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Ralph Peters

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In Praise of Attrition

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"Who dares to call the child by its true name?"

—Goethe, *Faust*

In our military, the danger of accepting the traditional wisdom has become part of the traditional wisdom. Despite our lip service to creativity and innovation, we rarely pause to question fundamentals. Partly, of course, this is because officers in today's Army or Marine Corps operate at a wartime tempo, with little leisure for reflection. Yet, even more fundamentally, deep prejudices have crept into our military—as well as into the civilian world— that obscure elementary truths.

There is no better example of our unthinking embrace of an error than our rejection of the term "war of attrition." The belief that attrition, as an objective or a result, is inherently negative is simply wrong. A soldier's job is to kill the enemy. All else, however important it may appear at the moment, is secondary. And to kill the enemy is to attrit the enemy. All wars in which bullets—or arrows—fly are wars of attrition.

Of course, the term "war of attrition" conjures the unimaginative slaughter of the Western Front, with massive casualties on both sides. Last year, when journalists wanted to denigrate our military's occupation efforts in Iraq, the term bubbled up again and again. The notion that killing even the enemy is a bad thing in war has been exacerbated by the defense industry's claims, seconded by glib military careerists, that precision weapons and technology in general had irrevocably changed the nature of warfare. But the nature of warfare never changes—only its superficial manifestations.

The US Army also did great harm to its own intellectual and practical grasp of war by trolling for theories, especially in the 1980s. Theories don't win wars. Well-trained, well-led soldiers in well-equipped armies do. And they do so by killing effectively. Yet we heard a great deal of nonsense about "maneuver warfare" as the solution to all our woes, from our numerical disadvantage vis-à-vis the Warsaw Pact to our knowledge that the "active defense" on the old inner-German border was political tomfoolery and a military sham—and,

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Ralph Peters is a retired Army officer and the author of 19 books, as well as of hundreds of essays and articles, written both under his own name and as Owen Parry. He has experience, military or civilian, in 60 countries, and is a frequent contributor to *Parameters.*

frankly, the best an Army gutted by Vietnam and its long hangover could hope to do.

Maneuver is not a solution unto itself, any more than technology is. It exists in an ever-readjusting balance with fires. Neither fires nor maneuver can be dispensed with. This sounds obvious, but that which is obvious is not always that which is valued or pursued. Those who would be theorists always prefer the arcane to the actual.

Precious few military campaigns have been won by maneuver alone—at least not since the Renaissance and the days of chessboard battles between corporate condottieri. Napoleon's Ulm campaign, the Japanese march on Singapore, and a few others make up the short list of "bloodless" victories.

Even campaigns that appear to be triumphs of maneuver prove, on closer inspection, to have been successful because of a dynamic combination of fire and maneuver. The opening, conventional phase of the Franco-Prussian War, culminating in the grand envelopment at Sedan, is often cited as an example of brilliant maneuver at the operational level—yet the road to Paris was paved with more German than French corpses. It was a bloody war that happened to be fought on the move. Other campaigns whose success was built on audacious maneuvers nonetheless required attrition battles along the way or at their climax, from Moltke's brilliant concentration on multiple axes at Koenigsgraetz (urgent marches to a gory day), to the German blitzkrieg efforts against the Poles, French, and Russians, and on to Operation Desert Storm, in which daring operational maneuvers positioned tactical firepower for a series of short, convincingly sharp engagements. Even the Inchon landing, one of the two or three most daring operations led by an American field commander, failed to bring the Korean War to a conclusion.

More often than not, an overreliance on bold operational maneuvers to win a swift campaign led to disappointment, even disaster. One may argue for centuries about the diversion of a half dozen German divisions from the right flank of the Schlieffen Plan in 1914, but the attempt to win the war in one swift sweep led to more than four years of stalemate on the Western Front. In the same campaign season, Russian attempts at grand maneuver in the vicinity of the Masurian lakes collapsed in the face of counter-maneuvers and sharp encounter battles—a German active defense that drew on Napoleon's "strategy of the central position"—while, in Galicia, aggressive maneuvering proved to be exactly the wrong approach for the Austro-Hungarian military—which was ill-prepared for encounter battles.

There is no substitute for shedding the enemy's blood.

Despite initial maneuver victories against Russia and in the Western Desert, a German overreliance on maneuver as a substitute for adequate firepower ultimately led to the destruction of Nazi armies. Time and again, from Lee's disastrous Gettysburg campaign to the race to the Yalu in Korea, overconfidence in an army's capabilities to continue to assert its power during grand maneuvers led to stunning reverses. The results were not merely a matter of Clausewitzian culminating points, but of fundamentally flawed strategies.

Operation Iraqi Freedom, one of the most successful military campaigns in history, was intended to be a new kind of war of maneuver, in which aerial weapons would "shock and awe" a humbled opponent into surrender while ground forces did a little light dusting in the house of war. But instead of being decided by maneuvered technologies, the three-week war was fought and won—triumphantly—by soldiers and marines employing both aggressive operational maneuvers and devastating tactical firepower.

The point is not that maneuver is the stepbrother of firepower, but that there is no single answer to the battlefield, no formula. The commander's age-old need to balance incisive movements with the application of weaponry is unlikely to change even well beyond our lifetimes. It's not an either-or matter, but about getting the integration right in each specific case.

Although no two campaigns are identical, the closest we can come to an American superpower model of war would be this: strategic maneuver, then operational maneuver to deliver fires, then tactical fires to enable further maneuver. Increasingly, strategic fires play a role—although they do not win wars or decide them. Of course, no battlefield is ever quite so simple as this proposition, but any force that loses its elementary focus on killing the enemy swiftly and relentlessly until that enemy surrenders unconditionally cripples itself.

Far from entering an age of maneuver, we have entered a new age of attrition warfare in two kinds: First, the war against religious terrorism is unquestionably a war of attrition—if one of your enemies is left alive or unimprisoned, he will continue trying to kill you and destroy your civilization. Second, Operation Iraqi Freedom, for all its dashing maneuvers, provided a new example of a postmodern war of attrition—one in which the casualties are overwhelmingly on one side.

Nothing says that wars of attrition have to be fair.

It's essential to purge our minds of the clichéd images the term "war of attrition" evokes. Certainly, we do not and will not seek wars in which vast casualties are equally distributed between our own forces and the enemy's. But a one-sided war of attrition, enabled by our broad range of superior capabilities, is a strong model for a 21st-century American way of war.

No model is consistently applicable. That is—or should be—a given. Wars create exceptions, to the eternal chagrin of military commanders and the consistent embarrassment of theorists. One of our greatest national and military strengths is our adaptability. Unlike many other cultures, we have an almost-primal aversion to wearing the straitjacket of theory, and our independence of mind serves us very well, indeed. But the theorists are always there, like devils whispering in our ears, telling us that airpower will win this war, or that satellite "intelligence" obviates the need for human effort, or that a mortal enemy will be persuaded to surrender by a sound-and-light show.

Precision weapons unquestionably have value, but they are expensive and do not cause adequate destruction to impress a hardened enemy. The first time a guided bomb hits the deputy's desk, it will get his chief's attention, but

if precision weaponry fails both to annihilate the enemy's leadership and to somehow convince the army and population it has been defeated, it leaves the job to the soldier once again. Those who live in the technological clouds simply do not grasp the importance of graphic, extensive destruction in convincing an opponent of his defeat.

Focus on killing the enemy. With fires. With maneuver. With sticks and stones and polyunsaturated fats. In a disciplined military, aggressive leaders and troops can always be restrained. But it's difficult to persuade leaders schooled in caution that their mission is not to keep an entire corps' tanks on line, but to rip the enemy's heart out. We have made great progress from the ballet of Desert Storm—"spoiled" only by then-Major General Barry McCaffrey's insistence on breaking out of the chorus line and kicking the enemy instead of thin air—to the close-with-the-enemy spirit of last year's race to Baghdad.

In the bitter years after Vietnam, when our national leaders succumbed to the myth that the American people would not tolerate casualties, elements within our military—although certainly not everyone—grew morally and practically timid. By the mid-1990s, the US Army's informal motto appeared to be "We won't fight, and you can't make us."

There were obvious reasons for this. Our military—especially the Army and Marine Corps—felt betrayed by our national leadership over Vietnam. Then President Reagan evacuated Beirut shortly after the bombing of our Marine barracks on the city's outskirts—beginning a long series of bipartisan retreats in the face of terror that ultimately led to 9/11. We hit a low point in Mogadishu, when Army Rangers, Special Operations elements, and line troops delivered a devastating blow against General Aideed's irregulars—only to have President Clinton declare defeat by pulling out. One may argue about the rationale for our presence in Somalia and about the dangers of mission creep, but once we're in a fight, we need to win it—and remain on the battlefield long enough to convince our enemies they've lost on every count.

Things began to change less than two weeks into our campaign in Afghanistan. At first, there was caution—would the new President run as soon as we suffered casualties? Then, as it dawned on our commanders that the Administration would stand behind our forces, we saw one of the most innovative campaigns in military history unfold with stunning speed.

Our military, and especially our Army, has come a long way. But we're still in recovery—almost through our Cold War hangover, but still too vulnerable to the nonsense concocted by desk-bound theoreticians. Evaluating lessons learned in Iraq, a recent draft study for a major joint command spoke of the need for "discourses" between commanders at various levels and their staffs.

Trust me. We don't need discourses. We need plain talk, honest answers, and the will to close with the enemy and kill him. And to keep on killing him until it is unmistakably clear to the entire world who won. When military officers start speaking in academic gobbledygook, it means they have nothing to contribute to the effectiveness of our forces. They badly need an assignment to Fallujah.

Consider our enemies in the War on Terror. Men who believe, literally, that they are on a mission from God to destroy your civilization and who regard death as a promotion are not impressed by elegant maneuvers. You must find them, no matter how long it takes, then kill them. If they surrender, you must accord them their rights under the laws of war and international conventions. But, as we have learned so painfully from all the mindless, left-wing nonsense spouted about the prisoners at Guantanamo, you are much better off killing them before they have a chance to surrender.

We have heard no end of blather about network-centric warfare, to the great profit of defense contractors. If you want to see a superb—and cheap—example of "net-war," look at al Qaeda. The mere possession of technology does not ensure that it will be used effectively. And effectiveness is what matters.

It isn't a question of whether or not we want to fight a war of attrition against religion-fueled terrorists. We're in a war of attrition with them. We have no realistic choice. Indeed, our enemies are, in some respects, better suited to both global and local wars of maneuver than we are. They have a world in which to hide, and the world is full of targets for them. They do not heed laws or boundaries. They make and observe no treaties. They do not expect the approval of the United Nations Security Council. They do not face election cycles. And their weapons are largely provided by our own societies.

We have the technical capabilities to deploy globally, but, for now, we are forced to watch as Pakistani forces fumble efforts to surround and destroy concentrations of terrorists; we cannot enter any country (except, temporarily, Iraq) without the permission of its government. We have many tools—military, diplomatic, economic, cultural, law enforcement, and so on—but we have less freedom of maneuver than our enemies.

But we do have superior killing power, once our enemies have been located. Ultimately, the key advantage of a superpower is super power. Faced with implacable enemies who would kill every man, woman, and child in our country and call the killing good (the ultimate war of attrition), we must be willing to use that power wisely, but remorselessly.

We are, militarily and nationally, in a transition phase. Even after 9/11, we do not fully appreciate the cruelty and determination of our enemies. We will learn our lesson, painfully, because the terrorists will not quit. The only solution is to kill them and keep on killing them: a war of attrition. But a war of attrition fought on our terms, not theirs.

Of course, we shall hear no end of fatuous arguments to the effect that we can't kill our way out of the problem. Well, until a better methodology is discovered, killing every terrorist we can find is a good interim solution. The truth is that even if you can't kill yourself out of the problem, you can make the problem a great deal smaller by effective targeting.

And we shall hear that killing terrorists only creates more terrorists. This is sophomoric nonsense. The surest way to swell the ranks of terror is to follow the approach we did in the decade before 9/11 and do nothing of substance. Success breeds success. Everybody loves a winner. The clichés

exist because they're true. Al Qaeda and related terrorist groups metastasized because they were viewed in the Muslim world as standing up to the West successfully and handing the Great Satan America embarrassing defeats with impunity. Some fanatics will flock to the standard of terror, no matter what we do. But it's far easier for Islamic societies to purge themselves of terrorists if the terrorists are on the losing end of the global struggle than if they're allowed to become triumphant heroes to every jobless, unstable teenager in the Middle East and beyond.

Far worse than fighting such a war of attrition aggressively is to pretend you're not in one while your enemy keeps on killing you.

Even the occupation of Iraq is a war of attrition. We're doing remarkably well, given the restrictions under which our forces operate. But no grand maneuvers, no gestures of humanity, no offers of conciliation, and no compromises will persuade the terrorists to halt their efforts to disrupt the development of a democratic, rule-of-law Iraq. On the contrary, anything less than relentless pursuit, with both preemptive and retaliatory action, only encourages the terrorists and remaining Baathist gangsters.

With hardcore terrorists, it's not about PSYOP or jobs or deploying dental teams. It's about killing them. Even regarding the general population, which benefits from our reconstruction and development efforts, the best thing we can do for them is to kill terrorists and insurgents. Until the people of Iraq are secure, they are not truly free. The terrorists know that. We pretend otherwise.

This will be a long war, stretching beyond many of our lifetimes. And it will be a long war of attrition. We must ensure that the casualties are always disproportionately on the other side.

Curiously, while our military avoids a "body count" in Iraq—body counts have at least as bad a name as wars of attrition—the media insist on one. Sad to say, the body count cherished by the media is the number of our own troops dead and wounded. With our over-caution, we have allowed the media to create a perception that the losses are consistently on our side. By avoiding an enemy body count, we create an impression of our own defeat.

In a war of attrition, numbers matter.

