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Commentary & Reply

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Commentary & Reply

From *Parameters*, Spring 2000, pp. 130-31.

To the Editor:

When I saw the title of Lieutenant Colonel Lonnie Henley's article "[The RMA After Next](#)" (Winter 1999-2000), I knew I was again suffering from Acronym Deficit Syndrome. Lieutenant Colonel Henley's article is an interesting and worthwhile discussion of several technologies with future military potential. I believe, for future discussion and research, that the key opportunity is the effect of information technology on decisionmaking. In an "omni-omniscient" battlefield where everyone knows everything, the key differentiator for victory will be strategic and tactical decisionmaking at all levels from the individual soldier (or organism?), through to the top or system level.

The spectrum of decisionmaking ranges from centralized to independent. In the electronic battlefield of the future, centralized decisionmaking will require overwhelming computing and communication power to quickly assimilate myriad data and in turn provide direction. Independent decisionmaking will require distributed intelligence, decision criteria, and algorithms for effectiveness. Clearly this technical taxonomy neglects human traits such as initiative--a hallmark of the US Army small-unit commander.

To recall Ecclesiastes, "There is no new thing under the sun." In 1976 or 1977, while I was on a two-week tour at TRADOC I heard General William DePuy, then commander of TRADOC, expounding his "parapet foxhole." In today's terminology, what General DePuy was addressing was individual decisionmaking and the conglomeration of individual decisions and actions into the success of the whole unit. Nearly 25 years later we need to continue to harness this vision. Bigger/smaller, faster, stronger, and numerical superiority mean little without coordinated decisionmaking and leadership.

In parallel with our fascinating pursuit of new "gadgets" (and I use the term lovingly) we need to continue to hone our ability to marry them to effective decisionmaking. The strategic challenge is to select promising research areas and ideas, then to manufacture, integrate, train, and deploy resources in a highly (fiscally) constrained environment. At the tactical level, the speed and effectiveness of tactical decisions coupled with sharp execution will spell victory.

Last, we cannot forget that while there are many who would fight future wars from the easy-chair comfort of the living room, or mega-command center, to quote many great leaders, it is the individual foot soldier who determines defeat or victory.

Colonel Carl A. Singer, USAR (Ph.D.)
Senior Program Manager, IBM Global Services
Passaic, N.J. (via e-mail)

The Author Replies:

I certainly agree with Colonel Singer's argument that a main effect of information technology on the US armed forces will be more rapid, more decentralized, and perhaps even more effective decisionmaking. This will greatly increase the combat power of our forces, though I do not think it represents a qualitative transformation in the nature of warfare. I reiterate my central thesis, however, that in order to discern truly revolutionary departures in military capabilities, it is necessary to look beyond this laudable marriage of information technology with late-20th-century maneuver warfare systems, and begin to think what will happen next, after the digitized battlefield is fully mature.

The advances in information technology are remarkable, but even more striking is the prospect of what will happen when they are merged with equally remarkable developments in biological science and the manufacture of advanced miniature devices. It may well remain true that the individual foot soldier is the final determinant of defeat or victory, but the environment in which that soldier operates, and some of the military tasks he (or she) performs, may be

significantly different three or four decades hence from those we currently envision.

Lieutenant Colonel Lonnie Henley

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Reviewed 8 February 2000. Please send comments or corrections to carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil