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Sustaining the Military Arts

G. MURPHY DONOVAN

In another era, a crusty Texas ranger justified his six-gun with quiet eloquence: “Better to have it when you don’t need it than to need it and not have it.” In his own way, Captain Woodrow Call¹ understood the prudent link between deterrence and capability. If he had to expand his views today, ranger Call would probably add: “. . . and you better know how to shoot too.”

In a larger context, the logic of deterrence, military capability, and military art is enlightened by the same common sense that energized Call’s epigram. Military capability isn’t just a function of weapons and forces, it must also be underwritten by military art—the ability to apply theories and principles of usage.

There are a host of programs under way today attempting to do just that, insure that military officers know how to use military forces effectively. Many of these efforts have been captured under the rubric of *warfighting* or warrior preparation. However, when the rhetoric is stripped away, too many of these programs are hollow. Fundamental obstacles to improved performance remain intact. This essay explores the origin of recent interest in warfighting, examines the obstacles, and suggests some new thinking on sustainability in the world of military ideas.

Whence “Warfighting”

The warfighting program began as a well-intentioned effort to get back to basics. In short, to reestablish some balance between military forces and prudent notions of how they might be used—successfully. How military art became uncoupled from the force structure is a complex question, yet it is fairly clear that the gap had become a chasm in the post-Vietnam era. Pundits, and many flag officers, are fond of dating the rift (and anything else wrong with the country) back to the early 1960s and the McNamara era. This is probably unfair.

Robert McNamara and his cohorts from the Rand Corporation may have revolutionized the acquisition process through the Planning, Programming, and Budgeting System at the Pentagon, but there is little evidence to suggest that new acquisition processes altered the need for sound military arts (strategy, operational skills, and tactics), the traditional province of generals. Surely it is ironic that PPBS has survived the test of time and military arts have not, but it is more than disingenuous to blame this neglect on civilians.

Indeed, US military performance in the field since the Korean War has been something less than spectacular. Some observers, like Harry Summers,² have been modestly successful apologists for military professionals, claiming among other things that US forces never lost a battle in Vietnam. Such claims tend to be a little irrelevant in light of the debacle in Saigon in 1975. It is pretty clear at this point that even military historians will not be scoring Khe Sanh or Tet as victories. It was also fashionable for a time to lay the blame for military failures on politicians, the press, or an ill-informed public, yet more sober analysis now sees that generals too can share the burden of Vietnam. Moreover, military performance in the field since the fall of Saigon has done little to dispel the belief that the traditional military arts, theoretical or applied, were in trouble.

The true roots of the problem probably have more to do with the politics of peacetime armies than anything else. While US military forces have seen combat frequently since World War II, it is also worthy to note that there has been no declared war since that time, nor have US forces engaged a first-world enemy, nor has combat touched the US mainland. This is not to suggest that a declared war would have made us any better at it. Yet these conditions, especially the absence of a world war, have contributed to the illusion that somehow the mere possession of military forces might make their use unnecessary or unlikely. Indeed, this is the very assumption that underwrites the theory of deterrence. Deterrence has been successful, but it has been so only at the upper end of the conflict spectrum, the catastrophic margin.

In theory, it is clear that the military capability required to support deterrence is not necessarily the same capability that might be required when deterrence fails. In practice, the lines between the two may never be clearly

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drawn. A deployed force that is too capable might undermine the very strategy it is designed to serve because it reduces the credibility of a threat to escalate to nuclear war. Such ambiguities may be political assets and military handicaps—especially when capability is defined solely as force structure at the expense of military art or competence.

Still, under the umbrella of deterrence and in the absence of catastrophe, the major world powers might fairly view the last four decades as an era of peace or successful deterrence. How Third World historians might categorize the same period is another matter. Nonetheless, peace is surely a homelands perspective and the homelands of the superpowers have been safe for a generation.

