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Ralph Peters

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After the Revolution

RALPH PETERS

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The latest "Revolution in Military Affairs" occurred in the 1980s. It is over now. A new paradigm prevails. There will be no end to the technological miracles that alter the geometries of conventional battlefields and theaters while reshaping budgets and forces. But machines, no matter how magnificent, do not of themselves constitute a revolution. True revolutions happen, above all, in the minds of men. By that measure, the military has undergone a profound and irreversible revolution. The average officer today perceives the temporal, spatial, and mechanical dimensions of warfare in a radically different manner than did his predecessor of 20 years ago. The changes have been internalized to such a degree that we must pause and think about them in order to recognize how far we have come in a breathtakingly short period.

Should anyone doubt that we have entered a *post*-revolutionary order, he need only consider the popularity of seminars and publications devoted to the Revolution in Military Affairs, or RMA--irrefutable indicators that any truly revolutionary activity is over. The drag-on debates as to whether or not there has been or is an RMA, what it portends, and how it differs from the "Military-Technical Revolution," are frivolous and irrelevant. The endless symposiums, studies, and articles are popular because they promise a new home to those intellectually dispossessed by the end of the Cold War. "Thinking" about the manageable secondary problem of the military application of technology in the future saves us from having to think meaningfully about the brutal, intractable issues immediately confronting our nation, our allies, and our interests.

Our national security problems have more to do with innovative behaviors than with military-technological competition. The advent of criminal and warlord parastates is a far more urgent challenge than funding the B-2 bomber boys club. We are witnessing multiple simultaneous revolutions--and devolutions--in worldwide social and governmental structures, and millennia-old patterns of human organization are collapsing. Amid galaxies of shining technologies there is a struggle to redefine human meaning. Technology is changing how man knows, and the resulting dislocations are culturally cataclysmic. Half the world is looking for God anew, and the other half is behaving as though no god exists. The RMA is a subset of a subset in the hierarchy of contemporary revolutions. By elevating the now-historical issue of the RMA to the top of our military agenda, we have fallen into the old American trap of seeking technological solutions to human problems, of so immersing ourselves in questions of form that we overlook fundamental issues of function.

We in the Department of Defense--and even more so those in the Department of State--live in the 19th century philosophically. Our understanding of our respective roles and missions is a vestige of a vanished order. We face a world in much of which the 19th-century manner of organizing and applying the power of the state has become the least relevant of all thinkable models. Far from the conventionally armed and recognizably structured forces our analysts stretch to imagine as future opponents, we confront, *today*, creatively organized enemies employing behaviors and technologies ranging from those of the stone-age to those at the imagination's edge. If we do not stop ducking behind a combination of obsolescent reservations about what militaries do or do not do and the wizardly technologies we buy to disguise our fear of the future, our post-RMA military may prove the most expensive white elephant in the history of mankind.

This is not an argument against technology, nor against robust conventional forces, which we shall need as long as murderers realize there is strength in numbers. It is, rather, a plea for putting the horse before the cart, for stepping back and conducting the painful, rigorous analysis necessary to employ technology relevantly and to shape a force to

fit the times, for asking basic questions as to our identity and purpose.

Only one potential new weapons complex appears genuinely vital to our national security for the budgetary future: multi-level ballistic missile defenses, critical because of the proliferation of missile and nuclear technologies. If the United States armed forces were otherwise to execute a ten-year moratorium on the fielding of *all* new weapon systems, concentrating instead on research, development, continued experimentation, the improvement of support systems, training and readiness, and, above all, on human factors, would our nation's security be seriously endangered or would it be enhanced?

Technologically, we are riding a change wave that threatens to make present and pending technologies rapidly obsolete. New weapons bought today may provide ten or so years of superiority--which we already have, anyway--but, as general research accelerates, purchases delayed until after the turn of the century may offer a full generation or more of advantage, since competitors will be ever less able to rise to the infrastructural requirements of the hyper-advanced technologies which will become available. In the meantime, the real threats we face imply a new lease on life for skilled infantry and an enduring need for special operations forces. We need to continue to stress transport and communications. Our intelligence networks need to regain a tactile human focus and to exploit information technologies without becoming enslaved by them. In most of our recent deployments, there has not been one weapon system, no matter how expensive and technologically mature, that has been as valuable as a single culturally competent Foreign Area Officer.

There is not one compelling reason to buy a single additional bomber, submarine, or tank today, save the preservation of the industrial base. Yet even that is a dubious cause, since, when tens of billions of dollars are involved, even the most skeptical hawk is apt to be amazed at how quickly the private sector can regenerate a needed production capability. If legislators wish to continue workfare programs for defense workers, let us at least be honest about it and not pretend to the American people that their security depends on systems in search of a mission when the real issue is whether or not we understand the world system decomposing around us.

At present, we are preparing for the war we want to fight someday, not for the conflicts we cannot avoid.

Our understanding of and approach to international relations and the use of the military is based upon an assumption of the ubiquity of the nation-state. We play by rules, some encoded in our own laws or in international laws and customs, others matters of habit that have so long endured that they have acquired totemic power in our collective consciousness. When other world actors play by our rules, we triumph. Increasingly, however, the world doesn't give a damn about our laws, customs, or table manners.

In much of the world, the nation-state is becoming irrelevant. From Colombia to Russia, traditional structures of government coexist nervously with emerging systems of resource allocation and human organization, from techno-capable crime networks to the machete-swinging clans of warlords, from Russian anarcho-capitalism through economic migrations to the re-emergence of the city-state in places such as Cali, Sarajevo, and Kabul. The future of China may resemble that of classical Greece, with its rival cities, blood feuds, and a contest of militarism with commerce.

Increasingly, in multiple spheres of human activity, post-formal webs of control operate transnationally, ignoring borders we still pretend are sacrosanct. What does sovereignty mean to a drug cartel, except that *narcotraficantes* cannot be pursued across an invisible frontier? Our Department of State is a magnificent tool for dealing with symmetrically structured, like-minded entities--but what can it accomplish in Somalia? In Bosnia? In Rwanda? In Burma? Again and again, we find that hard-won treaties mean nothing because we negotiated them with governments that have only nominal authority while the true sources of local power are asymmetrical to our own. We shake hands with warlords, smiling for the length of a photo opportunity, only to discover, in the words of that master of practical philosophy, Samuel Goldwyn, that "an oral contract isn't worth the paper it's printed on." We are becoming word-people, and we face deed-people, and we don't even have an adequate vocabulary to describe them. Imprisoned by the pathetically outdated terminology of diplomacy and international relations, we find that we cannot accurately describe what is happening, and therefore we cannot think it. We are speaking Latin in the computer age.

The borders we see on maps increasingly do not exist on the ground. Further, our emerging opponents could not care

less about the way we divide responsibilities among diplomats, lawyers, soldiers, and cops--except when they can exploit those divisions. Our opponents, crime chiefs and tribal chiefs alike, operate in environments of tremendous moral and practical freedom, and, increasingly, they assimilate relevant technologies much more swiftly than can the regulation-bound, labor-intensive, pre-modern bureaucracies of struggling nation-states. The government of Colombia affects Colombia--when it affects anything at all. Colombian drug cartels have a powerful effect on much of the developed world. But diplomatic practice demands that we deal only with and through the government in Bogota.

The imaginary sanctity of the nation-state tyrannizes our behavior, while terrorists, drug traffickers, resource pirates, and post-Soviet crime networks dance across continents and oceans. The fluidity with which the most sophisticated of our opponents range internationally resembles the flow of dollars in the international financial system. We move like sacks of cement. Where the opponents of our order find opportunities, we encounter barriers. We negotiate status of forces agreements. The bad guys just get on a plane and go.

Criminal organizations, to stress only one of the growing and largely ignored threats to our national security, increasingly have more power than do failing states. We refuse to face the consequences, insisting that all crime is a "law enforcement problem." But the veil of illusion is disintegrating, no matter how desperately we may try to patch it up. Latin America's problems are already a cliché. Elsewhere, the government of Burma cannot control provinces where a drug-financed tribal army rules, and Kurdish insurrections run on heroin receipts from Berlin and Stockholm. In Africa and post-Soviet Eurasia, it is impossible to construct a firebreak between government and organized crime. In Russia, the military is often for rent when it is not for sale, and the degree to which the Russian military has been penetrated by or has become a network of criminal syndicates may be the great unasked intelligence question of our time. Historically, organized crime has inhabited the gap between people's needs and expectations and their government's ability to fulfill them. Today, with the efficacy of formal government in worldwide decline, criminal organizations are becoming new forms of government (for want of a new and better word), often on a local level, but increasingly on a national scale. While historians may argue that some forms of government have long manifested criminal behaviors, from feudal Europe to post-colonial Africa, a key difference is that old-model "criminal" governments were almost invariably inward-looking. Today's new model of criminal government has regional, even worldwide, ambitions.

This has powerful implications for statecraft and military activities even where the United States is not actively engaged. Over the past few decades, a focus of our diplomacy and military assistance has been to help Third World militaries evolve toward the 20th-century US model of civil-military relations and task allocation, in which the military looks outward and law enforcement agencies do the domestic chores. After years of "progress," this model is breaking down everywhere. Criminal, terrorist, or other armed non-state organizations have grown too powerful and adept--in extreme cases, we even see the emergence of criminal enterprise armies (CEAs). CEAs may not have the organization and hitting power of CENTCOM, but they are increasingly more than a match for underpaid, undertrained, underequipped Third World cops--or even for regional militaries. From the Andean Ridge to Anatolia, traditional governments are fighting for their lives against border-hopping, criminally funded, increasingly well-equipped CEAs that know how to exploit Western tools, from human rights activists through banks and lawyers to the media. We attack our allies and clients for using military means to fight back: the United States Government formally deplores the use of military means in almost any form to enforce domestic stability. Yet domestic employment of the military appears an inevitable part of our own future, at least on our borders and in some urban environments (where we have already accumulated a dismaying amount of experience).

Organized crime is only one of the dirty fingers clawing at our future. Others range from hatreds based upon hereditary identifications, to the forlorn, violent attempts of overwhelmed cultures to detach themselves from Western influences, to resource wars. As our own society continues to fracture between those who can adapt to modernity and those who cannot, an archipelago of failure is emerging within the United States, posing problems so intractable and concentrated that traditional law enforcement may prove unable to contain them. Still, the most frequent "battlefields" for our military in the looming wars against criminal ghost states, parastates, and CEAs will lie in foreign theaters--or in the skies over oceans and on the seas themselves. We already possess the material tools for the job. What we lack are innovative methodologies and adequately contemporary laws. To address the broad range of emerging threats, we don't need new weapons, just new rules of engagement. Our approach to future threats amounts to preparing for an outbreak of influenza when the world has cancer.

At present, we are ineffective combatants against emerging threats because of laws and practices that extend citizen-equivalent judicial treatment to foreign criminals who have had a far more savage effect upon our country and its people than Saddam Hussein ever brought off. Eventually, we will recognize that international criminal and terrorist organizations in "peacetime" must be regarded as combatants during wartime: the goal is not to try them in a court of law, but to kill them until the survivors quit. Such a legal change would be a far more potent weapon than any machine we could buy--and it is a more pressing requirement than we are collectively willing to acknowledge.

In summary, more and more governments are being overwhelmed by, run by, or supplanted by an astonishing variety of criminal organizations and innovative structures for controlling wealth through violence and coercion. Russian military and security ties to organized crime are already a noontime nightmare. Mexico's ruling party is engaged in an internal gang war. Brazil has lost control of its interior and of the impoverished cities within its cities. Europe's NATO states are flooded by criminal formations from the former Warsaw Pact states. Nigeria, an ambitious heroin-broker, doesn't have an army--it has a mafia in uniform. The alarming trend among criminal organizations and other renegades is to cooperate--and they do it far better than the United Nations and NATO managed in the wreckage of Yugoslavia.

Many of the countless conflicts around the world have no more than an emotional relevance to our national security, and we are foolish to give them more than a passing glance. We live in an age of such cataclysm and collapse, of such spiritual and material ruptures, that man's fate in the non-Western world will be settled only in blood, and contributing our blood would only make things worse, postponing resolution. But, as belabored above, some threats already are so immediate that we will have to confront them, like it or not.

And we will not like it.

The roles and missions of the United States military are going to change, but the changes will not have much to do with the legacy of the RMA. Flag officers, sensible colonels, and captains fresh from the sea can shake their heads, but the United States armed forces already are involved in struggles against international organized crime and illegal immigration. We deploy on missions of disease control, resource protection, security assistance, and the protection of US citizens abroad. From fighting cholera in eastern Zaire to blocking our coastal waters against economic migrations, from fighting forest fires in the American West to evacuating our citizens from Liberia to impounding nuclear materials in Kazakhstan and on to attempting to alter the patterns of Haitian collective behavior, our military future is visible all around us. There are few conventional heroes. No wonder we yearn to refight the battle of Gettysburg.

We long for "military" missions and struggle to keep the holy brotherhood pure. But, as we maneuver to avoid roles in "non-military" problems, we betray the trust placed in us by the citizens we are pledged to protect. A military's reason for being is to do its nation's dirty work.

A watershed event was our military's adept refusal to play a direct role, rather than a safe supporting role, in counter-drug operations when the issue surfaced in the 1980s. Honorable, well-intentioned, and desperate to protect the force from the high proportion of failures endemic to such efforts, a military leadership that remembered Vietnam too well successfully argued that counter-drug operations are a law-enforcement function. The Department of State, always wary of the military arm's reach, agreed. As a result, our direct-action counter-drug operations in the Andean Ridge come down to a few scattered handfuls of US government agents charged with bringing down the most successful international business operation in human history--while much of our hemisphere engages in a struggle to the death over the future shape of human societies.

Fighting drug cartels and combatting other criminal "ghost states" is the moral officer's nightmare, full of impossible restrictions, gray areas, and daily opportunities to embarrass the flag and demoralize the force. But is self-perpetuation the highest purpose of our military establishment? Drugs and drug-related violence have killed more Americans, wrecked more lives, and cost us more in real-dollar terms than did the Vietnam War. Our cities have been raped, and generations of the poor have been lost irretrievably. Doesn't that constitute a threat to our national security?

Of course, the military could not solve this problem alone. As remarked above, we are constrained by a past century's model of what armies do, what police do, and what governments legally can do. Our opponents have none of this baggage, whether they are druglords or warlords. CEAs and other nontraditional organizations increasingly can out-

spend, out-maneuver, out-shoot, out-negotiate, and out-think states and their formal tools for enforcing order. For our part, we do not protect our most defenseless citizens from foreign enemies who penetrate our borders almost effortlessly. The relevant institutions of the US Government need to re-define themselves vis-à-vis the rest of the world, but we will probably fail to do it until the situation becomes so desperate it threatens our elites and the money-buffered enclaves in which they live, learn, and work.

US and international laws and appallingly outmoded diplomatic practices also cripple us in asymmetrical exchanges such as that which occurred in Somalia, just as they make a joke out of all efforts to bring a "just" end to the butchery in the former Yugoslavia. You cannot, cannot, cannot play by textbook rules when your opponent either hasn't read the book or has thrown it away. Attempts to bring our wonderful, comfortable, painstakingly humane laws and rules to bear on broken countries drunk with blood and anarchy constitute the ass end of imperialism.

In the nearer-than-currently-imaginable future, our happy-face attempts at peacekeeping are going to evolve into operations aimed at self-preservation. It is hard to bring this point home, since traditionalists can dismissively ask whether one foresees a radical Islamic fundamentalist invasion of Missouri or a Rwandan raid on Wall Street, knowing that like-minded readers will nod approvingly and go back to keeping the world safe for defense contractors. But ours is a world in which fringe Islamists bomb the World Trade Center and crack cocaine haunts the streets of Kansas City. A large proportion of the Los Angeles rioters emboldened by the media's lionization of Rodney King were illegal immigrants. And the US contingent in Mogadishu suffered proportionately more casualties than did the force that fought Desert Storm. This is a terribly changed and rapidly changing world.

The US armed forces must change with that world, and must change in ways that are fundamental--a new human understanding of our environment would be of far more use than any number of brilliant machines. We have fallen in love with the wrong revolution.

It is painful to write this. I personally love the Army as it is, valuing its ethos, its rectitude, its invigorating routine, its respect for our heritage. I love the legends and lineages, and a glimpse of our flag can move me profoundly. Selfishly, I do not want my Army to change, and my secret fantasies run more to Sherman at Shiloh than to tracking desperate, malnourished, and terrified economic refugees. I wish that the military that might descend safely from the RMA could be the sole answer to our nation's security challenges, but I cannot find grounds to believe it. It is a miserable prospect to be an officer faced with the need to argue in favor of filthy missions that will never entirely succeed and which will lend endless ammunition to those who loathe the institution that has given worth to my life. I wish it could be otherwise.

I understand the many reasons why it is preferable to think about, to write about, and to act upon the issues summed up by the phrase "Revolution in Military Affairs." The RMA offers us refuge within an antiseptic cocoon, and, for all its stunning science, it translates into continuity. To the earnest, the RMA offers an opportunity for engagement; to the careerist, it promises advancement and lucrative post-military employment; to the academic, it offers intellectual finiteness--concrete specifications rather than confounding ideas. The RMA, which I believe to be a historical event while others consider it barely begun, allows the traditionalist to appear forward-minded, and permits the forward-minded to avoid unpleasant realities. Most of the best minds within and surrounding the military have been drawn into RMA-related issues. Much of this effort is of great value, for we will, of course, always need to maintain conventional (or post-conventional) forces. But perhaps just a few of those bright officers and analysts would better serve their country by taking an open-eyed look at the black, hideous, broken, career-destroying world around us.

Major Ralph Peters is assigned to the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, where he is responsible for evaluating emerging threats. Prior to becoming a Foreign Area Officer for Eurasia, he served exclusively at the tactical level. He is a graduate of the US Army Command and General Staff College and holds a master's degree in international relations. Over the past several years, his professional and personal research travels have taken Major Peters to Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Ossetia, Abkhazia, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Croatia, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Turkey, as well as the countries of the Andean Ridge. He has published five books and dozens of articles and essays on military and international concerns. This is his fourth article for *Parameters*.

Reviewed 29 August 1997. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil.