

6-2-2003

## The "New" American Way of War

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### Recommended Citation

Millen, Raymond A. LTC, "The "New" American Way of War" (2003). *Articles & Editorials*. 138.  
[https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles\\_editorials/138](https://press.armywarcollege.edu/articles_editorials/138)

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# Conference Brief

Strategic Studies Institute

*U.S. Army War College, and  
The Strategic Studies Institute*



## The "New" American Way of War

U.S. Army War College  
XIV Annual Strategy Conference

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### Key Insights:

- The threats posed by new geostrategic realities render the so-called Weinberger and Powell doctrines obsolete.
- Released by the Cold War shackles, the United States exerts an assertive foreign policy emboldened by its unchallenged military dominance.
- The United States may act unilaterally to eliminate dire threats or multilaterally to bolster alliances and foster legitimacy.
- Preemptive strategy is neither new nor applicable for all threats, but one of many available options.
- Preemptive war and preventive war are strikingly different concepts that should not be confused, less they be misapplied.
- In modern conflicts, the issues of collateral damage, speed of response, and long-term presence assume greater importance.
- Decisive military victory does not equal strategic success.
- Transformation heralds a 21st century force with focus on information superiority, shared awareness, nonlinear battlefield, and demassification.
- Coherent jointness means the services operate and think as a cohesive entity.
- The United Nations must adapt to the evolving international security environment.
- The changing nature of the international security environment will require the United States to fight long, deliberate, and sometimes indecisive conflicts.

This year's topic, "The 'New' American Way of War," was particularly relevant because it occurred during the height of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). Over 130 national security strategists, including ten flag officers, from the Department of Defense, civilian universities, and other policy-related institutions participated in the conference, held April 8-10, 2003. As OIF demonstrated, the U.S. military is in the midst of changing the way it fights wars. With such a backdrop unfolding, the speakers and panelists used very clear topical examples to make their points.

## **Dr. Russell Weigley: The American Way of War.**

The keynote speaker was the preeminent American historian, Dr. Russell Weigley, whose book, *The American Way of War*, inspired this year's theme. Dr. Weigley recounted that the United States continually has modified how it fights wars. The strategy of attrition during the War of Independence reflected the nation's weakness, but this gave way to a strategy of annihilation during the last year of the Civil War. General Grant's strategy influenced the American way of war well into the 20th century. The key components were the mobilization of vast resources during war, direct confrontation of an enemy, and pursuit of the quickest route to decisive victory. While this doctrine failed in Korea and Vietnam, Americans prefer this method of waging war. Still, this preference creates friction with friends and allies, particularly given the U.S. prowess at high-tech war. Over-exuberance with technology raises expectations of limited casualties in warfighting, resulting in frustration and recriminations should high casualties arise. Dr. Weigley observed that, although it is not yet clear what the new American way of war will be, it must reflect the two characteristics that made Ulysses Grant the greatest of American generals: flexibility in method and resolution in purpose.

## **The American Way of War: Alternative Views.**

With Dr. Earl Tilford moderating the panel, Dr. Frank Hoffman, Mr. Max Boot, and Dr. Conrad Crane examined various past influences that have shaped the American approach to warfighting. One important influence is culture, which is the key to understanding how a government and its military institutions approach war. This culture is shaped by geopolitics, myth, and the aggregate experience. The current U.S. military interpretation of war is based primarily on the so-called Weinberger and Powell doctrines, legacies of the Vietnam War designed as a set of criteria for the use of force. However, the dynamic and chaotic post-Cold War world renders these doctrines impracticable. The emerging U.S. doctrine must acknowledge strategic threats and realities if security is to be assured. Optimistically, the hallmark of U.S. culture, however, is its ability to adapt to changing situations.

The Weinberger-Powell doctrines assert that America should avoid fighting small wars of limited liability where possible. This viewpoint belies the U.S. historical record, which reveals a plethora of limited wars across the globe since the War of Independence, and the war with Iraq is no exception. These small wars (mostly guerrilla) were predominantly political rather than the strict military confrontation the myth of the "big war" engenders. Moreover, most of America's small wars have been successes, and recognizing that fact as the norm for future wars is more productive than the irrational mania surrounding the Vietnam War experience. The United States will not be fighting peers, it will be fighting

"indians." Thus, the past as prologue to the future is what Americans should expect.

A popular myth characterizes American generalship as embracing boldness, innovation, and risk. The historical account reveals that, although such generalship is tolerated with successful generals, it is rarely encouraged. The military remains a student of Jomini and Fuller, focused on force ratios and firepower formulas. Development of bold, innovative leaders may be fundamental, but good staff work (much undervalued) creates the environment for innovation, and the commander assesses the need for boldness. On the other hand, American armies have achieved great success with centralized, risk-averse approaches, so why change? Inculcating and encouraging boldness and innovation will require major paradigm shifts in the military culture and significantly increase associated risks. One could argue that the United States should focus on producing competent leaders who understand and follow doctrine, a centralized command and control, and well-trained and fully-resourced staffs.

