Editor's Shelf

John J. Madigan III

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The authors of *Assumption-Based Planning: A Planning Tool for Very Uncertain Times,* published by RAND in 1993, referred to their product as "a report, not a users' manual." The structure and content of the document, however, tend to refute that caution. The RAND team seems to have created a process for thinking about the distant future which appears to be the antithesis of linearity and point estimates. The process focuses on the assumptions--explicit, implicit, unconnected, and unaddressed--that proliferate in any planning process.

The authors assert that the principal challenge in planning is "to identify the critical assumptions underlying an organization's thinking and operations, and then to understand which of those assumptions may become vulnerable and how." The RAND methodology has five "basic steps," the first two of which are to identify important assumptions and their vulnerabilities. Planners should next determine how to evaluate and respond to causes or consequences of changes in important assumptions. These three steps are described as "signposts," which are events or thresholds that indicate the changing vulnerability of an assumption; "shaping actions," designed either to avert or cause the failure of a vulnerable assumption, and finally "hedging actions," which are used to prepare an organization for the failure of one of its important assumptions.

The RAND analysts used two cases to illustrate their methodology, one of which was based on the Army's concept at the time for the near-term post-Cold War force, Army 21. The significance of that selection lies in the appearance in 1997 of a follow-on publication entitled *Assumption-Based Planning and Force XXI.* In this "documented briefing" RAND reports the results of its work in support of the Army Staff to identify "the important assumptions underlying Force XXI that are vulnerable in the coming 15-20 years." The second document is very useful as both process and product.

Readers might test assumption-based planning by applying its precepts to the issues identified in the Harris-Stewart article in this issue (pp. 67-83). The "Army After Next" project, which seems to have what RAND calls an "ends-uncertain timeframe," might also benefit from the methodology if it is not already in use in that project. Both publications are available from RAND, 1700 Main Street, Santa Monica, CA, 90407.

Last year marked the appearance of the ninth and final volume of the history of the US Marine Corps in Vietnam. Entitled *U.S. Marines in Vietnam: The Defining Year, 1968*, its 803 pages are intended to be the capstone of the account of Marine Corps operations during the war. Organized in six parts with 10 useful appendices, the text examines topics both chronologically (Parts I through IV) and functionally (Parts V and VI).

Start with Chapter 31, "1968: An Overview," where in less than three pages the authors identify the major tasks and challenges the Marines faced that year during their operations in the northern part of South Vietnam. Be prepared to relive contentious issues (developed in detail in the body of the text), such as USMC strategic differences with MACV regarding the relative efficacy of large-unit operations and pacification programs; commitment of significant Marine forces to the DMZ barrier project (the "McNamara Wall"); and the "MACV pressure" that led III Marine Amphibious Force to "garrison the isolated outpost" at Khe Sanh. The latter contributed to conflict between the Marines and MACV over command relationships and the specific issue of control of Marine air.

But it is the story of the Tet Offensive and what the authors call the subsequent "mini-Tet" operation that occupy the most space in the book. Nearly three-fourths of the chronological account involves events leading up to, during, or subsequent to those operations and to the siege at Khe Sanh. Here, as elsewhere in this very readable text, the authors move easily among matters strategic, operational, and tactical. The 34 maps and uncounted photographs contribute effectively throughout to a sense of time and place.

The authors departed somewhat from convention in preparing the text by incorporating responses from the many Marines and others identified in Appendix I as reviewers of various drafts. Those comments appear at the bottom of the page containing the material that elicited the response, and range from a few lines to substantial remarks on an operation, policy, or related topic. The resulting sense of being in a dialog with participants considerably enhances the narrative.

The Defining Year offers vivid testimony to the courage and commitment of those in the armed services who did their duty and more during the Vietnam era. It is also a tribute to the 4618 Marines killed and 29,320 wounded that year in Vietnam: more than 12 young Americans killed and 80 wounded each day in 1968 in just one of the several areas of operations in the country.

In an article appearing in the Fall 1997 issue of *Armed Forces and Society*, "Are Military Professionals Bound By a Higher Moral Standard?" J. Carl Ficarrotta asks whether there are unique moral obligations for military professionals or if military professionals are bound more strictly to the moral standards that apply to everyone. The ensuing examination of the concepts of "uniqueness," "strictness," and related issues is carefully developed and refreshingly free of jargon.

While Ficarrotta, an assistant professor of philosophy at the US Air Force Academy, observes that his assessment could be applied "to any readily identifiable group" that might have reason to avoid public misbehavior, the relationship of military forces to their society also seems to be reflected in his discussion. He concludes that "we ask a great deal of military professionals, particularly in the moral sphere. But outside of functionally driven contexts . . . we have little or no basis for asking them more insistently than others to be moral, or blaming them to a greater extent than we blame others for the same offenses. I do not think we can justifiably ask them to be saints." -- JJM