

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 33  
Number 2 *Parameters Summer 2003*

Article 13

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5-1-2003

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### Recommended Citation

Thomas J. Williams, "Strategic Leader Readiness and Competencies for Asymmetric Warfare," *Parameters* 33, no. 2 (2003), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2153.

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# Strategic Leader Readiness and Competencies for Asymmetric Warfare

THOMAS J. WILLIAMS

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“We have to put aside the comfortable ways of thinking and planning, take risks and try new things so that we can prepare our forces to deter and defeat adversaries that have not yet emerged to challenge us.”

— Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld<sup>1</sup>

Both current and past senior civilian defense officials reportedly have grown increasingly frustrated with the conventional mindset of many strategic-level military officers. In their view, too many senior leaders are too cautious, lacking the “fresh thinking, creativity, and ingenuity” to engage in the “out-of-the-box” thinking required to fully understand the new asymmetric<sup>2</sup> threats and challenges posed by the global war on terrorism.<sup>3</sup>

Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, in a speech delivered at National Defense University on 31 January 2002, made clear that in his view, “The future will require us to think differently and develop the kinds of forces and capabilities that can adapt quickly to new challenges and unexpected circumstances.”<sup>4</sup> General Richard B. Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, also recently noted how al Qaeda and Taliban fighters have “made lots of adaptations to our tactics and we’ve got to continue to . . . try to out-think them and to be faster at it.”<sup>5</sup> At the heart of the issue is whether and how the operational art and leadership attributes differ, if at all, in symmetric versus asymmetric approaches to warfare.

The conceptual underpinning of these statements and criticisms also raises significant questions about whether asymmetric warfare<sup>6</sup> poses unique challenges for strategic leaders or whether it more appropriately requires time-

tested leadership competencies applied with more creativity and risk-taking. The answers to these important questions would seem to hold great significance for strategic leaders' readiness and the leadership competencies needed for asymmetric warfare.

This article seeks to identify the adaptive linkages that exist between strategic leader competencies and the mental readiness<sup>7</sup> for asymmetric and more conventional warfare. Fortunately, the writings of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz seem to offer a framework to help guide the needed adaptation in strategic leader thinking with regard to asymmetric approaches to warfare.<sup>8</sup> An identification of these characteristics in the writings of both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz offers the opportunity to adapt their concepts to the present and anticipated challenges of asymmetric approaches to warfare. However, it is also important to recognize that while "asymmetry is important to strategy . . . not everything is asymmetry."<sup>9</sup>

### ***Conventional Leaders and Asymmetric Warfare***

It is unfortunate that so-called "conventional warriors"<sup>10</sup> are finding both their relevance and adaptability being challenged because of asymmetric warfare. At its core, this issue raises the question of whether conventional warriors can effectively lead in unconventional (i.e., asymmetric) wars.<sup>11</sup> For some, the answer to this important question will seem obvious. They will intuitively sense and view asymmetric approaches to warfare as counterinsurgency once was viewed, as "secondary or peripheral to conventional threats."<sup>12</sup> However, "conventional" and "symmetrical" are often seen as synonymous, since by definition symmetrical refers to instances when "our force and the enemy force are similar (e.g., land versus land)."<sup>13</sup> For many, this similarity implies predictable, and denying that predictability lies at the heart of asymmetric approaches.

This is no small matter given the various adjectives used to describe the current national security environment: uncertain, dynamic, fluid, unpredictable, unknown, turbulent, asymmetric, and complex.<sup>14</sup> Identifying and finding ways for strategic leaders to bridge and "leverage" the leadership competencies required in symmetrical scenarios to apply them effectively in asymmetrical warfare could have important implications for strategic leader training, development, and doctrine.

The debate about whether leadership differs in symmetric versus asymmetric war was perhaps unwittingly played out shortly after the deployment of US military forces into Afghanistan. The national press initially raised a chorus of crit-

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icism directed at the Commander of Central Command, General Tommy Franks, questioning whether he was “the wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time.”<sup>15</sup> General Franks was also described as “a classic Army officer: a good soldier, a solid man and low-key personality.” But for many, this implied that he was also “plodding,” “very unimaginative and timid.” In other words, some viewed him as “out of his depth,” “a conventional soldier in an unconventional war.”<sup>16</sup>

Time and the tides of war have altered the circumstances, revealing how wrong the press was in its initial criticism of General Franks; he has revealed his adaptability to this new, asymmetric type of warfare. However, embedded within those expressed concerns lies the perception, expectation, and perhaps the reality that asymmetric approaches require a strategic leader to possess a special mental readiness to accept and prepare for this new threat.

### ***Leadership Challenges Posed by Asymmetric Threats***

Senior defense officials have made it abundantly clear that in their view, the challenges posed by asymmetric approaches to warfare require a realignment of the way strategic leaders think and plan.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, some recent slating of officers into top military jobs has been described as a signal to encourage more fresh thinking and innovation.<sup>18</sup> The need to “think differently” has been a recurring theme in defense transformation efforts as well as in preparing US military forces for asymmetric threats.<sup>19</sup>

There also is a growing consensus that US military forces will increasingly face “adaptive adversaries.”<sup>20</sup> These adaptive foes will attempt to find imaginative ways to match their strengths against our vulnerabilities, combining unconventional approaches to achieve a synergistic effect.<sup>21</sup> Given the US military’s overwhelming strength and dominance, many believe that future adversaries have no choice but to seek every advantage in an effort to attack our will to fight, trying to find ways to exploit and undermine the psychological and physical advantages that our superior technology and information dominance provide.<sup>22</sup>

It also is a given that newer technology will become increasingly available to potential adversaries. And even without access to advanced technology, as the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 revealed, adversaries might also find unexpected ways to use familiar technology and our own freedoms against us. While current US information dominance can overwhelm an adversary, that advantage is likely to change by 2010.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore, we must face the challenge posed by asymmetric approaches to warfare, applying our strategic mental readiness and agility to act on what we know in order to influence the outcome.<sup>24</sup> According to Secretary Rumsfeld,<sup>25</sup> we must do as Frederick the Great advised in his *General Principles of War*. That is, we must examine our potential vulnerabilities and ask ourselves, “If we were the enemy, what type of force design would we form?” We must then fashion the forces and capabilities to deter and defeat these potential threats. To achieve this goal, we also must “encourage a culture of creativity and intelligent

risk-taking . . . [and] become more proactive and not reactive,” anticipating new threats before they emerge while developing new capabilities that can dissuade and deter those emerging threats.<sup>26</sup>

### ***Overview of Asymmetry and the Need for Mental Readiness***

Because of the uncertain and changing dynamics of asymmetric approaches, some military strategists have suggested that the writings of Sun Tzu seem more relevant than those of Carl von Clausewitz.<sup>27</sup> Both theorists offer many useful concepts in emphasizing and identifying the mental readiness and leadership competencies relevant for a strategic leader in an asymmetric war.

One consideration in judging whether Sun Tzu may seem more relevant than Clausewitz depends on whether one views asymmetry as “what someone may do to us” or as “something we do to them.” Asymmetry is better thought of as a method that applies equally to either side of a conflict, and it is important to recognize that. To the contrary, however, a careful reading of the comprehensive definition of asymmetry provided in the 1999 *Joint Strategy Review* reveals a potential vulnerability for strategic leaders in their thinking about asymmetry since it specifically defines asymmetry as something done to US military forces to undermine their conventional military strength. For example:

Asymmetric approaches are attempts to circumvent or undermine US strengths while exploiting US weaknesses using methods that differ significantly from the United States’ expected method of operations. [Asymmetric approaches] generally seek a major psychological impact, such as shock or confusion that affects an opponent’s initiative, freedom of action, or will. Asymmetric methods require an appreciation of an opponent’s vulnerabilities. Asymmetric approaches often employ innovative, nontraditional tactics, weapons, or technologies, and can be applied at all levels of warfare—strategic, operational, and tactical—across the spectrum of military operations.<sup>28</sup>

Thinking more broadly, some military strategists have proposed a definition of asymmetric approaches that recognizes the potential for its use by either side. They view strategic asymmetry as more general and proactive, describing it thus:

Acting, organizing, and thinking differently than opponents in order to maximize one’s own advantages, exploit an opponent’s weaknesses, attain the initiative, or gain greater freedom of action. It can be political-strategic, military-strategic, operational, or a combination of these. It can entail different methods, technologies, values, organizations, time perspectives, or some combination of these. It can be short-term or long-term. It can be deliberate or by default. It can be discrete or pursued in conjunction with symmetric approaches. It can have both psychological and physical dimensions.<sup>29</sup>

*Joint Vision 2020* reinforces the need for strategic leaders to maintain a more proactive view of asymmetry. This broader view also prompts the need to

identify and understand how asymmetric factors will influence operational art, since decisions even at a tactical level will become even more likely to influence operational-level activities.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, strategic leaders must also emphasize and foster this understanding in their subordinates to ensure they also display a mental readiness to deal with asymmetric threats. They too “will be challenged by significant responsibilities at tactical levels in the organization and must be capable of making decisions with both operational and strategic implications.”<sup>31</sup>

This reveals how many of our young officers must prepare to confront “volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous situations,” demanding of them increasing levels of “intellect, initiative, and leadership.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, US joint doctrine calls for all US military forces to possess a “strategic agility” that imparts an almost anthropomorphic quality to the military itself, rather than the people who constitute it. For example, the capstone regulation for all US joint doctrine, *Joint Publication 1*, calls for “the ability to adapt, conceptually and physically, to changes in the international security environment.”<sup>33</sup> Of course, it is not a military force per se that adapts or changes, but rather the people within the force, along with the concepts, doctrine, and intellectual preparation used to train, lead, and guide the force.

As the definitions above make evident, asymmetric approaches attempt to disrupt and undermine a strategic leader’s ability to direct and control rational and deliberate actions. Thus, asymmetric approaches seek to unsettle, disorient, misdirect, and deny the very purpose, strategy, core competencies, and critical processes that allow strategic leaders to provide effective leadership to the organization. Asymmetric approaches have the express intent to create maximum uncertainty and ambiguity for the leader and for the led.

In many ways, the call for “strategic agility” recognizes the prospect of how asymmetric approaches add to the complexity of warfare, prompting the need for readiness to rapidly shift to vastly different operations (e.g., conventional, unconventional, military operations other than war, anti-terrorist, humanitarian, peacekeeping, etc.). Consequently, it seems a given that the multifaceted nature of asymmetric approaches to warfare will demand of strategic leaders the intellectual agility and a “competence of adaptability”<sup>34</sup> to adjust rapidly to vastly different operations across a full-spectrum of operations at all levels of war.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Mental Readiness: Sun Tzu and Clausewitz Compared***

Williamson Murray has written, “The profession of arms is the most demanding calling not only physically but intellectually.”<sup>36</sup> Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld has stated, “We . . . are going to have to fashion a new vocabulary and different constructs for thinking about what it is we’re doing.”<sup>37</sup> Such sentiments challenge the strategic leader to possess a mental and physical readiness to successfully deal with the uncertainties and ambiguities of war. Asymmetric threats, by their nature, attempt to increase and capitalize on this uncertainty and ambiguity by exploiting and countering US technological and operational advantages.

Clausewitz seems to anticipate the challenges for a strategic leader in dealing with asymmetric warfare by noting, “In war everything is uncertain, and calculations have to be made with variable quantities.” This seems to contrast with Sun Tzu’s view that war is “calculated, certain, and controlled.” But Sun Tzu also places great emphasis on using both psychological and informational asymmetry to gain an advantage:

All warfare is based on deception. . . . When capable, feign incapacity; when active, inactivity. . . . Offer the enemy bait to lure him; feign disorder and strike him. . . . Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance. . . . I make the enemy see my strengths as weaknesses and my weaknesses as strengths.<sup>38</sup>

This passage from Sun Tzu leads many to believe his writings are more relevant to asymmetric warfare. However, some may read this passage and sense that it applies only to how others may use asymmetric threats against US forces. If so, that should give the reader some pause for concern, for in that impression of irrelevancy lies the threat that asymmetric approaches bring.