Regarding the other postmodern form of wars of attrition—the high-velocity conventional operations in which maneuver and firepower, speed and violent systemic shock, combine to devastate an opposing force—the Army and Marine Corps need to embrace it, instead of allowing the technical services, the Air Force and Navy, to define the future of war (which the Air Force, especially, is defining wrongly). We will not live to see a magical suite of technologies achieve meaningful victories at no cost in human life. We need to oppose that massive lie at every opportunity. The 21st century's opening decades, at least, will be dominated by the up-gunned Cain-and-Abel warfare we have seen from Manhattan to Bali, from Afghanistan's Shamali Plain to Nasiriyeh, from Fallujah to Madrid.

The problem is that the Department of Defense combines two fundamentally different breeds of military services. In the Air Force and the Navy,

people support machines. In the Army and Marine Corps, machines support people. While expensive technologies can have great utility—and Air Force and Navy assets made notable contributions to the Army-Marine victory in Operation Iraqi Freedom—the technical services have a profoundly diminished utility in the extended range of operations we are required to perform, from urban raids to extended occupations, from foot patrols in remote environments to peacemaking.

The Navy is struggling hard with these issues, but the Air Force is the strongest opponent of admitting that we face wars of attrition, since it has invested overwhelmingly in precision weapons designed to win a war by "deconstructing" the enemy's command networks. But the only way you can decisively cripple the command networks of terrorist organizations is by killing terrorists. Even in Operation Iraqi Freedom, airpower made an invaluable contribution, but attacking military and governmental infrastructure targets proved no substitute for destroying enemy forces. When, in mid-war, the focus of the air effort shifted from trying to persuade Saddam Hussein to wave a white handkerchief (which he had no incentive to do) to destroying Iraqi military equipment and killing enemy troops, the utility of airpower soared.

It cannot be repeated often enough: Whatever else you aim to do in wartime, never lose your focus on killing the enemy.

A number of the problems we have faced in the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom arose because we tried to moderate the amount of destruction we inflicted on the Iraqi military. The only result was the rise of an Iraqi Dolchstosslegende, the notion that they weren't really defeated, but betrayed. Combined with insufficient numbers of Coalition troops to blanket the country—especially the Sunni triangle—in the weeks immediately following the toppling of the regime, crucial portions of the population never really felt America's power.

It is not enough to materially defeat your enemy. You must convince your enemy that he has been defeated. You cannot do that by bombing empty buildings. You must be willing to kill in the short term to save lives and foster peace in the long term.

This essay does not suppose that warfare is simple: "Just go out and kill 'em." Of course, incisive attacks on command networks and control capabilities, well-considered psychological operations, and humane treatment of civilians and prisoners matter profoundly, along with many other complex factors. But at a time when huckster contractors and "experts" who never served in uniform prophesize bloodless wars and sterile victories through technology, it's essential that those who actually must fight our nation's wars not succumb to the facile theories or shimmering vocabulary of those who wish to explain war to our soldiers from comfortable offices.

It is not a matter of whether attrition is good or bad. It's necessary. Only the shedding of their blood defeats resolute enemies. Especially in our struggle with God-obsessed terrorists—the most implacable enemies our nation has ever faced—there is no economical solution. Unquestionably, our long-term

strategy must include a wide range of efforts to do what we, as outsiders, can to address the environmental conditions in which terrorism arises and thrives (often disappointingly little—it's a self-help world). But, for now, all we can do is to impress our enemies, our allies, and all the populations in between that we are winning and will continue to win.

The only way to do that is through killing.

The fifth edition of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines to "attrit" as to "wear down in quality or quantity by military attrition." That sounds like the next several years, at least, of the War on Terror. The same dictionary defines "attrition" as "the gradual wearing down of an enemy's forces in sustained warfare." Indeed, that is exactly what we shall have to do against religious terrorists. There is no magic maneuver waiting to be plotted on a map. While sharp tactical movements that bring firepower to bear will bring us important successes along the way, this war is going to be a long, hard slog.

The new trenches are ideological and civilizational, involving the most fundamental differences human beings can have—those over the intentions of God and the roles of men and women. In the short term, we shall have to wear down the enemy's forces; in the longer term, we shall have to wear down the appeal of his ideas. Our military wars of attrition in the 21st century will be only one aspect of a vast metaphysical war of attrition, in which the differences between the sides are so profound they prohibit compromise.

As a result of our recent wars and lesser operations, we have the best-trained, best-led, best-equipped, and most experienced ground forces in the world in our Army and Marine Corps. Potential competitors and even most of our traditional allies have only the knowledge of the classroom and the training range, while we have experience of war and related operations unparalleled in our time. We have the most impressive military establishment, overall, in military history.

Now, if only we could steel ourselves to think clearly and speak plainly: There is no shame in calling reality by its proper name. We are fighting, and will fight, wars of attrition. And we are going to win them.