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IS IT ALL ABOUT WINNING?

Dallas D. Owens

Only a few years ago the Army emphasized to itself, the rest of the U.S. defense establishment, and politicians that the Army's primary mission was to fight wars. The 2001 edition of *The Army* (FM-1) confirmed that, "the Army's nonnegotiable contract with the American people is to fight and win our Nation's wars."¹ The Army's core competencies were, except for support to civil authorities, a list of war prevention, preparation, and fighting capabilities.

The Army has now moved away from task-specific warfighting competencies and towards a shorter, more generic list that supports a full spectrum of military activities. The Army campaign plan only lists two: (1) train and equip soldiers and grow leaders, and (2) provide relevant and ready landpower to the combatant commanders as part of the Joint Force. This change towards greater flexibility and broader perspective represents the Army's recognition that while warfighting remains an important competency, post-conflict stability and reconstruction, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance now account for most of its operational tempo.

Major General James Dubik, J-9 for U.S. Joint Forces Command, contends that one of the requirements for transforming the military to become an effective future force is to expand the definition of war. The Army is embracing a larger mission set of appropriate military activity, but is not calling it war.

Either characterization of the notion of broader utility for military forces calls for a shift in the military lexicon of winning, despite how comfortable we might be with analogies of sports and other games of competition. Whereas the overly idealized traditional view of war saw its conclusion in terms of winning or losing, it makes little sense to talk of winning a reconstruction or humanitarian effort. Success in either of these activities can be defined and measured by using evaluation research techniques, though we can expect to always encounter issues of validity and reliability. But there are no opponents to concede defeat and certainly no referees to call "end of game" and declare a winner.

Why did we tend to define war and its outcomes so narrowly? Past proponents of "destroying enemy forces" and "winning decisively" were as much students of military history as today's leaders, and they were strategic thinkers as well. They certainly realized that understanding the broad range of military operations required analysis beyond the operational level.

Their emphasis was likely a product of the very real potential pitfalls of an Army that fails to focus on effective prosecution of the operational level of war. The post-Vietnam hollow Army was perceived by many to not be operationally effective. The period of their Army experience gave rise to a warfighting operational focus that contemplated relatively infrequent operations that would be of short duration. Title 10 of the United States Code reinforced their orientation by stating that the Army "shall be organized, trained, and equipped primarily for prompt and sustained combat incident to operations on land."²

Our operational focus on what is the worse case scenario quite properly ties success to an aggressive, decisive, and positive leadership style that seeks readily discernable outcomes. A leader of that mindset could certainly not condone something as indecisive as encouraging an enemy to change its point of view or even winning indecisively. But when approaching

something as difficult, inconclusive, and long-term as institution building, aggressive positivism may be less useful than stoic determination. When putting a humanitarian band-aid on the starvation and disease produced by poor governance, economic disasters, pandemics, and decades of war, the case for optimism is even weaker. We only have to look homeward to realize how long it takes to produce strong and successful institutions capable of supporting a prosperous, democratic, and pluralistic society. And even with our best efforts, some of our own institutions have proven more fragile and less effective than we would like.

Wars, using a traditional definition, seldom had clean endings. Rather, they consisted of long-term insurgencies, messy stalemates, temporary surrenders, or other cyclical political solutions to ever-present and not always unhealthy intergroup conflict. When a military activity is “other than war,” the idea of winning becomes even more ludicrous, though “winning the peace” is a phrase occasionally heard.

For a military operation to not be “all about winning” does not mean that it is ok to lose. It means that it is acceptable to admit that some endeavors fall outside the realm of decisive competition and therefore not subject to the lexicon of winning. Rather, for example, setting a goal for making some aspects of society better, for a specific period of time, might be a reasonable expectation. If the goal were achieved, then one might claim a measure of success. Alternatively, it might be necessary to invest in setting the stage for someone else’s success, with the understanding that military forces cannot and should not attempt to make a society in any form—that task rests on the shoulders of the members of that society.

The Army has long taught, even at the tactical combat level, that it is appropriate to create short-, intermediate-, and long-term objectives for operations. Most junior leaders understand that it is essential that the earlier objectives be realistic, for they serve as the basis for obtaining longer-term goals and meeting the requirements for ultimate success. For the national and international security environments that confront us today and will challenge us in the future, words like success and progress must be elevated in stature.

Is it going to be easy for our military leaders, at all levels, to modify their passion for winning? In a society that thrives on competition, whether it be for important outcomes like those that affect national security or mere whimsical games, anything less than winning is difficult to accept, especially for accomplished leaders who have become accustomed to winning most of life’s challenges. But one product of recent experience with the joint, combined, and interagency world, working with an expanded definition of war, is that our Army leadership and especially its junior members have shown remarkable adaptability. That adaptability will serve them well in a future where their profession is primarily concerned with outcomes that cannot be described by the classic notion of winning.

¹ Headquarters, Department of the Army, *FM-1 The Army*, Washington, DC, June 14, 2001, p. 1-2 of Chapter 3. <http://www.adtdl.army.mil/cgi-bin/atdl.dll/fm/1ch3.htm> accessed July 13, 2004.

² U.S. Code, Title 10, Subtitle B, Part I, Chapter 307, Sec. 3062, Paragraph (b).