As Michael Handel points out, both Sun Tzu and Clausewitz (at least with regard to “real war”) would probably agree that war is more of an art than a science. Thus, strategic leaders must grapple with the fact that there is no single, optimal solution for either asymmetric or symmetric types of war, given the endless complexities of war. However, asymmetric approaches seek to create and then capitalize on uncertainty. Therefore, effective strategic leaders remain open to these endless complexities and appreciate how “military action is intertwined with psychological forces and effects.”<sup>39</sup>

### ***Leadership Attributes***

What follows is a selective representation of some of the leadership attributes and competencies deemed important for strategic leaders to create a mental readiness to develop and promote “strategic agility” in their thoughts and actions as they prepare to meet the multifaceted challenges posed by asymmetry. Many of these leadership attributes and competencies are time-tested and effective in symmetrical warfare. However, asymmetrical threats and warfare require us to recognize that the relative emphasis on certain of these attributes has changed.

- *Situational Awareness.* A strategic leader’s ability to recognize what is happening and to maintain vigilance for threats, change, and opportunity is one of the most difficult challenges of asymmetric warfare. There is an increasing dependence on information dominance to facilitate maintaining situational awareness, which provides an obvious strength for US forces. Precisely because information dominance does provide strength, however, the resources required to maintain this dominance also pose lucrative targets for asymmetric threats; adversaries will attempt to maximally disrupt our ability to maintain the situational awareness these resources offer. Consequently, it is important for our leaders to



not become too dependent on “the new technology of operations”<sup>40</sup> and continue to develop the time-tested leadership competencies, expertise, and experience needed to maintain situational awareness by other means.

Sun Tzu also emphasizes the importance of the need for clear perception (i.e., situational awareness), by noting the importance of the “ability to examine human factors.” He cautions against being “a general unable to estimate his capabilities or comprehend the arts of expediency and flexibility when faced with the opportunity to engage the enemy.” Such a commander “will advance in a stumbling and hesitant manner, looking anxiously first to his right and then to his left . . . [placing] his confidence in unreliable reports, believing at one moment this and at another that.”<sup>41</sup>

By its nature, asymmetric warfare may entail attempts to degrade an opponent’s situational awareness by doing the unexpected, by making things appear entirely different from what is expected, or by creating an impression of what is hoped for (e.g., deception operations).<sup>42</sup> According to Clausewitz, this difficulty constitutes one of the most serious sources of “friction” in war.

Asymmetric approaches attempt to capitalize on increasing an opponent’s friction, which, according to Clausewitz, refers to the “uncertainties, errors, accidents, technical difficulties, the unforeseen.”<sup>43</sup> Friction represents every extraneous matter, which all combine as a force, like inertia, that then makes “the apparently easy so difficult.” It is also important to recognize that asymmetric approaches, by design, intend to capitalize on and create both psychological and physical “friction” to degrade, deter, or deceive an opposing force.

- *Strength of Mind.* Clausewitz’s concept of “strength of mind” or character offers a conceptual template for how to counter the uncertainty when situational awareness is lost. For example, he notes the importance of maintaining “the ability to keep one’s head at times of exceptional stress and violent emotion . . . [of] maintaining one’s balance in spite of them.”<sup>44</sup> Clausewitz notes how in the rush of events our thoughts are governed more by our feelings than logic. This outcome is exactly what the adversary posing the asymmetric threat hopes for by denying a strategic leader the situational awareness he or she has grown to depend on.

According to both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, it is precisely at these times that strength of character matters most, because such situations will cause one to call his or her intentions into question. In other words, the resulting uncertainty begins to kindle a flame of self-doubt about the appropriateness of one’s intentions or plans. Retired Lieutenant General Walter Ulmer captured the essence of this by noting how “the challenge is to implant methods for raising awareness about the cognitive and emotional processes that result in decisions.”<sup>45</sup> To make effective decisions, Clausewitz cautions that a strategic leader’s mind must be permanently armed with new information and reevaluation. This parallels in many ways Sun Tzu’s notion that “if wise, a commander is able to recognize changing circumstances and to act expediently.”<sup>46</sup>



- *Coup d'oeil: The "Inward Eye" of Truth.* Clausewitz's concept of "coup d'oeil" provides a useful approach for a strategic leader in dealing with an asymmetric threat. According to Clausewitz, when a strategic leader confronts the relentless struggle of the unforeseen (like asymmetric threats seek to present), two qualities are indispensable. The first involves possessing an intellect that "retains the glimmerings of inner light that leads to truth." The second involves possessing the "courage to follow this faint light wherever it may lead."<sup>47</sup>

Implied in this use of the "inward eye" is the need to remain open to possibilities other than those previously considered. In asymmetry, one seeks to use methods different from those expected, requiring an appreciation of an opponent's vulnerabilities. That allows the strategic leader "the quick recognition of a truth that the mind would ordinarily miss or would perceive only after long study and reflection."<sup>48</sup> This reinforces the importance of "long study and reflection" on possible asymmetric approaches that might counter one's own strengths.

- *Intelligent Risk-Taking.* In an address to US Naval Academy in May 2001, Commander-in-Chief George W. Bush stated, "As President, I am committed to fostering a military culture where intelligent risk-taking and forward-thinking are rewarded, not dreaded. And I'm committed to ensuring that visionary leaders who take risks are recognized and promoted." This echoes Clausewitz's dialectic of military genius (revealed in initiative and creativity) and leadership to counter the erosion of control by the friction of asymmetric approaches.

Clausewitz used the phrase "psychological fog" to describe the confusion or uncertainty in war. The horrors of war emotionally rob one's ability to maintain insight. Since by definition, asymmetric approaches seek to add to the uncertainty in war, one's mental processes will strive to bring order to disorder, imparting meaningfulness to still-unfolding events, and then force one to filter and prioritize information.

According to Clausewitz, this inability to know with certainty (i.e., the "fog of war") "wraps around three-quarters of all activities." An adversary attempts an asymmetric approach precisely to increase this fog of war, and our increased use of information dominance attempts to reduce it. However, since there can be no guarantees, strategic leaders must develop and reveal greater mental agility and readiness to react without being overly dependent on information dominance. In other words, a strategic leader can no longer be a "pure, narrow military thinker and worry [only] about fire and maneuver."<sup>49</sup>

- *Mental Readiness: Reducing the Fog of War.* The only thing that strategic leaders truly have control of is their own imagination, creativity, and intuition. Strategic leaders use these attributes, along with their "iron will and a powerful sense of purpose" to overcome the forces of asymmetric friction<sup>50</sup> and to cut through and counter the fog of war. Thus, to counter asymmetric threats, strategic leaders must develop a mental readiness to control the effects of "friction" and "fog" by anticipating and mitigating those effects on their own forces

while at the same time, through their actions, attempting to create more friction and fog for their opponent.

For many, asymmetric approaches to warfare may create a sense of “not fighting fair,” a sense of “that’s not the American way of war.” In reality, asymmetric war, like all types of wars, will take its form from the interplay of ideas, emotions, and conditions that prevail at the time. As such, asymmetric methods attempt to create and then exploit the uncertainties and influences that produce a natural inertia, or friction. Somewhat paradoxically, this asymmetric friction is derived and develops from all the same “inconsistencies, imprecision, [and] timidity of man” that combine to inhibit the escalation of violence in Clausewitz’s concept of “real war.” Nonetheless, we must recognize and remain cognizant of how the burning embers of asymmetric wars can ignite the larger forces of Clausewitz’s “real war.”

- *Knowing Yourself and Your Enemy.* In asymmetric warfare, strategic leaders will need to gain an even better understanding of their own vulnerability to fall victim to existing beliefs and wishful thinking. Consequently, in asymmetric warfare it becomes even more imperative for a commander to wisely use the available intelligence to counter the vulnerability that deception creates and to gain insight into the enemy’s mind, intentions, and capabilities. Clausewitz cautions that “one of the most serious sources of friction in war” is the difficulty of accurate recognition and assessment of one’s own strength and performance, much less the enemy’s.<sup>51</sup> There is a need to readdress and reemphasize the importance of this self-assessment process.

Part of this self-assessment process in preparing for asymmetric warfare involves the need to remain vigilant and open to the possibility of deception operations against one’s forces. By definition, “successful deception is usually designed to fit in with and magnify its target’s own preconceptions . . . [making] the victim deceive himself, while minimizing the amount of genuine information that has to be given.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, strategic leaders can reduce the likelihood of falling victim to deception operations by seeking to achieve a thorough understanding of their own and their enemy’s innermost thoughts, expectations, and plans.<sup>53</sup>

As General Montgomery Meigs has pointed out, both self-study and intellectual preparation have always been important for strategic leaders.<sup>54</sup> Asymmetry makes these factors even more important. This is why adversaries intending to use asymmetric approaches will often find deception operations useful in identifying an opponent’s center of gravity or in making him more vulnerable. For Clausewitz, deception was important to the extent that it is helpful in achieving surprise, one of the trademarks of asymmetric approaches.

Along with increased awareness for deception operations is the need for strategic leaders to remain vigilant for asymmetric approaches using the technology of psychological manipulation. While strategic leaders are no doubt familiar with the asymmetric effects of “physical precision,” they need also to increase their understanding of “psychological precision.” Emerging threats will

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allow for psychological precision that will help to shape a “military operation to attain the desired attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of the enemy and/or global observers” of the action.<sup>55</sup> This emerging “psychotechnology” will actualize Sun Tzu’s notion that “all warfare is based on deception,” giving militaries the potential ability to psychologically manipulate armies, causing “intense fear, calm, or whatever reaction is required.”<sup>56</sup>

***Intellectual Abilities: Comprehending the Asymmetries***

- *Intellect.* It goes without saying that the character and intellect of the leader will always matter, but this blend becomes even more important in being able to see through the uncertainty, chance, and probability needed for both operational instinct and adaptability<sup>57</sup> in countering asymmetric threats. This reflects the diversity of threats and challenges posed by asymmetry. Clausewitz called on the “higher powers of the mind” to provide a “sense of unity, and a power of judgment raised to a marvelous pitch of vision, which easily grasps and dismisses a thousand remote possibilities.”<sup>58</sup> To do this effectively, one must be aware of and appreciate past asymmetrical threats in order to then anticipate the possible and creative expression of new threats. That is, one’s judgment should not be constrained or harnessed by merely remaining vigilant for imitative acts.<sup>59</sup>

Asymmetric approaches to warfare increase the importance of remaining open to these possibilities. The requirement for greater flexibility of thought also places increased demands on one’s judgment and intuition. This is because of the difficulties inherent in the asymmetry of forces, intents, and operational designs. For example, asymmetric approaches attempt to deny the strategic leader situational understanding that he can then use to shape his vision of the operational design needed to counter the threat. An effective leader must therefore use his intellect to combine experience, intuition, and judgment to create new strategies.

- *Intuition (“Gut feeling”).* The mental readiness required for dealing with asymmetric threats also calls for a continual development of one’s intuition. Clausewitz recognizes that at times, “Action can never be based on anything firmer than instinct, a sensing of the truth.”<sup>60</sup> While studies have shown that many of our strategic leaders are more comfortable with data than with intuition,<sup>61</sup> true

intuition is not dependent upon carefully generated or assessed data. It involves the ability to comprehensively understand the impact and interplay of human factors, to then exploit fleeting opportunities, and to make rational calculations in the face of danger. S. L. A. Marshall also makes reference to how one must train the eye “to look for the signs of order and of progress amid the confusion” of war and to “make men knowledgeable of human nature as it is and as it reacts under the various and extreme stresses of the field.”<sup>62</sup> While his sage advice applies equally to symmetric or asymmetric approaches, asymmetric threats may make this more difficult to achieve.

This also suggests the importance of knowing about and understanding the mind of the opponent and what he is likely to do. The importance of this may need renewed emphasis. For example, while an earlier, 1986 edition of the US Army’s authoritative guide for fighting wars, Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*, addressed this important fact, the later 1993 version offered only a brief description. Consequently, the 1986 version appears more relevant to the challenge posed by asymmetric threats. It encouraged operational commanders to consider how at times the operational center of gravity may exist as an abstract of the “mental and psychological balance of a key commander [or potential adversary]” and pointed out that identifying an “enemy’s center of gravity requires extensive knowledge of his organizational make-up, operational patterns, and physical and psychological strengths and vulnerabilities.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, in countering the threats posed by asymmetric warfare, we still must “get inside an adversary’s decision-making cycle (his operational ability to react)” and exploit his weakness while effectively concentrating our own combat power.<sup>64</sup>

- *Boldness*. While Sun Tzu argues the strategic leader should take prudent, cautious, and calculated risks, Clausewitz sees greater benefit in “daring and risk-taking,” with a decisive quality (requiring greater reliance on intuition and temperament). However, asymmetric threats seek to create uncertainty, undermining one’s ability to act in a calculated, decisive manner, increasing the probability of an uncalculated bold or rash reaction. Therefore, a strategic leader must exercise self-discipline to avoid “rashness, excessive audacity, blind impetuosity or foolish ambition [that] are all easily exploited by the enemy and most dangerous to any allies, for a general with such defects in his character will naturally fall victim to all kinds of stratagems, ambushes, and trickery.”<sup>65</sup>

- *Self-Reliance*. Self-reliance then becomes the best defense against acting on the pressures of the moment. Since asymmetric approaches attempt to create confusion and doubt about a planned operation or ability, they can cause the strategic leader to lose confidence in his or her earlier judgment. As Clausewitz notes, an “iron will-power” can overcome this friction, “but of course wears down the machine as well.”<sup>66</sup>

Therefore, a strategic leader’s readiness (mental, physical, and moral) must allow an openness to both the possible and the most likely adversary dispositions, followed by bold actions and movement to deny the adversary the op-

portunity to reciprocate. However, as General Myers said of al Qaeda and the Taliban, some adversaries adapt quickly. We must therefore become more adept at anticipating their adaptations by moving more quickly, boldly, and decisively. To do so requires one to systematically reason through what is happening and also accurately assess what is not happening.<sup>67</sup> By using these approaches in maintaining situational awareness, the strategic leader can exploit opportunities or at least deny adversaries the ability to conduct “psychologically decisive” operations against his forces.

### ***Leadership and Policy Implications of Asymmetric Warfare***

Asymmetric warfare likely will make it even more difficult for policymakers to exercise control and ensure that actions taken to counter asymmetric threats retain their relationship to expressed policy. For example, war provides the state with the ends and means to protect or enhance its vital interests relative to other states. Most accept Clausewitz’s view that war should be a rational activity that is entered into only to serve the interests of the state as a continuation of policy, but viewed as the policy of last resort. Importantly, as Clausewitz states, “war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument.”

Asymmetric approaches could present a political wild card, however, since they may entail the use of irrational means to achieve the desired ends. In other words, in asymmetric warfare the “rational calculus” is not necessarily observed. Thus, asymmetric warfare may lessen the ability of policymakers to control the magnitude and duration of war and undermine their ability to determine at what point their expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object of the war. As such, asymmetric warfare upsets the Clausewitzian pronouncement that states, “Once the expenditure of effort exceeds the value of the political object, the object must be renounced and peace must follow.”<sup>68</sup> As terrorist states and adversaries have found, with asymmetric warfare small but effective expenditures of effort hold the possibility to provide significant and disproportional political gain.

Both Clausewitz and Sun Tzu recognized that in war nothing is certain. This is perhaps even truer with the more ambiguous nature of asymmetric warfare. While Sun Tzu aspired to find predictability, he too recognized that in war there are no constant conditions. With any war, whether symmetric or asymmetric, once the forces of war are unleashed, neither military commanders nor policymakers retain complete control over their actions. Each side reacts to the actions of the other in a continuing escalation of reciprocal acts. Complete control is not possible because, once unleashed, the forces of war freely operate and are “obedient to no law but their own.”<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, as effort is expended to wage war, friction makes everything difficult. Again, this is true for both symmetric and asymmetric wars, both of which involve danger along with physical and emotional exertion for the forces

involved. In conventional wars, these elements coalesce into the concept of general friction and serve as a countervailing force, propagating greater and greater amounts of difficulty and uncertainty, which serves to eventually bring conventional wars to an end. Since asymmetric wars may not always have clear, achievable political objectives, they are less likely to encounter the countervailing forces that cause them to stagnate or fizzle out. Consequently, the need for strategic leaders to prepare for protracted asymmetric war remains clear.

## ***Conclusion***

This article has addressed the vital importance for strategic leaders to foster and develop the mental readiness to think differently and identified some leadership competencies to enhance their ability to respond to the threats posed by asymmetric warfare. It is the nature of asymmetric threats that we cannot know with certainty the exact nature of the threats likely to emerge.

Asymmetric approaches, when successful, attempt to make it hard to fight the way we want to, perhaps even denying us the capability to fight at all (e.g., against an elusive, non-state actor), potentially leading to feelings of “military irrelevancy or impotency.”<sup>70</sup> While it is true that the mental readiness needed for asymmetric warfare parallels, in many ways, the preparation needed for “symmetrical” wars, this essay points out that the emphasis and demand for certain leadership attributes and characteristics will rise.

Clausewitz offers a model of the needed end-state by making it clear what qualities must exist for “military genius.” These stated qualities seem even more relevant for asymmetric approaches, as Clausewitz relates how a “military genius” has a calm and “inquiring mind”<sup>71</sup> with a “comprehensive approach rather than a specialized approach.”

To remain relevant, our professional military education system and officer corps need to begin in earnest to identify and adapt the attributes and methods required to ensure strategic leader readiness to counter, deter, or defeat operational and strategic asymmetric threats and war. We should strive to produce more “military geniuses” among our strategic leaders by helping them to become more mentally adaptable and ready to proactively respond to emerging threats. In doing so, we need to ensure that our strategic leaders can demonstrate the new ways of thinking about conflict by identifying and adapting the procedures and processes that make sense in preparing for asymmetric warfare, and then educating the entire force in how to use them.<sup>72</sup>

Strategic leaders can best prepare for the uncertainty posed by asymmetric threats by ensuring that they “maximize [their] conceptual and organizational adaptability and flexibility.”<sup>73</sup> Only then can strategic leaders respond to the calls by President Bush and Secretary Rumsfeld to “think differently” by inculcating a conceptual framework that allows for more proactive preparation to counter asymmetric threats.



The questions and criticisms directed toward General Tommy Franks about whether he was too “conventional” to lead an asymmetric war have been appropriately muted. He has demonstrated his ability to master and succeed in an increasingly complex and uncertain asymmetric warfare by nurturing and valuing the same innovation and creativity deemed so important by Clausewitz and Sun Tzu. However, the fact that the early criticisms were even raised should give us pause for concern. It suggests it is time to respond to calls by our civilian leadership for senior military officers to develop a greater openness to and consideration of this new type of threat, along with developing new ways of thinking as our military force transforms around us.

An adaptive, “transforming” force is by nature a changing force. Fortunately, we have Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, two great military strategists and philosophers, to help guide that openness to change, while providing direction and relevance to our preparation for asymmetric war and the transformation of the “American Way of War” currently under way.

#### NOTES

The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of Dr. Richard Yarger, US Army War College, for his many insights and suggestions on an earlier version of this article.

1. Donald Rumsfeld, speech at National Defense University, Washington, D.C., 31 January 2002, <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2002/s20020131-secdef.html>. Hereinafter, Rumsfeld speech.

2. Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld has indicated that he does not like the use of the phrase “asymmetrical threat,” but also acknowledges that he does not know of an alternative. See Thom Shanker, “Rumsfeld’s Search for a Way to Fight a New Type of Foe,” *The New York Times*, 4 September 2002, p. 1.

3. Elaine Grossman, “Is the U.S. Military Ready to Take on a Non-Conventional Terror Threat?” *Inside the Pentagon*, 18 October 2001, p. 12.

4. Rumsfeld speech.

5. Thomas E. Ricks and Vernon Loeb, “Afghan War Faltering, Military Leader Says: Myers Cites Al Qaeda’s Ability to Adapt,” *The Washington Post*, 8 November 2002, p. 1.

6. *Joint Vision 2020* (JV 2020) identifies the concerns raised by asymmetric approaches to warfare: “In the face of such strong [US] capabilities, the appeal of asymmetric approaches and the focus on the development of niche capabilities will increase. By developing and using approaches that avoid US strengths and exploit potential vulnerabilities using significantly different methods of operation, adversaries will attempt to create conditions that effectively delay, deter, or counter the application of US military capabilities. The potential of such asymmetric approaches is perhaps the most serious danger the United States faces in the immediate future.” Director for Strategic Plans and Policy, J5, Strategy Division, *Joint Vision 2020* (Washington: GPO, June 2000) p. 6.

7. Well-being initiatives also reflect the importance of “the human dimension [that] cannot be ignored; it’s our greatest strength.” Non-attribution comment.

8. Michael I. Handel, *Sun Tzu and Clausewitz: The Art of War and On War Compared* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1991). Handel’s comparative analysis provides the basis for the identification of the mental readiness and leadership attributes deemed most relevant to preparing for asymmetric warfare. As Handel notes, “The insights of Sun Tzu and Clausewitz identify the immutable ‘human’ dimensions of warfare so essential for victory” (p. iii). The identification and use of these “human dimensions” form the basis for the strategic leader mental readiness and psychological attributes needed for success in an asymmetric war.

9. Steven Metz and Douglas V. Johnson II, *Asymmetry and U.S. Military Strategy: Definition, Background, and Strategic Concepts* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, January 2001), p. 35.

10. Of course the issue is not so much “conventional” in the warrior sense, but rather being a “conventional thinker.” One of the major reasons for the disintegration of two regiments of the 106th Infantry Division in December 1944 was attributed to how “conventional thinking dulled imagination and silenced argument”



among the leadership. Gay Hammerway, "Losing Battles: The Experience of the Combat Soldier," in *Understanding Defeat*, ed. Trevor Dupuy (New York: Paragon, 1990), pp. 25-48.

11. These concerns are reminiscent of the early days of the Vietnam War, when strategic leaders reluctantly came to realize the need to alter "conventional war" thinking and doctrine to fight a war marked by insurgency. For many in the Army, there was "scant difference between limited war and insurgency." In the end, the Army was told to alter radically its method of operation to develop a counterinsurgency capability. Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), p. 37.

12. Melissa Applegate, *Preparing for Asymmetry: As Seen Through the Lens of Joint Vision 2020* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, September 2001), p. 2.

13. See, e.g., Joint Staff, Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations* (Washington: Joint Staff, 1 February 1995), p. III-10. It is also important to note that a frequent criticism leveled against our military is that it is too focused on countering the conventional, symmetrical threats and consequently retains an unwieldy organizational structure to effectively counter asymmetrical threats.

14. Kathleen Mahoney-Harris, "Huntington Revisited: Is Conservative Realism Still Essential for the Military Ethic?" *Essays 2001* (Washington: National Defense Univ. Press), p. 45.

15. Robert D. Novak, "Thinking Inside the Box," *The Washington Post*, 12 November 2001, sec. A, p. 25. This article directly questioned whether a strategic leader trained and experienced in fighting conventional wars "can adjust to the demands of unconventional war."

16. Thomas E. Ricks and Vernon Loeb, "U.S. Commander Shuns Spotlight: Franks Criticized on Pace of War," *The Washington Post*, 9 November 2001, sec. 1A.

17. Ralph Peters, "The New Warrior Class," *Parameters*, 24 (Summer 1994), 16-26.

18. See, e.g., Thomas E. Ricks, "Bush Backs Overhaul of Military's Top Ranks," *The Washington Post*, 11 April 2002, p. 1. Ricks indicates that Rumsfeld selected generals who were "unconventional thinkers who are likely to be supportive of his drive to transform the military to better address terrorism and other new challenges," as well as officers who dare to be different.

19. Transformation is the third priority (behind the global war on terror and optimizing intelligence) on Secretary Rumsfeld's top-ten list of priorities. In his view, now is the time to "change the way we operate . . . [and] we must accelerate our organizational, operational, business, and process reforms." Daniel G. Dupont, "Rumsfeld Encourages Legislative Changes, Outlines DoD Priorities," *Inside the Pentagon*, 26 September 2002.

20. Robert B. Killebrew, "Toward an Adaptive Army," *Army*, January 2002, pp. 21-26.

21. Report of the National Defense Panel, *Transforming Defense: National Security in the 21st Century* (Washington: GPO, December 1997). This report focuses on the long-term issues facing US defense and national security. It calls for fundamental change in US national security institutions, national military strategy, and defense posture by 2020. The report proposes a way for the United States to maintain its "asymmetric advantage" by remaining open to advances in technology, exploiting opportunities to solve the challenges that are emerging. It also notes how "service specific innovation is a key component of the military's transformation strategy" (p. 69), implying the need for both a mental readiness for innovation and an openness to implement the needed changes.

22. This raises two important issues. First, asymmetric adversaries have three inherent advantages: Time, will (will of the people, resolve), and the power of the defensive. On the other hand, there is also some concern and evidence that information technology may not simplify the wartime decisionmaking process but in fact makes decisionmaking more complex. Even so, potential adversaries seem unwilling to take the chance and are reportedly placing increased emphasis on information warfare and information operations to counter the United States. (Robert H. Scales, Jr., *Future Warfare Anthology* [rev. ed.; Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2001], pp. 56-60.)

23. Robert H. Scales, Jr., "Clashes of Visions: Sizing and Shaping Our Forces in a Fiscally Constrained Environment," in Scales, *Future Warfare Anthology*, pp. 117-18. Scales suggests that technology will soon become available to adversaries so that information dominance will no longer be enough. We will need the ability to "act on what you know, to put speed into the equation so that you can exploit 'information dominance.'" The speed with which one processes and acts on the information allows for a "decision in times and orders of magnitude quicker than our ability to conduct campaigns today . . . to exploit what we already know." Thus, information dominance and mental agility must allow for "speed to balance knowledge."

24. The battle in Ia Drang Valley during the Vietnam War offers an interesting example of how a strategic leader, then-Lieutenant Colonel Hal Moore, Jr., processed the available information of what was (and what was not) happening and then determined in what way and how to influence the action. See, e.g., Gordon R. Sullivan and Michael V. Harper, *Hope is Not a Method: What Business Leaders Can Learn from America's Army* (New York: Random House, 1996), pp. 46-47.

25. Rumsfeld speech.

26. Ibid.

27. John H. Poole, *Phantom Soldier: The Enemy's Answer to U.S. Firepower* (Emerald Isle, N.C.: Posterity Press, 2001). One reason that Poole may emphasize and view Sun Tzu as more relevant than Clausewitz may be because his book is based in large part on ancient Chinese writings that historically have emphasized asymmetric approaches.

28. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Strategy Review 1999* (Washington: Joint Staff, 1999), p. 2.

29. Metz and Johnson, pp. 36-42. Dimensions of asymmetry are also identified. "Positive asymmetry" entails using differences to gain an advantage, while "negative asymmetry" is a difference an opponent might use to exploit a weakness or vulnerability. Asymmetry can also be long-term or short-term, deliberate or by default, low vs. high risk, discrete or integrated, material or psychological. In addition, Metz and Johnson identify six forms of asymmetry as relevant: method, technology, will, morale, organization, and patience.

30. "Simultaneous revolutions in military affairs, technology, and information, and a reordering of the international system, have shattered traditional boundaries, merging the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war into a single, integrated universe in which action at the bottom often has instant and dramatic impact at all levels. Never in history have so many strategic burdens confronted the entire chain of command." Richard A. Chilcoat, *Strategic Art: The New Discipline for 21st Century Leaders* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, 1995), pp. 1-2.

31. *Joint Vision 2020*, p. 19.

32. Jeffrey D. McCausland and Gregg F. Martin, "Transforming Strategic Leader Education for the 21st-Century Army," *Parameters*, 31 (Autumn 2001), 17-33.

33. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Warfare of the Armed Forces of the United States*, Joint Publication 1 (Washington: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 14 November 2000), p. x.

34. See, e.g., William M. Steele and Robert P. Walters, Jr., "21st Century Leadership Competencies," *Army*, August 2001, p. 29.

35. David R. Gray, "New Age Military Progressives: U.S. Army Officer Professionalism in the Information Age," in *Army Transformation: A View from the U.S. Army War College*, ed. Williamson Murray (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2001), p. 41. Gray shares an important and timely observation of how in several conflicts, an opponent's will or "human factors" played a more significant role than technological superiority. See also, William R. Strosnider, "Deception and the Future Battlefield—Information Superiority at Risk," Strategy Research Project, US Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., 9 April 2002.

36. Williamson Murray, "Thinking About Innovation," *Naval War College Review*, 54 (Spring 2001), 122, <http://www.nwc.navy.mil/press/Review/2001/Spring/art9-sp1.pdf>.

37. William M. Arkin, "A New Mindset for Warfare," 22 September 2001, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A8672-2001Sep22>.

38. Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971) pp. 66-67, see also pp. 92-93.

39. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), p. 136.

40. See, e.g., S. L. A. Marshall, *Men Against Fire: The Problem of Battle Command in Future War* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1978), p. 102. Marshall points out a perhaps timeless axiom that a commander's "state of mind . . . creates its own illusion, fostering the conclusion that under the new system of war all matters can . . . be settled at a distance . . . [and] all moral values which once attended the commander's effort to impress his men with his personality and character are somehow sundered by the new technology of operations." Joint Publication 3-0, *Doctrine for Joint Operations*, also emphasizes the importance of maintaining situational awareness (see, e.g., pp. III-12, III-13, and III-26).

41. Sun Tzu, pp. 87-88.

42. Jon Latimer, *Deception in War* (New York: Overlook Press, 2001), p. 3.

43. Clausewitz, p. 119.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 107. Clausewitz's observation is borne out in the psychological literature. Individuals with good judgment and character reveal an ability to think effectively over time and in a wide variety of situations while their emotions are raging. See, e.g., S. Leonard, "The Many Faces of Character," in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 49 (1997), p. 242.

45. Walter F. Ulmer, Jr., "Military Leadership into the 21st Century: Another 'Bridge Too Far'?" *Parameters*, 28 (Spring 1998), 4-25. General Ulmer also points out how personality testing of general officers reveals they have a fairly high need for control, tendencies toward dominance in their interpersonal interactions, greater comfort with data than intuition, and a high "achievement through conformity orientation." Ulmer points out that while these attributes help contribute to effectiveness at the tactical level, they may lead to dysfunction at the strategic level.

46. Sun Tzu, pp. 65-67.

47. Clausewitz, pp. 101-02.

48. Ibid., p. 102.
49. Anthony Zinni, cited in US Army War College, Department of Distance Education, Course 9, *Military Operations Other Than War and Conflict Termination*, Lesson 2, *Military Operations Other Than War (MOOTW) and Urban Operations* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, 2002), p. xi. However, it is also interesting to note the plight of Colonel Douglas Macgregor as one such innovative and strategic thinker who has recently been in the news. See, e.g., Thomas E. Ricks, "A Test Case for Bush's Military Reform Pledge?" *The Washington Post*, 20 February 2002, p. A13.
50. Christopher Bassford, "Clausewitz and His Works," in US Army War College, Department of Distance Education, Course 2, *Theory and Nature of War* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, 1996, rev. January 2000), p. 30, also on-line at <http://www.clausewitz.com/CWZHOME/CWZSUMM/CWORKHOL.htm>.
51. Clausewitz, p. 117.
52. Michael Herman, *Intelligence in Peace and War* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1966).
53. Handel, p. 40.
54. Montgomery C. Meigs, "Operational Art in the New Century," *Parameters*, 31 (Spring 2001), 4-14.
55. Metz and Johnson, pp. 52-53.
56. Ibid., p. 53.
57. Meigs, p. 6, provides two examples. The first was taken from Hans Delbruck's *The Dawn of Modern Warfare* and pertains to Gustavus Adolphus, who was described "as a hero in battle, not only because of his decisions but his acts. He was careful in his deliberations, prompt in his decisions, undaunted in heart and spirit, strong of arm, ready to both command and fight." The second was taken from John Keegan's *The Mask of Command* and describes U.S. Grant as someone who "confined himself to practicalities: carrying the war into the enemy's heartland, making its people bear the real burdens of the conflict they had brought on the republic and meanwhile sustaining the spirits of an army of electors," demonstrating what Meigs describes as a "rare and essential blend of operational instinct for what would work, the strength to press on through uncertainty." Asymmetry may demand both.
58. Clausewitz, p. 112.
59. This represents an area where Clausewitz's focus on developing a comprehensive theory of war lends guidance to developing insight into asymmetric threats. Clausewitz called for studying past wars to build one's theory of war that would then allow one to apply that theory as an "aid to judgment." However, it was never intended to replace that needed judgment. In the same manner, asymmetric threats must now be studied in earnest as a "continuous and reciprocal . . . activity that is focused more on future probabilities, illuminated and informed by past successes of adversaries." It is this active study that can then serve as a proactive guide to empower and aid judgment in how to counter these oft-times ambiguous and uncertain threats. See, e.g., Michael Howard, *Clausewitz* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1983), p. 30.
60. Clausewitz, p. 108.
61. Ulmer, pp. 4-25.
62. Marshall, p. 181.
63. Department of the Army, *Operations*, Field Manual (FM) 100-5 (Washington: US Department of Army, May 1986), pp. 179-80. The 1993 version of FM 100-5 is surprisingly quiet on this issue, relegating even the concept of a center of gravity to a small, almost inconsequential paragraph while largely ignoring the importance of understanding one's opponent.
64. Department of the Army, *Decisive Force: The Army in Theater Operations*, Field Manual 100-7 (Washington: US Department of Army, May 1995), p. 3-1.
65. Polybius, *The Rise of the Roman Empire* (London: Penguin Press, 1979), III, 81, 248.
66. Ibid., p. 118.
67. James D. D. Smith, in his book, *Stopping Wars: Defining the Obstacles to Cease-Fire* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1995), p. 74, discusses the psychological concept of "cognitive dissonance," wherein the "individuals seek justification for their behavior, and evidence that contradicts their justification tends to be ignored." Therefore, if a strategic leader discounts asymmetric threats, that may reveal a tendency to ignore evidence that contradicts his view.
68. Clausewitz, p. 92.
69. Ibid., pp. 77-78.
70. Applegate, p. 6. This also argues for a "broader and deeper insight into the motivations, perceptions, objectives, and vulnerabilities of our asymmetric adversaries . . . to master the asymmetric domain."
71. A point that was also raised in the article by Joseph F. Coates, "How to Think Like a Futurist," in US Army War College, Department of Distance Education, Course 10, *Strategic Challenges for the 21st Century*, Lesson 1, *Future World Order* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, 2001), pp. 2-7.
72. Ibid., p. 7.
73. Ibid., p. 46.