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Principles of War: Obsolete or Timeless

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PRINCIPLES OF WAR: OBSOLETE OR TIMELESS

Abstract

Today the traditional Principles of War are obsolete. That's one view. The principles are timeless and as valid today as they were yesterday and will be tomorrow. That's another view. Within these opposing views is the belief that certain principles need to be revalidated or revised and others added or abandoned. In an era of transformation and strategic evolution we may change as well as retain certain principles. The challenge, according to an ole country song, is which principles to hold, fold, or draw to and why.

This essay seeks to contribute to a review of the emerging discussions on the Principles of War. One fundamental thesis is that today war and nations are adjusting to evolutionary and revolutionary strategies and systems as well as tactics and technologies. Transnationalism, transformation, terrorism, and technology are influencing a new international security environment. The changing operational environment is influenced by multiple conceptual and technological factors associated with Network Centric Warfare, Effects Based Operations, and related emerging ideas which are transforming our approach to and conduct of war. Similarly, this may requires changes to our Principles of War and this paper proposes new principles for consideration

Principles of War

Principles of War represent the fundamental truths that serve as basic guidelines in the practice of the art and science of military affairs. The principles have evolved over time and have stood the test of time as warfighting guidelines at the strategic, operational, and tactical level. Although there is no international consensus on a single list of principles, nations concur that the various national principles serve as the foundation for evaluating military strategy and tactics as

well as operational planning. The United States currently recognizes the following nine

Principles of War:

~Objective: To direct every military operation toward a clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective.

~Offensive: To seize, retain, and exploit the initiative.

~Mass: To concentrate the effects of combat power at the place and time to achieve decisive results.

~Economy of Force: To allocate minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts.

~Maneuver: To place the enemy in a position of disadvantage through the flexible application of combat power.

~Unity of Command: To ensure unity of effort under one responsible commander for every objective.

~Security: To never permit the enemy to acquire unexpected advantage.

~Surprise: To strike the enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which it is unprepared.

~Simplicity: To prepare clear, uncomplicated plans and concise orders to ensure thorough understanding.

Understanding War

It's inadvisable to initiate a discussion of these principles without first understanding war.

This is because today many misunderstand war's evolving character. War is a common, yet unique event and experience. Wars vary from total to limited. They often have multiple objectives and a singular purpose—peace. They have similarities and differences. They inspire acts of courage as well as compassion. They're international events with local and personal consequences. They determine the fate of nations and the fate of peoples.

Theorists often define war as an act of violence, power, and force. Combatants, however, describe war as more, much more. It's ruthless, brutal, terrorizing, dehumanizing, and painfully cruel. With minimal eloquence, but maximum forthrightness, the American Civil War Confederate General, Nathan Bedford Forrest, growled "War means fightin' and fightin' means killin'." But today too many are too often too uncomfortable with this bold truth.

As we transition from the Industrial Age to the Information Age, some believe that superior technology and knowledge may alleviate the need to kill. Some talk more of Information Age technologies and concepts than Industrial Age power and attrition. While many believe that sophisticated systems and technologies win wars, most often its simple hard work by mankind that wins wars. War is more a human-centric enterprise than a net-centric one. Systems and technologies rarely win wars. Instead, its courage, compassion, and competent warriors that wins wars.

Soldiering at the tactical level is a tough and hard responsibility. But some want to focus on the easy and soft. Today some seek to disarm rather than defeat, pacify instead of pulverize, or compromise rather than conquer. We may agree that there is a time to disarm, pacify, or compromise. But once war begins it's time to fight. Humanitarian actions and peace negotiations should be conducted concurrently with war, but war is often the more dominant action if the more humane actions are to succeed.

This easy and soft approach to war is also often manifest in the belief that the war will be brief, inexpensive, simple, and controllable. These are the four false myths of most wars. Wars are invariably much longer, more costly, more complex, and more uncontrollable than initially envisioned. Wars emerge and evolve as contradictions to our initial thoughts and become more challenging than originally perceived. Will and resolve then become dominant characteristics or considerations of war. One opponent strives to defeat the will and resolve of the other. The target is rarely the soldier on the distant battlefield front, but the statesman and citizen on the home front. Today, more wars are won on the home front of resolve than the front lines of battle. The popular support and resolve of the people are crucial to victory in war.

Victory in war is rarely, if ever, the ultimate goal. Victory is only a means to the end. The true goal is peace. Peace often requires patience and perseverance. But it's peace that justifies war and its fighting and killing. Yet, today we seem to often confuse or merge the strategic political with the military tactical. Fighting politically correct or collateral damage restrictive battles have sensible and honorable strategic goals. But they have operational and tactical consequences. Technologically superior precision weapons and munitions create perceptions that the battlefield is a clinically clean and controllable experimental laboratory environment. But the true crucible of war is more akin to chaotic emergency trauma rooms or intensive care wards with catastrophic injuries and ugly deaths and dirty battlefields.

Principles of War must guide us through the politically and militarily treacherous myths and landscapes of war. War creates negative emotions primarily because of its death and destruction. In a past era of protest the value and validity of war was challenged with a song that asked: "War, what is it good for?" With no intent at flippancy, possibly one answer is in a familiar slogan: "Except for ending Slavery, Fascism, Nazism, and Communism, war has never solved anything." We have to focus beyond the tragedy of war to view its triumphs—and self-determination and peace are often the true triumphs. Nations and peoples willing to fight harder and with greater determination for their beliefs and values survive while others perish. The survival of freedom validates war.

Understanding Terrorism

As deadly and destructive as war is, however, an increasingly deadly dimension to war has steadily emerged. Today terrorism incorporates the worst traits of inhumane war into its most insidious actions. Despite the devastation of war, most civilized countries and combatants are

governed by rules, codes, or laws. Generally, terrorism has no such principles, except to inflict the most harm on those most innocent for the most publicity to create the most fear.

The hatreds and horrors of terrorism are deep and dark and chilling. They're changing and shaping our lives. Terrorism is fanaticism and fatalism. In war combatants are trained in the skill to kill and the will to kill, but discouraged against the thrill to kill. The skill to kill includes training in those physical traits required on battlefields. The will to kill involves those psychological preparations that respect human life, but that in war focus on survival and self-preservation. The thrill to kill, however, is psychotic. It's rejected by war, but embraced by terrorism. The thrill to kill represents the cowardly insanity of terrorism and hate.

Historically, hatreds emerge from the perceived and real differences or divisions among peoples. Angers and animosities occur because of the disparities between prosperity and poverty, hope and despair, freedom and oppression, justice and injustice. It's the ancient struggle between the advantaged and disadvantaged, the haves and have nots. These despairs and depressions become the hopeless grievances and roots of hatred. When one has nothing to live for, one will die for most anything. Terrorism is born. Today, terrorism is a powerful and ominous threat.

A 5 July 2004 "Time" magazine investigative report concluded that one primary goal of the jihad is simply "to kill Americans." As blindly obvious as this is to some, it's ignored or trivialized by others. The truth is, however, the jihad threat is becoming more formidable than the infamous Cold War communist threat "We Will Bury You." Furthermore, the religious fervor that underlies the jihad may require more years to defeat than it did to expose communism. The jihad's goal is to bury America in fear and devastation.

The amorphous and infectious illness of terrorism spreads the jihad movement worldwide in epidemic proportions. It thrives on the weak and unprepared, but mostly it flourishes on fear.

Peoples and nations who lack resolve resign themselves to terrorism. As terrorist acts increase we ask, according to Charles Krauthammer in a 24 December 2001 “Time” viewpoint: What did we do to inspire such hate? What can we do against such rage? How can we respond or will responding only make terrorism more hateful and angry?

What we can and must do is act with resolve and conviction. The Afghanistan people rejected the corruption and cruelty of the Taliban. The Iraqi people rejoiced upon their deliverance from the tyranny of Saddam and they’re today striving for self-determination despite the evils of terrorism and Al Qaeda. Nations and peoples who respond with resolve are becoming increasingly more successful. The challenges remain great, but the consequences of no response or resolve are greater.