Dr. Brian Linn introduced three schools of thought regarding the American ways of war: the Continentalists, the Warriors, and the Strategists. Each school has shaped and continues to shape how America fights wars. Although not always in accord, they do complement each other and deserve continued study and application as the United States lays out a new course. In this pursuit, a revival of America's military intellectual past is essential.

## **The Emerging Strategic Environment and the American Way of War.**

Colonel Rich Yarger moderated this panel, which featured Mr. Tom Donnelly, Dr. John Ikenberry, Dr. Hank Gaffney, and Dr. Jane Lute. One viewpoint averred that U.S. dominance has created a unipolar strategic environment. Despite charges of unilateralism, the National Security Strategy does not embrace unilateral action exclusively nor has the United States acted unilaterally in Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. However, the United States must not balk from using its military preeminence to roll back radical Islam and democratize the Middle East, while hedging against a future threat from China. The United States should foster institutions with expeditionary forces that can respond to crises immediately rather than relying on failed institutions like NATO, EU, and UN. The United States should embrace its unipolar position and embark on creating new permanent coalitions.

Another viewpoint argued that a multilateral grand strategy lay at the heart of the U.S. construction of a world order. Alliances are part of a larger security system that has defended the United States and its allies against threats, secured U.S. presence abroad in a legitimate and predictable order, and inhibited the rise of counteralliances against the United States. Washington does not fully understand the need and benefits of such a system and prefers to act unilaterally against emerging threats,

relying on its military and technological superiority. The former U.S. security system not only defended against the Soviet threat but also created institutions and legitimate order based on a positive agenda of liberal democracy. It ensured regular consultations and cooperation and requires no reinvention. The United States protected allies, fostered open and free economic markets, and purposely practiced self-constraint to assure allies and promote stability.

A third perspective pointed out that a Center for Naval Analysis study on the use of force since 1989 reveals that conflicts are not quick affairs. Most crises emerged from enduring problems, and the United States reacted very deliberately in resolving them. As a *modus operandi*, the United States has sought support and partners abroad and also enjoyed remarkable success in securing forward bases in support of operations. Air strikes initiated hostilities to enervate the enemy but were not in themselves decisive. Joint operations were essential and reflected increasingly networked capabilities; but they were kept under strict political control. Most importantly, the end-state required an enduring presence measured in years, not months. Post-war Iraq will be no different and will require a large air, ground, and naval presence even while the United States combats Al-Qaida.

The final, insightful perspective invoked the real strategic question of how the United States should use its power for immediate global access and domination of ground, sea, air, and information warfare capability. The old paradigm of interests, capabilities, and threats no longer applies because the United States has unbounded capabilities and has set the precedent of deploying forces on behalf of causes or against threats that are remote from vital interests. The emerging strategic environment complicates matters. Governance is becoming ever more internationalized. States are losing the monopoly on the use of force, the creation of wealth, and the ability to forge coalitions on an increasing basis—these are devolving to the individual. These changes force states to act with ever greater transparency and accountability including military means. Consequently, traditional legitimate uses of force will be increasingly constrained.

### **The ‘New’ American Way of War and National Security Strategy (NSS)/ National Military Strategy (NMS).**

Dr. Robin Dorff moderated this panel comprising CAPT Sam Tangredi, Dr. Loren Thompson and Dr. Daniel Goure. U.S. NSS and NMS documents are quite straightforward and lay out exactly how the current U.S. administration seeks to use military power for preemption of hostile nations seeking weapons of mass destruction (WMD) capabilities. NSS seeks to dissuade adversarial nations from future military competition with the United States. Just as there are different types of wars, the United States must be capable of fighting them in different ways. Unlike past conflicts, the issues of collateral damage,

speed of attack, and a long-term presence for the purpose of reconstruction are assuming greater import.

Strategic preemption may define the new American way of war, but its distinction from preventive war is becoming blurred. President Bush has stated that deterrence and containment are no longer viable concepts in many emerging conflicts, and the NSS reflects the view that the United States will not wait for threats to manifest themselves into attacks before taking action. Despite the attractiveness of preemption, the concept is not new to U.S. policy because the idea of preemptive nuclear strikes existed during the Cold War. The Bush administration is simply codifying a tradition of national security thought rather than generating a radical new doctrine. Still, preemption and prevention are strikingly different concepts.

The United States will not necessarily apply the preemptive strategy to all threats though. The war against Iraq was clearly the application of this of a preventive strategy but not a signal that the United States will apply either in every case. Many current threats may cause concern to the administration but are not imminent. The administration was initially deeply concerned about wearing out the force and was highly selective about defining the national security missions that it sought to pursue, hence the intention to withdraw from peacekeeping and nation-building missions. The administration also sought to restructure the military by relying more on airpower and a smaller, swifter ground component; however the events surrounding 9-11 have required a reassessment of that initiative.

### **Richard Perle: The ‘New’ American Way of War and Tomorrow’s Security Challenges.**

Post-Iraq war evaluations will be positive and may conclude that the war set major historic events in motion. This may be the first war of the “New American Army” and may signal the need for a change of the UN mandate, to make it more effective for 21st century threats, not as a reactor to the cross-border confrontations of the previous century. To remain viable, the UN must become an appropriate arbiter that supports necessary defense decisions before overt aggressive materializes. The Army must accelerate Transformation with emphasis on power projection; precision weapons; a smaller, lighter, more lethal force; and a requisite doctrine.

### **The Road Ahead: Defense Transformation and the ‘New’ American Way of War.**

Vice Admiral Arthur Cebrowski and Brigadier General (Promotable) Michael Vane comprised this panel with Colonel Mike Matheny moderating. Transformation reflects the shift of the military focus from fighting great power wars to fighting as a great power force. A greater reliance on strategic deployment translates to fewer forces deployed forward and less reliance on allies. Future trends

point towards information superiority, shared awareness, nonlinear battlefield, and *demassification*. Traditional separate processes (e.g., organize, maneuver, jointness) will eventually merge into one process—employment. Because the U.S. Army is changing into an expeditionary force, regional infrastructures will not be required to support warfighting. Network centric warfare also permits a greater contribution of forces in combat. Of course, not all embrace Transformation unquestionably. Persistent rigidity in training, misplaced emphasis on mass, doctrinaire thinking, and refusal to exploit interdependencies illustrate a few of the obstacles, but the strategic environment demands adaptation.

A critical component of Transformation is jointness. The goal is to achieve coherent jointness, meaning the services operate, think, and speak alike as a cohesive force. The armed forces must eschew the inclination to limit jointness to simple deconfliction, meaning the services operate separately and sequentially to avoid operational entanglements. It complements rather than replaces service cultures. For jointness to endure, services must infuse it in key areas such as lift, logistics, space, and ISR. Moreover, jointness must become inculcated through leadership, training, and war gaming, such as *Unified Quest*. Lastly, jointness must be instituted from captain to flag rank through schools and joint war games.

### **The Present as Prelude to the Future: Has Tomorrow Arrived?**

With Dr. Douglas Johnson presiding, this panel featured Mr. James Howe, Dr. Steve Biddle, and Dr. Steven Metz. Missile technology is creating increasingly smaller, cost effective, and more accurate missiles, which will permit the United States to project power immediately and with greater effect. Their increasing sophistication will herald a very different kind of warfare and forces necessary to prosecute it.

The new American way of war must reflect emerging forms of armed conflict. The devolution of warfare describes a blend of state and nonstate actors with little distinction between war and peace. Nonstate actors will be self-funded, networked, and unconstrained by laws and rules. To counter the U.S. dominance, states and nonstates will adopt asymmetric warfare and moral ambiguities. Hence, the United States must be prepared to fight slow, deliberate and perhaps even indecisive conflicts. Decisiveness requires: strategic, operational and tactical vision to anticipate threats and form an accurate picture of the battlespace; decisional, strategic, operational, and tactical speed to permit the United States to respond to threats sufficiently; tactical, strategic, and psychological precision for permitting accuracy, limiting unintended consequences, and achieving desired, controlled effects; and government, nongovernment, and interagency compatibility.

The U.S.-led war in Afghanistan illustrated that a transformation of sorts took place. For that theater and

the particular circumstances involved, the SOF-Allies-Precision Bombing formula worked, but its applicability to other conflicts must be tempered by serious examination and not as a formula. Regardless, the role of ground power is a *sine qua non* to the new American way of war.

### **Conference Wrap-up: Assessment and Critique.**

Dr. Douglas Lovelace moderated this final panel comprising Dr. Robin Dorff, Dr. Jeffrey Record, Dr. Grant Hammond, and Dr. Marybeth Ulrich. Events in Iraq clearly support the contention that there is a new way of conducting war and it, under certain conditions, is likely to be a successful way. The new conduct of war is not attrition warfare but is increasingly technologically based, faster moving over greater distances, fought by smaller formations and more precise in selecting targets and hitting those targets.

The new way retains aspects of the old in that it is still chaotic, requires flexibility, requires effective leadership, is inextricably linked to other sources of national power, and should be conducted in the context of a grand strategy.

At the strategic level, it is not yet clear if Iraq is an aberrant example of warfare or represents a new way of war in that it is a preventative war, less concerned with international approval, and less multilateral. The danger of this becoming our new way is that to sustain such policies may result in political isolation and a fear of U.S. power.

### **Conclusions.**

The 14th Annual Strategy Conference vetted the implications, risks, and opportunities available to the United States. No one can select with certainty the best path to take, but relying on the status quo is not an option. The conference provided an opportunity to discuss the way ahead. Policymakers, academics, and senior leaders can continue that dialogue.

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