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What is Doctrine?

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ABSTRACT ‘Doctrine’ has been part of military vernacular for at least a century. Nonetheless, it is a concept which is rather under-explored. The aim of this article is thus to break doctrine down into its component parts in order to grasp what a military doctrine actually is. Thereafter, the article points out different ways to utilise doctrine as a military devise. A doctrine cannot be, or rather should not be, all things to all men. On the contrary, doctrine can be a tool of command, tool of education or a tool of change. The main upshot of the article is that the future of doctrine is far brighter than its critics want us to believe.

KEY WORDS: Military Doctrine, Applied Philosophy, History of Military Ideas

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) defines doctrine as ‘fundamental principles by which the military forces guide their actions in support of objectives. It is authoritative but requires judgment in application.’1 To modern ears this may sound a bit arcane. What on earth can some solemnly endorsed principles do for military forces that have a virtually endless scope of missions? What can be said, apart from generalities and banalities that address all soldiers in all possible situations? The task of the doctrinaires seems both insurmountable and inadvisable: ‘there is no such thing as a doctrine of war and [if] there were such a thing it would be bad’.2

There are ample warnings of a similar sort around: ‘Knowing the enemy is the bedrock of the business of strategy: strategic theories, in comparison, are second order problems. To concentrate on doctrine before enemies is to put the theoretical cart before the actual horse – a double error.’3 In other words; to write a generic doctrine, for all kinds of operations, in all kinds of coalitions, and against all kind of enemies, is a waste of time, in the best of circumstances.

1AAP-6 NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions.
3Ken Booth, Strategy and Ethnocentrism (New York: Holmes & Meier 1979), 16.
What is more, doctrine is particularly bad in the type of operations that have concerned us the most recently, namely counter-insurgency (COIN). To succeed in COIN you have to delegate and decentralise, and leave the most important decision-making to mid-ranking officers in the field. And according to Markus Mäder, the ‘general perception of traditional COIN advocates within the [British] Army, [is] that doctrine would jeopardise these very qualities’. The political and cultural complexities of COIN operations require officers which are able to play it by ear, in the sense that they pay greater attention to the situation at hand than to some generic prose written by a typing pool far from the hot spot.

Consequently, doctrine seems to be a relic of the past. It once made perfect sense, perhaps, and was an apt solution to recurring questions, as for instance how to fight the same kind of war over and over again, but not any more, not when we have to fight new enemies in exceedingly changing circumstances. To echo the opening question: What can doctrine offer armed forces that have their units ‘scattered from Malta to Peshawar, from the Curragh to the Cape’?

Before we sign and issue doctrine’s death certificate, however, we ought to know the patient a bit better. It would be a pity to bury a creature still alive. Despite NATO’s definition, ‘doctrine’ is still a rather fluffy concept with various definitions and connotations. So, in order to write doctrine off as a relevant military tool, we have to agree on what doctrine actually is.

La Doctrine

Doctrine’s origin can be traced in different centuries and in different cultures, depending on the preferred definition. If you are not too demanding on behalf of the actual codification of doctrine, you will find doctrines at the root of both the Macedonian phalanx and the Roman legions. However, if you insist on written doctrines, you have to wait until the paper revolution that followed Gutenberg’s invention.

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6‘Scholars and military practitioners approach doctrine largely on the intuitive level, and there is no single approved definition. In practice, definitions follow institutional or personal whim and vary between individuals, services, nationalities and time periods.’ Albert Palazzo, *From Moltke to Bin Laden, The Relevance of Doctrine in the Contemporary Military Environment* (Canberra: Australian Government, Department of Defence, Land Warfare Studies Centre 2008), 6.
Moreover, if you are searching for the fountain of modern doctrines, you have to wait until after the French Revolution.

Quite commonly then, Field Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke is heralded as the first real doctrinarian. According to for instance General Sir Rupert Smith, the elder Moltke was the true inventor of ‘a coherent military doctrine’ and his 1869 Instructions have, in spirit at least, ‘inspired most operation manuals of Western militaries to this day’.7 Albert Palazzo also gives Moltke the mixed blessing of being the inventor of military doctrine.8 However, a case can be made that it was not the Prussians that invented modern military doctrine.