In an era when the policy agenda has been dominated by deterrence, it is not difficult to understand why military leaders have worried more about acquiring forces than using them. Further, as Barbara Tuchman reminded us, peacetime soldiers are fond of preparing for the last war.³ US and Soviet generals are especially keen on looking back at World War II—an unqualified success. Thus modern military forces contain more than a hint of *déjà vu*. Cold indeed is the citizen's heart that does not swell at the sight of a flock of bombers, a column of tanks, a covey of carrier battle groups, or the majesty of a battlewagon under way. Nonetheless, the difficult problems of military competence concern strategy and operational art, not just procurement and logistics where necessities are often confused with sufficiencies.

Military theory has never enjoyed a prominent place in the US national security debate. Somehow, an ethereal strategic idea is no match for the existential impact of an F-15 tearing the sound barrier. Just as surely, few careers or fortunes have been made crafting or promoting strategy, while many have been made pushing or selling weapons. There has been little professional or pecuniary incentive to spend much time on military theory or strategic applications. Until recently, the arms race had seldom been cast as a competition of military art or strategy.

Yet the 1970s did see a modest revival of interest in the military arts among some senior US Army officers. This revival was highlighted by a new interest in operational art and the introduction of strategy options such as AirLand Battle and Follow-On Forces Attack. More recently, Navy Secretary John Lehman and Admiral James Watkins have weighed in with *maritime strategy* options for the US Navy. Even the Secretary of Defense contributed to the revival, as his posture statements came to talk less of deterrence and more about *competitive* and *war-winning* strategies⁴ in the event deterrence failed. Withal, the initiatives tended to come from individual military services, and even there none of the strategic dialogue could hold a candle to the continuing emphasis on weapons and procurement issues.

Nonetheless, at some point all of these separate and laudable initiatives were joined, not by interservice consensus, but by a word—*warfighting*—and

another pleonasm was born. It was here that a good idea went south and the nonsense began. The babble began with the concept itself, and it seems now that the rhetoric of warfighting is more important than any serious attempt to address the problems of military competence and performance.

Conceptual Nonsense

The term *warfighting* is at once redundant and ambiguous. It is redundant because we can safely assume that a war is expected to contain a fight or two. It is ambiguous because it misplaces the emphasis. War is not a collection of fights: it is a controlled series of joint military campaigns for political purposes. A fight suggests a brawl, often spontaneous, where the outcome is anybody's guess—as in prizefight or street fight. Indeed, many military dictionaries define *war* but none defines *fight*. The Soviet military lexicon refers to many *military actions*.⁵ There are no references to *fight*.

The term *warfighting* also suggests a simplistic understanding of how an adversary might see the problem. For the Soviets, war is not synonymous with nor does it necessarily call for armed conflict.⁶ They see it as a broader dialectical struggle where political, social, technological, and economic forces are equally important. Indeed, recent Soviet theoretical writings suggest that, even within military doctrine, the sociopolitical agenda may be assuming more relative importance than military-technical factors (i.e. troops and weapons).⁷

The recent arms control offensive is a case in point. The Soviet diplomatic blitz has all the earmarks of a surprise attack which seems to have put the West on the defensive, President Bush's counterproposals notwithstanding. Moscow's unique view of war does not diminish the stakes, but it does reflect a prudent flexibility on venues for the competition. Military professionals have a vested interest in the inputs to, and the results of, arms control negotiations.

Beyond Rhetoric

Other than semantics, there was an even more fundamental problem. The coinage *warfighting* was a symptom, not a solution. Traditional and prudent military concerns didn't need to be obscured with mindless jargon. *The real problem was military performance* and the lack of attention paid to military arts (strategy, operational skills, and tactics). None of this was clarified by a gerund—a bad verb and a worse noun. Thus at the outset, a clear definition of the problem was lost when good intentions failed to move us beyond rhetoric. Strategic pidgin isn't the antidote for strategic illiteracy.

The military arts of strategy, operations, and tactics are merely the creative bridges that allow officers to orchestrate the military sciences (intelligence, logistics, engineering, etc.) to successful ends. Yet, how we think

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about military arts and sciences is not merely a question of rhetorical clarity. Indeed, real solutions to questions of military competence will require a more substantial commitment to what might be called "intellectual sustainability," a unifying framework that links *training, education, intelligence, and exercises*. The ultimate goal of such a framework would be some higher level of strategic competence.