Principles of Peace

We have been forced into the war on terrorism and its destructive deaths. We must concurrently respond with courage and compassion. Possibly we should concurrently consider Principles of Peace. Today many agree there is a mismatch between where the world’s wealth, technology, education, health, jobs, opportunities, and other benefits are located and where the most disadvantaged live and who have few such benefits.

Therefore, if the developing world remains mired in poverty and unemployment as well as lacks social, legal, medical, economic, and education reforms, international stability will increase. It will eventually explode. The richest one-sixth of the earth’s population, who enjoy a disproportionate five-sixths of its wealth, will suffer the consequences of this explosion. We must seek a better balance and distribution of the hope and opportunity of this wealth to benefit all.

We must reengage in the war on poverty. Poverty provides a breeding ground for terrorism and hate. We must improve the world trade imbalance by providing poor countries access to world markets and by voiding unfair trade protectionism practices. We must help create honest police forces and fair judicial systems in developing countries. We must invest in health and education programs. We must support advancing technology transfers to help developing countries prepare for tomorrow's sophisticated world.

These initiatives will be costly, but such investments will produce significant dividends for peace. The costs will be much less than those of war. We've been forced to courageously engage in the war on terrorism. We must be equally compassionate in engaging with countries to enhance their political, economic, and social infrastructure. We then do more than win the war; we win the peace with principles, too.

Changing Strategic Environment

This review of the character and nature of traditional war and evolving terrorism, as well as the changing international security environment, must be at the forefront of our consciousness as we review the old and consider new Principles of War. The principles are an integral part of war and must be evaluated in the context of its brutality and benevolence. The current nine Principles of War for the United States military are: Objective, Unity of Command, Simplicity, Mass, Maneuver, Offensive, Surprise, Economy of Force, and Security. They have a traditional timelessness, but times are changing.

Some deserve to be retained as a nucleus for any revised list. Some may survive and others may disappear. Some may address the emerging military dimensions and domains of war. Others may focus on expanding into the political, economic, and social aspects of war. We must be careful, however, to create a list with neither too many to dilute their effectiveness nor too

few to diminish their relevance. All must be responsible guidelines for soldiers, statesmen, and citizens. As a nation, we all have a collective responsibility in war and in peace.

Today's changing operational environment is influenced by multiple factors. Two primary ones are warfare's emerging concepts and advancing technologies. They include: Network Centric Warfare, Effects Based Operations, Collaborative Information Environment, Standing Joint Force Headquarters, Joint Fires, Operational Net Assessment, Knowledge Management, Decision Superiority, and a host of related concepts and technologies to enhance collaborative and distributive planning and operations.

These multiple concepts are creating changes in our approach to war. We now refer to Information Age capabilities as opposed to Industrial Age ones. In the 21st Century, compared to the 20th Century, principles must now address dispersed forces over massed ones, knowledge based operations over information based ones, proactive over reactive actions, interagency and joint and coalition centric operations over military centric ones, precise effects over precise targeting, as well as other emerging distinctions.

Our review of the principles must be founded on the transformation and evolution in today's military. Despite the unpredictability and uncertainty of war, we've been rather successful in adjusting to new approaches to war and technology. We're developing new concepts and new technologies to prepare us for Information Age warfare. Yet, this evaluation may need qualification as we consider new or additional principles.

Principles for Consideration

We have been successful strategically in Major Combat Operations. But as proficient as we are at winning the war in Major Combat Operations we are less so in winning the peace in Security, Stability, and Reconstruction Operations. We have a tendency to relegate to a

secondary priority an early focus on end state and conflict termination goals. A new principle could address Security, Stability, and Reconstruction Operations.

We seem to be deficient in Information and Influence Operations. We have the world's most sophisticated Madison Avenue public relations and advertising firms, the Hollywood film industry is acclaimed worldwide, and our freedom of the press is internationally renowned. Yet, our democratic dissent often confuses instead of coalesces public opinion. Divisiveness and division then separate us. Too often a terrorist with a camcorder emerges from a cave with a cheap propaganda video and releases a message that reverberates worldwide and on our airwaves, too. It unifies our enemies. We need strategic themes with local messages and a process to release timely coordinated and coherent messages. A new principle could address Information and Influence Operations and public opinion support initiatives for both domestic and international audiences.

We have a current principle identified as Maneuver. Its one principle commands employ to position or disperse forces to achieve a battlefield advantage with either direct or indirect actions. Today, possibly maneuver should become a part of a new principle, Shaping. By Shaping we prepare the battlefield with a broader range of actions to include maneuver as well as fires, intelligence, decisions, deception, and others. A new principle, Shaping, could address maneuver, but in a much broader context than the disposition or dispersal of forces.

We have a conventional military second to none, but our major threat is now an unconventional and asymmetric one characterized by terrorism and insurgency. Years ago the Marine Corps talked about the "Three Block War." It illustrated time and distance challenges in unconventional war. A Marine or Soldier on patrol, for example, may engage in many types of war in a few city blocks and hours. An hour after reveille, for example, the infantryman on patrol

may be participating in Humanitarian Assistance operations in one city block. An hour later and a block away, he may be involved in Peacekeeping activities. Then one block and another hour later, he may be engaged in hostile combat action. Today a Fourth Block may be the civil-military initiatives associated with Security, Stability, and Reconstruction Operations as well as other types or levels of war. The challenges are multiple and diverse. Our forces must of necessity be flexible and agile. A new principle could address this diversity and the need for agile and responsive actions to engage vastly different missions, threats, and asymmetric adversaries.

We are becoming more effective and efficient in incorporating the interagency and joint/coalition capabilities into our planning process. In concept and practice we understand our national security can be enhanced by considering and applying all instruments of national power as well as that of our allies. Yet, to date we lack definitive rules and procedures to effectively institute interagency capabilities beyond the strategic level. The interagency is a significant resource that must be more fully integrated into our political-military process. A new principle could address the interagency and its contributions to planning and executing war.

We have come to more comprehensively promote the concept of cultural understanding as a critical requirement for evaluating potential adversaries as well as in planning and conducting combat operations. In conventional warfare physical geography and terrain mapping are important, but in unconventional, irregular, insurgent, terrorist type conflicts human geography and cultural mapping are crucial. Insurgents and terrorists weaponize culture and target us with our misunderstanding of their culture. They lock and load and fight us with ideas and ideals and too often we misinterpret both. We too often perceive the adversary as a monolithic one, when it's actually a chaotic and complex mixture of contemporary culture and traditional values, a

phenomenon and an ideology, an economy of poverty or excess, a tribal or social sect system, religious purists or spiritual extremists, a series of hopeless or unaddressed grievances that combine to produce a volatile reaction. In the process, we neither understand the game nor the rules. We'll never win the game, for example, if we play by rugby rules and the opponent insists on playing cricket or if we attempt to win a downhill slalom race in cross country skis. We must understand the cultural aspects of the game, the rules, and the equipment and resources vital to winning the game. A new principle, Cultural Understanding, could focus on the cultural aspects and attitudes crucial to our successful engagement with multiple and diverse cultures.

We have come to understand that combative or civil contentiousness may exist without an actual crisis. Yet, we at times focus too exclusively on the application of military actions to resolve issues or differences. Meanwhile, the fundamental causes of the crisis may be economic, political, or social. The majority of crises may be resolved by various elements of national power without resorting to war. At times, the best action to preserve the peace is to simply avoid the war. Alternative actions may be executed sequentially or simultaneously and achieve the desired results. Not every crisis is worth a war and sometimes the best way to win a war is simply not to fight one. Economic sanctions, political concessions, social enhancements, containment, deterrence, and a host of similar non-military initiatives may be employed to resolve a crisis and avert a war. Military actions may also be employed, but those other than war are often preferred initial actions. Selective strikes, show of force operations, precision and limited engagements, are but a few of many military actions other than war. Alternative actions abound and few wars are worthy of prosecution until the alternatives are considered with due diligence. A new principle, Alternative Actions, could emphasize those actions other than war that may achieve our goals and resolve the crisis.

We have come to appreciate the value of alliances, coalitions, and partnerships. The British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, proclaimed “the only thing worse than fighting with allies is fighting without them.” A century earlier, the classic theorist on war, Karl von Clausewitz, wrote “One country may support another’s cause, but will never take it so seriously as it takes its own.” This is a true and subtle warning. Nations fight first for their interests and then for the interests of other coalition partners. Furthermore, they may be willing or reluctant members of the coalition or they may be members borne of necessity. Whatever the reason, it’s their national interests that dominate and determine coalition membership. As Lord Palmerston, mid-nineteenth century British Prime Minister, announced “We have no eternal allies and we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual.” Once this is accepted and understood the multiple sensitivities of coalition members may be negotiated and possibly fulfilled as strategies and policies are discussed and developed. Virtually every individual member of the coalition has strengths and contributions of value to the collective coalition. Coalitions are force enhancers and force multipliers. A new principle, Coalition Interests, could address the significance of coalitions in deterring and prosecuting war.

We have an appreciation for the Deployment, Employment, and Sustainment of forces as major considerations in war. Yet, too often commands prepare grand operational schemes without an appropriate initial focus on logistics and force flow, closure, and sustainment. We need to remember that logisticians can support most any plan operators can execute, but that operators can rarely execute a plan that logisticians are unable to support. Logistics is critical. A new principle could address the influence and constraints of logistics and the critical need for parallel planning between operators and logisticians.

We are today exploring and implementing numerous innovative concepts and technologies. The one common theme is their orientation toward achieving Decision Superiority. As we transform into the Information Age our plans and operations are becoming information based. A basic goal is to transform data into information, then knowledge, then understanding. The ultimate goal is to help commanders make better and timelier decisions. Information is one of the most powerful weapons in the commander's arsenal. Information is power. Powerful information is lethal. Yet, as crucial as "Speed of Decision" is, possibly more critical is "Speed of Action." We must be adapt and adept at "Speed of Action" if "Speed of Decision" is to be meaningful. Decisions are important, but to be important they must be acted upon. Actions are crucial. A new principle could address the decision and action interrelationships in the new information based environment.

Summary

Understanding war and terrorism, as well as the transformation and evolution occurring in today's international security environment, is an essential prerequisite for reviewing and revising the Principles of War. The validation or modification of traditional principles and the considerations and justifications for new ones must be pursued with an appreciation for the complexities of wars and respect for those who fight them.

The principles must serve as useful and meaningful guides to political and military leaders who make the fateful decisions to prosecute war. First and foremost, however, the principles and resources of our nation must serve those young people who sacrifice for us in battle to preserve, protect, and perpetuate our nation's values and interests.

We recruit them from the hinterland and heartland, from farms and factories, from main streets and rural routes. We train them hard. We pay them little. We equip them well. We do this,

according to the classic theorist Clausewitz, for two reasons: to fight at the right time and to fight at the right place. Possibly a third is to fight for the right reason. War must be just. War must be principled.

The right place is often some distant, dangerous, faraway land. The right time is rarely, if ever, a good time. But failing to fight may be worse. We must be prepared to fight anytime and anywhere, for the right reasons, to protect the integrity and sovereignty of our freedoms and nation. This may be best achieved with Principles of War that guide us in prosecuting just war for honorable peace.

America neither created nor established freedom. Instead, it was mankind's desire and quest for freedom that founded America. As long as America is free we will have a military willing to defend such freedoms. Perhaps, possibly, maybe we should reverse this thought and proclaim that as long as we have a strong and principled military prepared for war we will have a free America.

Similarly, the traditional Principles of War neither created nor are responsible for war. Instead, it's war that created the need for principles to responsibly guide nations and combatants in war. Without such principles, war becomes irresponsible and unjust.

Principles are crucial to war and the values, freedoms, and peace for which just wars are waged. The glory of war is peace. Therein is the glory of the Principles of War. They help us achieve peace. That's their critical importance and the importance of their review for relevance.