Presumably, during Moltke’s era the word doktrin did not exist in the German military vernacular.9 Despite the fact that you find the word used by Carl von Clausewitz in for instance English and Swedish translations of Vom Kriege, you would presumably search in vain for the word in his original German manuscripts.10 Even the idea of having a template to fight by would be antithetical to the German way of war:

Nothing could be further from the German military mentality than making a fetish out of a word or phrase. No rule of war could be universally valid for all times and places. Kein Schema! Was one of the most common admonitions of the German staff, along with contempt for Patentlösungen.11

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8‘Moltke rationalised the complexities of his age by institutionalising a self-replicant system of interpretation and action that contemporary military professionals would identify as the first articulated doctrine of war.’ Palazzo, From Moltke to Bin Laden, 17.
9‘In fact, the old Prusso-German army had no concept of doctrine in the modern American and Western sense. That army used the term Lehre rather than Doktrin to describe the concepts in its official manuals.’ Daniel J. Hughes, Moltke On the Art of War: Selected Writings (New York: Ballantine Books 1993), 174.
10The closest Clausewitz got to our concept of doctrine was presumably ‘Methodismus’: ‘Officers whom one should not expect to have any greater understanding than regulations and experience can give them have to be helped along by routine methods tantamount to rules [Methodismus]. These will steady their judgment, and also guard them against eccentric and mistaken schemes, which are the greatest menace in a field where experience is so dearly bought.’ Carl von Clausewitz, On War, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton UP 1976), 153. However, as the level of war rises, method’s utility ‘will decrease to the point where, at the summit, it disappears completely. Consequently, it is more appropriate to tactics than to strategy’ (Ibid).
Those on the receiving end of Prussian strategic culture and military professionalism had to do something radical to catch up. Hence, in order to find the roots of modern military doctrine, we have to pay nineteenth-century France a visit.

Military history has seen scores of shattering defeats, whereof France has had a substantial share. Here however, the defeat against Prussia 1870 is the crucial one. If you just look at the numbers and available technology involved, you find little that can explain the French disaster. In fact, that should not come as a surprise because the outcome of modern wars can rarely be explained by numbers and materiel, despite the long traditions of doing exactly that.12 The disaster of 1870 could not even be explained by differences in bravery and individual skills.

Nonetheless, the French understood that the catastrophe of 1870 had revealed something seriously wrong in the French Army. To do better next time, France had thus to do something to its army’s collective ability to fight modern battles. Combat’s mental domain, as well as its physical, had to be investigated. The invincible spirit of war associated with the great Napoleon had to be rekindled in the French forces. They needed something to infuse ‘with life the whole body of an army, without which the most admirable texts and precepts enshrined in regulations are but dead bones and dry dust’.13 Hence they not only needed a new formula for victory, but also something to energise and inflame will power and to foster what later became known as élan vital.

To stand firm in the storm of steel that evolved on the battlefield in the second half of the nineteenth century would take the conviction of a crusader, spurred by the holy gospel, by la doctrine. A doctrine could presumably evoke conviction within the military sphere just as it did within the religious: ‘It is necessary that they [our officers] should understand not only the letter but also the spirit of our regulations, so that they may be certain that these regulations are their most sure guide and one to be followed with sincere conviction and entire faith.’14

In 1903, after more than 20 years maturation, ‘doctrine’ was definitely established by the future Marshal Ferdinand Foch as a distinct military concept, apart from its originally religious

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connotations. After another decade, during the Great War doctrine finally became a household concept in all the great armies.

Worthy of note, however; after the Russian Revolution, there erupted a heated doctrinal debate between Trotsky and some of his military subordinates. To what extent that discussion rested on a Russian or a Marxist tradition, independent of the French discourse, is unfortunately hard to answer without being in command of the Russian language and well versed in the labyrinths of Marxism. Hence, that is a question this author leaves to more gifted investigators.

So far we have had a quick glance at the origins of modern military doctrine. It was a French invention with a double purpose, both explaining how to win the next war and infuse the will to do so. However, we have not said much about what doctrine is.

The Anatomy of Military Doctrine

In order to abstract the essentials of military doctrine, we will take a short detour via the world of sports. The point is not to trivialise war, but that sport is, luckily, a much more familiar arena for most of us.

In team sports there are in principle two ways to make the most of the team. One way is to gather the best players available and position them according to their skills and competence. During the match the players use their judgment and abilities as far as they can in order to take advantage of the opportunities on the pitch, supported by erratic orders from the bench.

The second approach is to base the game on a permanent system and a particular way to play. Players are picked, trained and play each game in accordance with a scheme. This is the doctrinal approach. The aim of this approach is to make the total greater than the sum of the parts, to have the best team without having the best players, so to speak. By providing a conceptual compass and a mental counterweight the team can hopefully also handle more chaos and confusion than they can do without.

A recipe, such as a doctrine, that tells us how to play in order to win has to contain three basic elements. At the outset, it needs some assumptions about what leads to victory. It needs an element of explanation and theory of some sort, because statements backed by reason usually have a persuasiveness that mere opinion lacks.

15'Doctrine will extend itself to the higher side of war, owing to the free development given to your minds by a common manner of seeing, thinking, acting, by which everyone will profit according to the measure of his own gifts; it will nevertheless constitute a discipline of the mind common to you all.' Ferdinand Foch, The Principles of War [1903] (London: Chapman & Hall 1920), 7.
Second, we have to take our own team into consideration. Who are they? What can they actually do? What has driven them to the pitch in the first place? In other words, we have to take cultural elements into consideration.

Finally, the players have to take the scheme seriously in order to give it effect. It has to carry some form of authority in addition to the power of the best argument. The players also have to know something about the nature of its obligations. Do they need to stick to the scheme, come rain come shine, or do they have some conditional leeway?

Doctrine’s three basic elements can be encapsulated in a simple figure (see Figure 1).

In the following we will have a closer look at each of the three corners, and we will also see that the concept of doctrine is often squeezed towards one of them.

Theory

A distinction can be made between ‘prescriptions which belong to practical reasoning and those which logically entail an explanation of a general kind’. In the case of practical reasoning we only need to know whether something works – not why. When it comes to ‘explanation of a general kind’ on the other hand, our belief has to be justified, as we ought to know why ‘a postulated course of action would produce a given result before we can authoritatively recommend it to practitioners’. Consequently, an important function of a doctrine will be to explain why the preferred doctrine is superior to all realistic

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17 Ibid., 185.
alternatives. In other words, doctrine can be portrayed as ‘the best available thought that can be defended by reason’.\(^\text{18}\)

Evidently, war is a particularly hard activity to pin down in prescriptive theory.\(^\text{19}\) War’s reflexivity, complexity and contestability make a mockery out of most attempts to create an infallible recipe for victory. Consequently, exactly what makes an argument convincing varies across different epistemological communities.\(^\text{20}\) The epistemological bedrock of doctrine can in other words vary across a wide spectre of supporting sciences and fields of knowledge, from mathematics to religion, from Marxism to practice theory, to name just a few.

**Culture**

In the other corner of the triangle you find doctrine as a cultural artefact. Culture is also notoriously difficult to define, but in this text culture is merely ‘all that in human society which is socially rather than biologically transmitted’,\(^\text{21}\) and which is a-rational. Culture is not only an alternative to rational argument, but ‘an alternative conception of reason as such, one which spurns utility and abstraction for the feel and flavour of things’.\(^\text{22}\) For instance, I may give ample reasons why I like one type of music or one type of food, but the reasons I give are of a different order to the reasons I give to explain why a stone will sink when thrown into a lake: ‘our cultural allegiances, whether to those of our own group or to others, are not necessarily irrational because they are a-rational’.\(^\text{23}\)

Since little in life is more fuzzy and unmanageable than culture, it tends to cause the dream of doctrine to implode into mere dust and spilled ink:

> It is not enough to write new doctrine, if the purpose is to change the way an army will fight. Ultimately, an army’s behaviour in


\(^{19}\)In this chapter the word ‘war’ is used as it is in ordinary language rather than in a strict legal or political sense. It is not central to the main arguments whether the war is large or small, legal or illegal, etc.

\(^{20}\)Epistemology’ is rather broadly defined in this chapter and denotes ‘the study of our right to the beliefs we have’. Ted Honderich, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: OUP 1995), 245.


\(^{23}\)Ibid., 59.
battle will almost certainly be more a reflection of its character or culture than of the contents of its doctrine manuals. And if that culture – or mindset, if you will – is formed more by experience than by books, then those who would attempt to modify an army’s behaviour need to think beyond doctrine manuals.²⁴

The crucial question for doctrine-makers, is how deep rooted such cultural traits actually are. In order to capture the different cultural stances regarding doctrine, I have drawn a model seen in Figure 2.

For culture, or a-rationality, to have any doctrinal significance at all, two preconditions have to be met. First of all, culture must have casual power, in one way or another. It must be able to induce people to act and cause things to happen. If not, cultural elements are mere decoration. Second, culture has to be manipulative, in one way or another. If the makers of doctrine are culture’s slaves, and not its masters, doctrine is little more than a weathervane.

Figure 2. Cultural Amenability

Authority

Finally, in the third corner you find authority and authorisation. Since war is an activity where reason rarely points ‘in a single direction’, and since military operations are an inherently collective activity, it is sometimes necessary authoritatively to choose which way to go, and to endorse a selection of theories to trust. Geoffrey Till uses an apt picture to underscore the point: ‘Maritime doctrine is the application of military theory in a particular time and place. If maritime theories are about the art of cookery, doctrine is concerned with today’s menus. Both are essential.’ Doctrine is thus not a mere description of how things are done by experts and professionals, but a prescription telling how things should be done:

[M]ilitary thought and doctrine are not synonymous. The first is personal, the latter institutional. A military thinker may inspire admirers to emulate or implement his ideas; but this can never be a substitute for institutional acceptance. Those who listen (or read) the works of any thinker are free to reject as much or as little as they choose from the corpus of his works.

In democracies it is a truism that politicians (over)rule generals, not the other way around. Flag officers have the right to raise their voice in manners compatible with their strategic culture, but as long as the orders they finally get are legal the only option they have is to comply or resign.

As a corollary, politicians also have the right to use doctrines to convey issues that are not necessarily supported by ‘the best available thoughts’. Politics can pull war, and preparation for war, in a different direction than experts, or culture for that matter, would have taken it. And war itself can in return influence policy in unexpected ways.

Even if all doctrines, by this text’s definition, must contain elements of all three pillars of doctrine, namely, theory, culture and authority,

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28 ‘[T]he politicians should get what they ask for, even if it is not what they really want. In other words, the politicians have a right to be wrong.’ Anna Bolin, Political-Military Relations: An Introduction to a Field of Study (Stockholm: Förvarshögskolan 2004), 12.
not all doctrines need to emphasise all three corners to the same degree. The three pillars' weight can be varied according to need, without neglecting any of them.

The Utility of Military Doctrine

Based on how the three elements of doctrine are balanced, you can produce three ideal types of doctrine; doctrine as a tool of education, doctrine as a tool of command, and doctrine as a tool of change. Figure 3 represents these three concepts.

As a tool of command a doctrine tells authoritatively what to do, as a tool of change it tells authoritatively what to be, and as a tool of education it tells what we do and who we are, for the time being.

As a longue durée different geostrategy has influenced the weight laid on the command side of the triangle. Nations with homogenous strategic challenges over time, for instance Germany, have tended to use doctrine, or at least doctrine like devices, as a tool of command, while nations with heterogeneous and shifting strategic environment, such as Britain and the United States, have tended to use doctrine mainly as a tool of education. In addition to such deep rooted historical structures come more abrupt events, such as a shocking defeat or an astonishing victory. Such strategic and political earthquakes may bring disaster, but they can also give golden opportunities for change. Indeed, some of the most fertile doctrinal discussions have occurred in the wake of such upheavals.

Doctrine as a Tool of Education

There is of course a plethora of military documents related to education of some sort, but doctrine is elevated from those mainly because a

![Figure 3. The Doctrinal Utility Span](image-url)
doctrine presents ‘essential knowledge’, that is knowledge that everyone within a given branch of military service is expected to possess. In an air force a pilot knows a lot that a mechanic does not, and vice versa, but both have to relate to a common core of basic knowledge in order to function well together.

As an alternative to providing rules and principles, a doctrine, used as a tool of education, can instead present particular cases that the military students, broadly defined, can use to reach their own conclusions. In order to do that, however, the case presented has to be detailed enough to offer sufficient similarities and dissimilarities with the situation of the reader. Military story telling is the perfect vehicle for such case presentation.

Military superstars, such as the American generals Colin Powell and Wesley Clark and the British generals Sir Rupert Smith and Sir Mike Jackson, had all retired from their military careers when they published their stories, or educational doctrines in disguise. Nonetheless, their books are important vehicles for carrying on the flame of their strong personalities, their leadership and their doctrinal convictions. In fact, it does not even take a general to produce such a Bildungsroman. Craig Mullaney’s An Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier’s Education (2009) is a superb case in point, written by a young soldier with all the necessary credentials, such as Ranger School and West Point, in addition to a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford.

Even a formal doctrine can be electrified by linking it to a face and a history, as for instance is the case with the US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual of 2007, which is published with a foreword by General David H. Petraeus. By adding Petraeus’ name to the document it ties it into a greater story, namely Petraeus’ personal history. In addition to being one of the doctrine’s main contributors, Petraeus is a man who combines bravery in battle, wisdom in war, and a PhD in international relations, perhaps a perfect combination for fuzzy conflicts.

Even if doctrine can be used profitably as a tool of education, the core function of doctrine is still usually seen as a tool of command.

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29A Bildungsroman is usually a portrait of a young man and ‘how he enters life in a happy state of naivety seeking kindred souls, finds friendship and love, how he comes into conflict with the hard realities of the world, how he grows to maturity through diverse life-experiences, finds himself, and attains certainty about his purpose in the world’. Wilhelm Dilthey quoted in Yuval Noah Harari, The Ultimate Experience: Battlefield Revelations and the Making of Modern War Culture, 1450–2000 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2008), 145.
Doctrine as a Tool of Command

Doctrine’s rationale as a tool of command is to enhance military cohesion and facilitate coordination while simultaneously reducing the need for military commanders to issue detailed instructions. In short, the aim of doctrine is to reduce the effect of Clausewitzian friction.

A simple agreement is usually the most effective way to solve coordinating problems, but in combat, where things can happen fast and involve many people, agreement may be out of reach. However, a doctrine can facilitate tacit conventions in the heat of battle by prearranging salience and distinguishing relevant precedents. If everybody in a unit instinctively comprehends the situation in a similar way and trusts everyone else to do it, countermeasures can be taken more swiftly without cumbersome and time consuming coordination. Obviously, we are balancing on the horns of the ‘basic doctrinal dilemma’ here.30 If our troops act like robots or mindless imitators, their performance would be judged outstanding at a military tattoo, but they can be pretty easy to outsmart.

Doctrinal critics have thus always questioned the wisdom of issuing authoritative documents regulating behaviour or comprehension in combat, and have instead opted for a ‘doctrine of no doctrine’.31 To them it is fairly obvious that each situation has to be treated on its own merit. Especially in Great Britain, which has fought its wars worldwide, many have seen the multifariousness of war as the main argument against doctrine. It can ‘prepare the army to face the wrong army at the wrong time and in the wrong place’.32

However, it is exactly because of this diversity of missions that you need a doctrine. If any army can use a doctrine, it is those with multifarious tasks:

The task of training the great armies of the Continent is child’s play compared with the severe and intricate problem which is

30 ‘[M]ilitary doctrine carries a number of risks. These derive from the basic doctrinal dilemma: doctrine must be explicit and specific to achieve useful empirical content; to the degree that this occurs, however, dogmatism and doctrinal righteousness too often prevail. Efforts to avoid this pitfall often result in doctrine that is so abstract as to be of no value in the field.’ Jeffrey S. McKitrick and Peter W. Chiarelli, ‘Defense Reform: An Appraisal’ in Asa A. Clark et al. (eds), The Defense Reform Debate, Issues and Analysis (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP 1984), 324.
imposed upon our General Staff by the geographical distribution of the units which compose the British Army [...] That the task of ensuring unity of effort from men trained under such diverse conditions is insuperable unless their minds are guided and bent in some one definite direction by the assimilation of a common doctrine is recognised by the General Staff.\(^{33}\)

By nature it is difficult to anticipate what our adversaries will do and even sometimes what our own politicians are likely to do, but a common doctrine makes it at least easier to guess what our own troops will do. Hence, a doctrine of no doctrine imports into the problem ‘fresh unknown factors – viz. the unknown minds of subordinate commanders’.\(^{34}\) Thus, if you reject formal doctrine in order to make your troops inventive, all you accomplish is to invite a multitude of unknown doctrines in by the backdoor:

Instead of a General Staff doctrine, held in common with comrades and chiefs, each commander will have his own doctrine [...] In short, adherence to the ‘doctrine of no doctrine’ intensifies the difficulty of transferring the mind of the commander to the minds of his subordinates, a difficulty which it is the object of all training and teaching to overcome.\(^{35}\)

Even in modern counter-insurgency operations, a common doctrine wisely written will not hamper the mid-ranked decision-makers, but assist them. Doctrine is not a screenplay telling how you should act in all situations, no more than conventions in general are. Doctrine is not ossified habits that make you predictable and sluggish, but a springboard to bounce off from. Moreover, if you think that a doctrine may lure you into preparing your army to face the wrong enemy, no preparation at all is presumably not the answer.

It is strategy and operational art that translate political aims into military tasks, but without a doctrine, without a grammar so to speak, such translation becomes difficult. The grammar is not there to restrict your eloquence, but to make you understandable to your surroundings.

Strangely, there is often an implied assumption that an armed force can have only one doctrine. However, just as it is fully imaginable that a person can be both a parish priest and rugby player without ever mixing the two, or that a police squad can treat gangsters substantially different than school kids, it is at least imaginable that an armed force

\(^{34}\)Ibid., 27.
\(^{35}\)Ibid., 26 and 27.
can do two completely different things. On the deepest organisational level there is perhaps room for only one capstone doctrine, but on a more practical level there can be several doctrines in the doctrinal tree. Having more than one doctrine is not doctrinal cheating, it is doctrinal necessity.

Perhaps new technology and the cheap access to information subvert the rationale for doctrine as a tool of command? If your boss knows much more than you do about the situation you are in, he would certainly not leave it to your judgment (however doctrine assisted) to sort out the situation. When the digitised battlefield enables the President virtually to monitor the heart rate of any given soldier, the temptation to strategically micromanage may become irresistible.

However, even this enticement, at all command levels, can be subject to doctrine, a doctrine not primarily for the boots on the ground, but for the executives, for those holding ‘the long screwdriver’. Perhaps the most pressing doctrine in the future might be that which tells the commanders to do less?

As such, doctrine as a tool of command may make for a dramatic u-turn, in the sense that while its original raison d’être was to be a beacon for military commanders operating in the informational darkness; it can now become a floating device for use in the tremendous ocean of information made possible by modern information technology. Doctrine can be a pilot guiding you between the Scylla of uncertainty and the Charybdis of information overload.

Doctrine as a Tool of Change

As mentioned previously, a doctrine can act like a weathercock or a thermometer, only revealing tendencies and policies it is ultimately unable to do anything about. Some commentators claim that this is the normal situation, especially on the strategic level.36 However, glancing at history, it seems obvious that doctrine can influence a wide spectrum of activities, such as procurement, fighting, planning and training.37

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37 ‘Change of doctrine cannot be entirely ignored, for adopting a new doctrine can result in substantial changes in the practices and structure of a military organization.’ Theo Farrell and Terry Terriff, The Sources of Military Change, Culture, Politics, Technology (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner 2002), 5.
As a rule, doctrine as a tool of change has been most in demand in the
wake of military disasters and other revolutionary changes in the
strategic context, where practical and cultural changes were sought and
speeded up by a controlled revolution from above. In order to
substantiate that claim, we will pay a short visit to some particularly
volatile periods in the last 200 years of military history.

One of the greatest military eye-openers in military history occurred
north of Jena in 1806. It was 20 years since Frederick the Great had died,
but most Prussians still regarded the Frederickian system as superior to
all others. Prussia had been at war against revolutionary France in the
1790s, but had yet to meet Napoleon in open contest on the battlefield.
When that eventually happened, in 1806, it ended in utter disaster.

In Frederick’s world, iron discipline was the pinnacle of military
prowess. Standing firm in the face of mortal danger and firing in unison
without aiming was the core of military excellence.38 For Gerhard von
Scharnhorst on the other hand, this attitude was no longer supreme
prowess, but supreme stupidity, no less. Old habits had to be weeded
out: ‘Before the war we taught the men to load quickly, but not well, to
fire quickly, but without aiming. This was very ill-considered; we must
therefore work with all our might to root out this error.’39 As argued
previously, the Prussians did not use the word doctrine as we know it
today, but the Prussian resurrection after 1806 shows at least that it is
possible to change quite a lot relatively swiftly.

The French willingness to change, and their willingness to expose
their despair after the disaster in 1870 was, as also seen previously,
somewhat unprecedented. Almost by paper work alone, to exaggerate a
bit, was their supreme commanders’ inexplicable passivity on the
battlefield, as for instance at the Battle of Gravelotte in August 1870,
turned into élan vital and offensive à outrance in the next war. Modern
document, as we know it today, was born in an intense desire to change
and to catch up.

The American willingness to change after their bitter defeat in
Vietnam was not as profound as the Prussian after 1806 or the French
after 1870, but even for the Americans it was evident that something
had to be done to avoid a similar failure in the future. And again the
defeat could not be explained by access to material resources. One
important measure the US Army took was to institutionalise systematic
military thinking through the establishment of US Army Training and

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38 ‘Aiming was in any case forbidden since it would slow the rate of fire – at most, the
men were told to point their weapons waist-high.’ Peter Paret, Yorck and the Era of
2002), 124.
Doctrine Command (TRADOC) in 1973 and the issuing of a new version of FM 100-5 *Operations* in 1976, a move that triggered the doctrinal renaissance that we still are part of. Doctrine development became an ‘engine of change’.\(^{40}\)

Importantly however, the US Army’s focal point in the 1970s was not to win the next Vietnam War so to speak, but to hurry back to conventional war. Wars of the Vietnamese kind were not important enough: ‘I’ll be damned if I permit the United States Army, its institutions, its doctrine and its traditions to be destroyed just to win this lousy war!’\(^{41}\)

Perhaps the most important thing a doctrine can do after great upheavals is to offer new *meaning*. A quest for meaning is part of human nature and can be met by different means, as for instance a new doctrine. When military employees struggle to get up in the morning and wonder why they should bother to go to work, some would find comfort in thinking about the pay cheque, or the splendour of their uniform, while others want something more. For the latter, the doctrine should be the place to look. According to Richard Dawkins, ‘Religion has at one time or another been thought to fill four main roles in human life: explanation, exhortation, consolation and inspiration’.\(^ {42}\) This is also a rather apt description of a military doctrine, read in this particular way. Doctrine has thus kept its existential zest, especially in periods when the need for armed forces is not self-evident.

In summation: in order to significantly change huge organisations it takes years and usually enormous efforts, apart from the commitment from powerful sponsors. Given the difficulties, we should perhaps rather move away ‘from trying to change organizations and instead look at how we might help them become ready for change’.\(^ {43}\) An important element in that process will be some sort of consciousness-raising activity, such as forging a new doctrine. If you succeed, doctrine can become ‘a key weapon at the disposal of [military] leadership to steer their organisation through an era of uncertainty and sustained change.’\(^ {44}\) In other words, it is easy to acclaim Sir Michael Howard’s doctrinal credo:

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\(^{44}\)Mäder, *In Pursuit of Conceptual Excellence*, 293.
I am tempted to declare dogmatically that whatever doctrine the Armed Forces are working on now, they have got it wrong. I am also tempted to declare that it does not matter that they have got it wrong. What does matter is their capacity to get it right quickly when the moment arrives.45

A Fourth Generation?

Military command has been through three distinct stages. The first leg was characterised by the supreme commander’s presence on the battlefield. The next stage occurred when Helmuth von Moltke definitely left the Feldherrenbügel. The third, and present stage, started with the end of World War I when airpower and increased firepower turned the battlefield into a three-dimensional battle space. The introduction of new technology and the radical improvement of the old forced military theorists to change their way of thinking, and according to Stephen Biddle the mental aftermath of the Great War is still with us.46 Does that mean that we have seen the end of doctrinal history? Presumably not. A ‘fourth generation doctrine’ is budding.

Military doctrines have always been issued with an eye to how it would be comprehended by adversaries and opponents, especially so with unclassified doctrines. That is part of the basic doctrinal dilemma. However, in an era characterised by wars of choice, what our own politicians, voters and taxpayers think the services are doing is becoming increasingly important. And new doctrines are important ways to tell them. Hence, what I call a ‘fourth generation doctrine’ does not have its most important readers in the Armed Forces.

A service may survive a lost war, but not the loss of political support. General Anthony C. Zinni of the US Marine Corps was rather plain-spoken on this matter:

We teach our ensigns and second lieutenants to recognize that sister Service as the enemy. It wants our money; it wants our force


46‘[World War I] introduced the central problem of modern warfare: how to conduct meaningful military operations in the face of radical firepower. And by the end of the war, an answer appeared that has remained central to great power military doctrines through more than 80 years of subsequent warfare.’ Biddle, Military Power, 29.
structure; it wants our recruits. So we rope ourselves into a system where we fight each other for money, programs, and weapon systems. We try to out-doctrine each other, by putting pedantic little anal apertures to work in doctrine centers, trying to find ways to ace out the other services and become the dominant service in some way. These people come to me and the other CinCs and ask, ‘What’s more important to you – air power or ground power?’ Incredible! Just think about it. My Uncle Guido is a plumber. If I went to him and asked, ‘What’s more important to you – a wrench or a screwdriver?’ he’d think I’d lost my marbles.47

A particularly interesting case of fourth generation doctrine is The US Army/ Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual. Apart from the military promulgation, the doctrine was issued in 2007 by the University of Chicago Press, and can be bought in commercial book stores. Significantly, there were journalists, human rights advocates and academics among the staff that developed it.48 However, if doctrines are made in order to look good to modern liberal consciences, then they can send the completely wrong message to the warriors. The publisher itself indicates the problem: ‘The opposing school of thought wants to save the Army from its new doctrine. Instead of worrying that the manual will not be put into practice, these critics worry that it will be.’49 Apparently, you cannot win modern wars by being politically correct. However, by almost mischievous ways, fourth generations doctrines may in fact turn out to be a war winning instrument exactly because they address the home front and not the soldiers in the field. That said, however, double communication can be self-defeating if there are significant discrepancies between the doctrinal message and the actual modus operandi in the field, especially if the soldiers start to live by the doctrine. If you must lose the war in the field in order to win it at the news desk you may be worse off than you were when you won the shootouts, but lost the arguments.

It is important not to overstate this point, particularly if it is connected directly to The US Army/ Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual. According to Stephen Biddle the Field Manual was in use

in Iraq, but not always in a way that we would recognise.\textsuperscript{50} Crucially, this is \emph{not} doctrinal cheating, but military prudence: ‘To the credit of General Petraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker, they have proven able to improvise and innovate under fire, departing from the manual to take advantage of unexpected trends’.\textsuperscript{51} Doctrine made organisational improvisation possible.

A fourth generation doctrine is not necessarily promulgated to make the armed forces look good. It can also be issued as a warning and a clear message: ‘In fact, the British Army’s interim doctrine on \textit{Wider Peacekeeping} (1995) was designed to caution policy-makers and the public about the costs of using force in peacekeeping (unusually for military doctrine, a glossy version was on sale at bookstores).\textsuperscript{52}

To sum up: first generation doctrines, or rather, doctrine-like documents such as the Royal Navy’s \textit{Fighting Instructions} (1653) and Frederick the Great’s \textit{Instructions for His Generals} (1747), were made for forces where the supreme commander fought with his men, either in front of them or close behind them. In the second generation of doctrines, the supreme commanders had left the battlefield. The third generation doctrines followed the commanders and left the battlefield as well, and tried instead to orchestrate a three-dimensional space and the entire range of combat capability, including physical, moral and mental domains. The fourth generation of doctrines is in danger of leaving even the war.

\textbf{What is Doctrine? – Reconsidered}

The question this text set out to answer was: What is doctrine? My short answer is that doctrine is \textit{institutionalised beliefs about what works in war}. My elaborate answer is that doctrine is \textit{an authoritative theory of war that allows for cultural idiosyncrasies}, where ‘theory’ is simply defined as:

\textsuperscript{50}In fact, Iraq is among the cases that fit the manual’s assumptions poorly – which has led actual US strategy in Iraq to diverge from the manual’s prescriptions in ways that are not always fully appreciated in the public debate.’ Stephen Biddle, ‘The New US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual as Political Science and Political Praxis’, \textit{Perspectives on Politics} 6/2 (June 2008), 348.

\textsuperscript{51}Ibid., 350.

an attempt to bind together in a systematic fashion the knowledge that one has of some particular aspect of the world of experience. The aim is to achieve some form of understanding, where this is usually cashed out as explanatory power and predictive fertility.\(^{53}\)

Despite the epistemological challenges facing all military doctrin-makers, it is a modest requirement that armed forces think through their challenges and systemise their knowledge for the benefit of the future. The question is not whether armed forces ought to have a doctrine or not, but whether to be frank about it or not. Doctrines exist; it is only their degree of explicitness, status and use that vary.\(^{54}\) If the doctrinal need is not filled by official doctrine it is filled by something, or someone, else. Unofficial and ‘untested’ doctrines will crop up elsewhere if they are suppressed at the top level:

‘Doctrine should not be, and is not designed as a substitute for thought. Yet it must be said that on occasions, especially during the Second World War, an ill-designed and sometimes confused appreciation of certain ideas drawn from progressive military theory, rushed to fill the doctrinal vacuum with disastrous results.’\(^{55}\)

Hence, even if the development of doctrines is doomed to fail the highest expectations, the alternative is worse. We humans always theorise, in the sense that we look for patterns and connections.\(^{56}\) Making a doctrine is thus a question of forethought and honesty. Properly written, doctrine will light your way, ease your progress, train your judgment, and help you to avoid pitfalls.\(^{57}\) Alas, not even doctrine can do wonders: ‘reiterations of doctrine cannot transform human nature or change cockroaches into butterflies’.\(^{58}\)


\(^{56}\)’Not theorizing is an act [while] theorizing can correspond to the absence of willed activity, the “default” option.’ Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan, The Impact of the Highly Improbable* (New York: Random House 2007), 64.

\(^{57}\)The phrase is Clausewitz’s ‘Theory then becomes a guide to anyone who wants to learn about war from books; it will light his way, ease his progress, train his judgment, and help him to avoid pitfalls.’ Clausewitz, *On War*, 141.

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