criminality will thus remain significant features of the international landscape. On the other hand, we may take comfort in history. In the words of one historian, "not merely terrorist leaders but terror itself has been trumped in the past... Aroused consensual societies... annihilate rather than merely defeat their [terrorist] enemies."¹⁷ Only by understanding and adapting to the new circumstances of fourth generation warfare can we successfully face the challenges that surely lie ahead. ☺

NOTES:

1. Michael Klare, "Waging Postindustrial Warfare on the Global Battlefield." *Current History* 100 (2001), 433.
2. John Keegan, "How Bush Should Fight 21st Century Warfare," *The Age* (14 September 2001); available from <http://theage.com.au> [accessed 27 December 2001].
3. Klare, 433.
4. Victor Hanson, "The Longest War," *American Heritage*, February/March 2002, 39.
5. Harold Gould and Franklin Spinney, "Fourth Generation Warfare." *The Hindu Online* (9 October 2001); available from <http://www.hinduonnet.com> [accessed 27 December 2001].
6. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 197.
7. David Rapoport, "The Fourth Wave: September 11 in the History of Terrorism." *Current History* 100 (2001), 419.
8. Franklin Spinney, *Fourth Generation Warfare*, available from http://www.d-n-i.net/FCS_Folder/fourth_generation_warfare.htm [accessed 27 December 2001].
9. Donald Rumsfeld, "A New Kind of War." *New York Times* (27 November 2001); available from <http://www.nytimes.com> [accessed 27 December 2001].
10. Gould and Spinney (on-line).
11. William Lind et al., "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation." *Marine*

Corps Gazette (October 1989), available from http://www.d ni.net/FCS_Folder/4th_gen_war_gazette.htm [accessed 24 January 2002].

12. Jason Vest, "Fourth Generation Warfare," *The Atlantic Online* (December 2001); available from <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/2001/12/vest.htm> [accessed 27 December 2001].
13. Klare, 434-5.
14. Klare, 433.
15. Vest (on-line).
16. Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay, "A War Nasty, Brutish, and Long," *Current History* 100 (2001), 403.
17. Hanson, 39.