Training and Education

We often think about military training and military education as different enterprises, and they are—at least to the extent that we do the former well and the latter not well at all. Problems of military education have been studied exhaustively in recent years—the just-completed Skelton panel deliberations are but a single example⁸—and those efforts will not be reviewed here. Suffice it to say that out of all this study, it would be helpful if some clear consensus emerged that training should focus on technical proficiency (military sciences) while education should focus on operational competence (military arts). The military sciences are lower-level skills of necessity, while military arts are higher-level skills of sufficiency. Training gives us the building blocks; education should provide the integrative skills that allow us to orchestrate the basics in creative ways, to effective ends.

Military literature reveals the symptoms of neglect at the professional schoolhouse. The contrast between American and Soviet military biographies is startling. A Soviet officer's biography will show a lengthy list of published contributions to military theory. No such list enriches official American biographies. Soviet officers are expected to contribute to the world of ideas in their chosen profession. The American profession of arms is not enriched by similar expectations. While a senior Soviet officer might be motivated to publish or perish, an American might rewrite the maxim to read, "Publish *and* perish." Too many American soldiers await retirement to find their professional courage.

Beyond the professional schoolhouse, the relationship of intelligence and exercises to warrior preparation is even more confused. On the one hand, intelligence does not overly concern itself with support to military training and education, while on the other, senior officers are reluctant to see exercises as an extension of the military schoolroom—an ongoing practicum for "warfighting" and strategic theory.

Intelligence

The onus for the neglect of military arts must fall, in part, at the feet of the military intelligence community. Since World War II, the growth of a large permanent military establishment has been supplemented by the growth of an equally impressive intelligence culture. Yet here, the focus has been skewed toward weapons, forces, and technology—not military arts.⁹ Indeed, if technology is a measure of merit, the modern intelligence apparatus is the most sophisticated collection, if not analytical, machine in the history of nations. The center of interest has been the Soviet Union, or more precisely the growth of Soviet military forces. Here we became mesmerized by the outputs of the Soviet colossus at the expense of understanding processes.¹⁰ Just as US military leaders worried more about acquiring military forces than creating doctrinal theories about how they might be used, so too intelligence analysts have worried more about *what* the Soviets had than *how* they might use it. We put *our* cart before *their* horse. In truth, many intelligence products are mere reading lists—lists of Soviet weapons and forces, not analyses of doctrine and strategy. The effect of this is that the weight of intelligence effort has gone to threat support for procurement or warning, not the education of or support to combat commanders. Small wonder that the competition with Moscow has often been cast as an arms race, seldom a competition of strategies.

Neglect by military intelligence is particularly bizarre. You might expect an institution whose product is ideas to be enthralled with enemy military thought. On the question of understanding Soviet strategy, operational arts, and tactics, the intelligence community has only recently begun to appreciate the value of theory in the Soviet system.¹¹ Yet, this appreciation is clearly not having an impact on military schoolhouses, if curricula and reading assignments are any clues. There are small pockets of interest within the intelligence community where Soviet military texts are translated, but these efforts are meager and live in constant fear of the budget knife.¹² The most obvious symptom of this neglect is the essential unavailability of the *Soviet Military Encyclopedia*, a multi-volume tract that has been revised thrice since the Russian revolution. This document has yet to be translated in its entirety in the West. The contents of the bible of Soviet military thought is thus largely unknown to two generations of American officers.¹³

Part of the explanation is that support to military schools has not been a high priority for the intelligence community. This phenomenon is another puzzle because logic dictates that military intelligence and military academic centers have a convergence of interests. Yet, the formal institutional linkages are sparse to nonexistent. Every major command has a large intelligence staff; professional military schools have no similar departments. And security is not the explanation for this neglect.

The picture is not much brighter at the operational level. Unit commanders are finally going public with criticism of intelligence support.¹⁴ The thrust of their complaints is that combat intelligence officers are not well versed in US or Soviet operational concepts. These complaints are right on target. Intelligence officers themselves are trained to know the *what* of the Soviet force structure, yet are seldom educated to understand the *how* of operational employment. Further, the “best” intelligence officers tend to gravitate to headquarters where promotion opportunities are better, military art is irrelevant, and ignorance is not necessarily a handicap.

Exercises

Of all the obstacles that inhibit real progress in the military arts, the attitude toward exercises and war games is the most perplexing—and the most sensitive. Exercises represent a benign application of military theory. They also serve a variety of purposes. Foremost among these are training, weapon testing, plans familiarization, and the exposition of doctrine. Exercises also provide an opportunity to develop fundamental insights about how adversaries perceive specific threats (our military plans and practices) and how they intend to defeat such threats (the enemy’s plans and practices). Short of war, military exercises and war games are the best available extended classroom for the development of military arts—strategy, operational skill, and tactics. Exercises are the one forum, other than combat, where the three elements of military art are joined on the same stage.

However, professional attitudes toward exercises and war games are ambiguous at best. On one hand, at the tactical level, we have excellent centers training some of the best units in the world.¹⁵ Exercises, practice, and drill are important for tank crews, ship captains, and aircraft commanders. If officers at this level fail to perform, the penalties are severe. A ship captain who endangers his crew or vessel or an aircraft commander who is found guilty of pilot error is likely to have an abbreviated career. Yet, at the operational/strategic level the exercise game is played by a different set of rules. Senior officers do not take exercises seriously as a venue to hone their strategic skills. There are few penalties for this neglect—except when it’s too late, when we win battles and lose wars.

It is common, especially at higher headquarters, to delegate exercise and wargaming duties and responsibilities. Junior generals sit for their seniors and colonels play for junior generals. Few brass hats feel obligated to test or hone the most important links in the strategic chain—operational/strategic decisionmaking. It is the rare general who plays his wartime role from start to finish in a major exercise or game. Flag officers seldom let the practice of their trade interfere with their managerial, protocol, bureaucratic, or budgetary preoccupations.

At the Pentagon, an ironclad rule holds that you never send juniors or the second string to Congress to testify (especially on budget matters). No such maxim applies to exercises and war games. The Red commander is actually played by an intelligence officer at many war games, a staffer unlikely to be allocating forces in wartime. Casting the intelligence officer in the black hat role may be a delicious irony; he's probably easier to whip in any case. Yet the real message here is failure, the failure of commanders to provide leadership and the failure of intelligence to educate real commanders well enough to play role reversals. Role reversal is a standard event in tactical drills, a rare occasion in strategic games. Unfortunately, in combat a thousand smart captains will not compensate for one dumb general.

Several recent studies have attempted to evaluate the quality of generals by comparing them to their industrial colleagues, using such criteria as IQ tests, educational levels, and psychological stability tests. With these criteria, senior officers fare quite well. Unfortunately, criteria such as military expertise, contributions to strategic theory, and exercise/gaming/combat competence didn't play any role in the evaluations.¹⁶ What most of these studies tend to "prove" is that many senior officers have learned to excel in ways that have nothing to do with war.

Some "New Thinking"

Any military system which demands excellence at the tactical level and excuses it at the strategic level is a fraud.¹⁷ Having reviewed several of the standing obstacles to military competence, we can conclude that some of the more acute problems are roosting under brass hats. If this is where the responsibility ends, it is also where the solutions must begin. The first task is to forget the warfighting rhetoric and recognize the obstacles for what they are—the dead hands of inertia. Recognizing a problem is always half the battle; solutions are then a question of courage, stamina, and leadership, which brings us to the subject of the leader.

The *leader*, that most slippery of terms, is probably the most used and least understood noun in the strategic lexicon. In its worst sense, it is an office or position. In its best sense, it is an accolade. Managers and commanders are arbitrarily imposed, leaders are voluntarily acknowledged. The troops have nothing to say about who manages or commands, they have everything to say about whom they follow. Such is the reality of leadership in a democracy.

Those leaders entrusted with the power to use lethal force in the pursuit of national security must be held to high standards of competence. Armies, like ball teams, tend to perform the way they practice. American generals need to get serious about creating that unifying framework of training, education, intelligence, and exercises. They must set an example for those

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they would lead. The people at the top “should be the first to make sacrifice, not the last.”¹⁸ If flag officers must delegate some of their bureaucratic duties, so be it. As for congressional testimony, let some lieutenant colonel do it! If recent events are any guide, half-colonels are a hard act to follow in congressional hearing rooms anyway.

There should be no debate about obvious concerns such as the communications gap between military education and military intelligence. Senior officers should sponsor a shotgun wedding of schoolhouse and intelligence if educators themselves refuse to take the lead. Senior officers also need to recognize exercises as an extended classroom in which *every* commander plays *every* exercise and game where he has a wartime role. Common sense is the only evidence required to support these proposals.

Unfortunately, the leadership dilemma may be the schoolhouse problem come home to roost. The captains we educated as managers are now colonels and generals. The careerist tends to confuse rank with achievement, promotion with competence. Those who advanced in such a culture believe that their personal success is a validation of their way of doing things, even if *their* way includes ignoring the obvious. This confusion will not be undone without radical changes in the ways that officers think about warrior preparation. Warfighting rhetoric and reading lists will not get the job done.

Institutionalizing the Framework

If we are to create a unifying framework for strategic literacy and operational competence, we are forced to consider the institutional cement that would hold such an effort together. At the moment, there is no true joint/combined schoolhouse where integrating theories of military training, education, intelligence, and exercises come together. Each service still maintains separate senior schools and strategic gaming facilities, the crucibles of military thought. If we are to fight in a joint/combined environment, we certainly need to school and think in a similar medium. The creation of a senior joint school has received serious study and high-level support in recent months.¹⁹ Though the initiative for creating and sustaining such an institution must come from the JCS, it must receive the support of the services to achieve success.

In America, the question of consolidating military functions, especially near the top, nearly always resurrects fears of hidden agendas—oblique

plots to create a general staff along the lines of the Prussian model. In reality, however, there are probably more hidden agendas associated with general staff strawmen than have ever been associated with efforts to improve inter-service cooperation. The general staff bogeyman is just that, a perennial spectre exhumed to undermine serious military integration. Indeed, military centralization has been miscast as a political threat. It is not, and we should proceed with whatever unification steps are necessary to provide for cohesion and competence in our conduct of war.

The American military tradition is unique. In fundamental ways, Americans are not comfortable with large standing or professional armies. Still, both are a reality today. Given this reality, the issue isn't too much centralized military power so much as it is too much parochialism, too much fragmentation of effort, too much bad performance. Congressionally mandated joint tours are just more Band-Aids. A senior joint school could be viewed as a kind of strategic insurance—insurance to guarantee the competence of senior officers should their military skills be required. By any measure, strategic competence is the ultimate leverage for any competitive strategy.

George Santayana told us that those who don't remember history are condemned to repeat it. In American military history, there are at least two great lessons worth remembering. The first lesson comes from Lincoln's experience in the first modern war. In the early years of the Civil War, Lincoln had to fire his high commanders after nearly every major battle. Good logisticians and engineers (military scientists) were common enough, but Lincoln couldn't find commanders (military artists) who had experience with, or aptitude for, the successful orchestration of forces larger than division or corps. In short, it took Lincoln four years to find a general who had mastered "warfighting," the military arts. We had a similar experience in Vietnam,²⁰ only there no one fired the generals.

The second great lesson of American military history is that we keep forgetting the first lesson. We have never created that unifying framework for military arts and sciences where ideas about military training, education, intelligence, and exercises could germinate on common ground. In an era when weapon flight times are measured in minutes instead of hours, and force movements are measured in hours instead of years, such neglect is suicidal. A unifying framework, and a joint/combined institution, are ideas whose time has come.

NOTES

1. The fictional hero of Larry McMurtry's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Lonesome Dove* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

2. Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1982).

3. Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), p. 22.

4. *Report of the Secretary of Defense to Congress* (Washington: GPO, February 1988), pp. 115-18; and *US Military Posture FY 1989* (Washington: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1988), p. 5.

5. *Soviet Military Encyclopedia* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1976), I, 539. Military actions defined by the Soviets include strike, engagement, battle, and operation.

6. M. Kiryan, *Problems of Military Theory in Soviet Scientific Reference Publications* (Moscow: Nauka Publishing, 1985). See chapter 3, "War and Armed Conflict."

7. Marshal S. Akhromeyev, "The Doctrine of Averting War . . .," *Problemy Mira I Sotsializma* (No. 12, 1987), 23-28.

8. US Congress, House, Committee on Armed Services, *Report of Panel on Military Education of the One Hundredth Congress*, 101st Cong., 1st sess., 1989, Committee Print 4.

9. The intelligence community publishes a number of product lists and catalogues of interagency coordinating mechanisms, all of which are classified. In the military subject area, the overwhelming majority of products and interagency committees are devoted to forces and weapon capabilities, not doctrine or military arts.

10. With the exception of research, development, and acquisition, the processes within the Soviet military system receive comparatively little collection or analytical emphasis. Consequently, we know little about Soviet assessment methods, the calculus for their correlations of forces, or their measures of effectiveness.

11. Theater commands sponsor Tactics Analysis Teams which meet several times a year; however, no similar forums evaluate operational art or strategy developments. Several small centers outside of the intelligence community are attempting to fill the vacuum on doctrinal research. One notable effort is the US Army's Soviet Studies Office, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

12. Air Force Intelligence sponsors a modest translation effort within the Directorate for Research and Soviet Studies. Their products include the Soviet Military Thought series of books published by the US GPO and "Soviet Press Selected Translations," published bimonthly by Current News and Research Service, American Forces Information Service (AFIS/OASD/PA). The other services sponsor similar, albeit modest, translation efforts.

13. The lack of a US or NATO military encyclopedia could also be viewed as another symptom of the military science problem in the West. Specialized dictionaries and encyclopedias are not only academic aids, but more important, they serve to capture precedents and standardize the operational application of concepts for any profession.

14. Clifford R. Krieger, "Fighting the Air War: A Wing Commander's Perspective," *Airpower Journal*, 1 (Summer 1987), 27-28. Colonel Krieger's observations are supported by official functional inspections, the caveats of which preclude citation.

15. The US Air Force RED FLAG exercises at Nellis AFB and the US Army OPFOR exercises at the National Training Center, Ft. Irwin, are models for training officers at wing and battalion level.

16. See Michael Satchell, "The New US Military," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 20 April 1988, p. B-2.

17. Over the years, critics of American industry such as W. Edwards Deming, Joseph M. Juran, and H. Ross Perot have aired similar complaints about the captains of American industry. See David Zabecki's "Rethinking the Management Ethic," *Military Review*, 17 (December 1987), 49. Zabecki argues that traditional American principles of management don't serve industry or the military in a competitive environment.

18. The words of H. Ross Perot, interviewed in *Newsweek*, 15 December 1986, p. 41.

19. See "Congress May Push Strategic Studies Emphasis," *Army*, 39 (January 1989), 7, for an early discussion of US Representative Ike Skelton's proposals. The Skelton Panel's final report stated the following:

The panel strongly supports the proposal . . . that a National Center for Strategic Studies be established at Fort McNair in Washington, D.C., where selected senior military officers, high-level government officials, congressional staff members, and private sector media, labor, industry, and other leaders could be brought together to research and study national strategy. The center would be made up of four components: a revamped National War College with its year-long program of study adapted to focus on national security strategy and to accommodate a smaller number of more senior, highly select officers; a "think-tank" for the study and formulation of national security and national military strategy; the Capstone course [a general officer familiarization course focusing on the services, the unified and specified commands, the Joint Staff, and strategy]; and an institute for conducting seminars, symposiums, and workshops in strategy for both the public and private sectors. [*Report of Panel on Military Education . . .*, pp. 35-36.]

20. See Daniel J. Kaufman, "National Security: Organizing the Armed Forces," *Armed Forces and Society*, 13 (Fall 1987), 108. Quoting former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General David C. Jones. Also see Jones's, "What's Wrong With Our Defense Establishment," *New York Times Magazine*, 7 November 1982, p. 70.