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4GW as a Model of Future Conflict

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Warfare Since Boyd Panel Presentation

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I have been asked to be the token diversity candidate from outside the 4GW "church" today, and am honored just by the chance to appear at an event that preserves John Boyd's deep intellectual contributions, and to be on stage with my fellow panelists and Col Eric Walters. My assigned task is to explain why academics and historians have problems with the 4GW construct. My remarks will draw upon my work on an alternative concept called Hybrid Warfare which I have presented at Oxford University this past winter. My comments will also draw upon unpublished work about to be released in a book titled *Global Insurgency and the Future of Armed Conflict*, edited by Dr. Terry Terriff, of University of Birmingham (UK) and Aaron Karp and Dr. Regina Karp of Old Dominion University, in which several of our distinguished speakers have prominent contributions including Mr. Lind and Col Hammes.

Let me begin by summarizing the arguments up front. The 4GW construct is often criticized for three major faults.

The theory is described as "weak" and the concept is too diffused, having become over time the equivalent of everything that is asymmetric.

Second the history that is drawn upon is uneven and often "too selective," that is it is packaged to support a major component of the theory without full examination of trends or detailed counter-findings.

Finally, the generational framework is labeled "indefensible" and unnecessary. In my own assessment, I find that it hides more than it reveals.

The events of 9/11 did more than collapse a pair of buildings, or punch a hole in the Pentagon. It punctuated the end of one era of war, and heralded the dawning of a new one. This new age was a surprise to some, but it was accurately forecasted in the prescient article penned by a collective of cutting edge thinkers in 1989. The new age presents policy makers and statesmen with its own method of conflict, a way of war that is extremely foreign to America's armed forces. This mode of war makes conventional thinkers highly uncomfortable and traditional military solutions unworkable.

This kind of war, as Mao suggested long ago, has several constituent components and overwhelming military power by itself is insufficient. Regardless of unfounded speculation in some corners, this does not eliminate the utility of the timeless Clausewitz or some 15 centuries of recorded military history before Westphalia. Quite the contrary, this current conception should cause us to reconsider our strategic

complacency, and reassess today's security challenges.

More than a decade's worth of unipolar delusion and unilateral triumphalism went up in smoke on 9/11. European illusions fell later after the attacks in London, Madrid and Paris undercut the idea that savage violence was something in the Continent's collective past. American hubris about its invulnerability and the over-financed Pentagon were the principal victims of 9/11, reinforced by subsequent events in Iraq.

The 4GW school was the first to identify the roots and nature of this threat. The future portends an even more lethal strain of perturbation. Purportedly a dog's breakfast of ethnic, demographic, religious, and socio-economic trends could soon create what the CIA called a "perfect storm" of conflict. Iraq's insurgents and jihadist foreign fighters will benefit from their education in Iraq, and will soon return home or to alternative battlespaces with greater motivation, lethal skills and credibility. Their Darwinian evolution against America's vaunted military has refined their methods and emboldened their plans, while the clash within Islam continues unabated.

Fourth Generation Warfare

Almost immediately dismissed as "elegant irrelevance," it is now difficult to ignore 4GW. We may quibble with the accuracy or the necessity of the generational framework, or the selective historical foundation, but not with the need to comprehend and respond to today's most common mode of warfare. Colonel Hammes is correct that "this kind of warfare is not new or surprising" and in his description of irregular conflict as "evolving." But irregular warfare has a long history. Thus, it's hard to me to put away my tattered copy of Asprey's two volume history and pass over Pontius Pilate, Caesar, the Spanish Guerrillas or the long history of Irish insurgency. That is not to say that there is not anything new to today's conception or that the 4GW community was not a decade ahead of others.

One can also readily agree with Colonel Hammes that "there is nothing mysterious" about this form of warfare, that its non-traditional nature and emphasis on political will, amorphous structure, and mass mobilization techniques are well grounded in the annals of conflict. 1 Clearly, the notion that "superior political will when properly employed can defeat greater economic and military power" was not mysterious to the Founding Fathers. Why else might the Continental Congress have met and issued its famous promulgation in 1776. Certainly, this concept informed Washington's strategy. Just as clearly, protracted conflict, social and political networks, diasporas, and ideological fervor were not lost on Lawrence and his Bedouins or Michael Collins and his generation.

Whether this really is something entirely new, as Hammes and other advocates of New Wars suggest, is challengeable. 2 Serious scholars like Dr. Tony Echevarria have found the entire construct to be both "artificial and indefensible." 3 The generational construct is hard to buy into, it relies on what Sir Lawrence Freedman concludes is "selective history and poor theory." 4 The assertion that a form of war, "visible and distinctly different from the forms of war that preceded it" has emerged is a bit much. 5 Arguably, what has occurred is simply part of war's evolution, a shift in degree rather than kind abetted by new technologies and more importantly new or reemerging environmental or socio-political conditions. As Clausewitz noted, war is a true chameleon, with continuous adaptation in character in every age.

In fact, as Professor Colin Gray has noted, little in what is described as fundamentally different in the 4GW literature is inconsistent with a Clausewitzian understanding of war as a contest of human wills. The emphasis on impacting the political cohesion or will of one's opponents remains a fundamental aspect of Clausewitz's canon. Clausewitz described the totality of the enemy's capacity to resist as "two inseparable factors, ...the total means at his disposal and the strength of his will." 6

A number of historians have challenged the generational framework, and find that it overlooks several

centuries of relevant conflict and the alternative possibility of seeing contemporary conflict within the realm of evolutionary change in irregular warfare that crosses through time. Academics like Sir Lawrence Freedman of Kings College find little to gain by accepting a generational construct, and much historical evidence overlooked. I have also mentioned a litany of case histories and individuals that do not fit nicely within the generational framework as defined, and thus my own assessment is again, that the concept of conflict defined with the 4GW theory may be valid but that the four generations do not help me understand it at all, and that the generations tend to hide more than they reveal. In order to respond to these comments, I recommend that the 4GW school defend itself by focusing and documenting what is believed to be enduring and to clearly depict what has changed.

However, the 4GW advocates did correctly capture the rise of nonstate actors, the confluence or blurring of civilian and military spheres, and salience of culture and popular will. They also predicted the intensity of this new form of conflict, or our vulnerability to this style. Overall, the theory of 4GW may be viewed as ineloquent in its historical foundation but its relevance is unquestionable. While the proponents have done an excellent job of laying out the nature of this challenge, few have attempted to detail of prescriptions (with exception of the gentleman on my right). 7

While historians may disagree with 4GW proponents regarding their grasp of history, the need for increased attention to the nontraditional components of what they describe as 4GW is incontrovertible. So too is the criticism that war is evolving in a manner inconsistent with the Pentagon's infatuation with *Revolutions in Military Affairs* and a Transformation agenda warps defense investments towards kinetic solutions. 8

What is not debatable is the intensity of this form of conflict, or the West's relative vulnerability or the fact that we have been very slow to address the implications of the increasingly blurred character of modern wars. We are slow to see that the most frequent form of war is now "amongst the people" and very slow in shaping our institutional tool set. It is not just that conventional warfare or interstate conflict is on the decline, there is a fusion of war forms emerging, one that blurs regular and irregular warfare, and terrorism, as well as subversion.

For a decade or more, most of us overlooked these trends. The American military has been focused on the wrong set of strategic drivers and indicators. In effect, they had misidentified the true Revolution in Military Affairs as Dr. Freedman has noted. Had the United States achieved the transformation agenda it put forward, I think it would have been at a substantial strategic disadvantage in the real world today. No doubt, its capacity to defend against ballistic missiles and to attack the space-based assets of a mythical peer competitor would be superb. Undoubtedly, the ability to dominate the electronic spectrum would be unsurpassed, and everything within a 200-mile square box would be detected by some ever present "unblinking eye" over the battlespace. The much cited "fog of war" would magically be blown away by America's information dominance, somehow resulting in a long Pax Americana. More probable, all of this would be utterly irrelevant to the problems at hand. Security officials at the Pentagon had badly misread what really constituted a threat to our national security interests, due to an enthusiastic embrace of an idealized and outdated versions of warfare. Advocates of 4GW, including the gentlemen on this stage, do not suffer from any embarrassment or lack of sleep in this regard.

What some of the critics of 4GW have overlooked is the critical importance of the cognitive and virtual dimension of today's conflicts. I expect several speakers to discuss this today. Now as we all know, T. E. Lawrence and the French expert Galula underscored this same issue in their seminal works. But the speed, frequency, and graphic imagery that is possible today with modern media is simply beyond their comprehension. It may still be beyond most of us. Recent scholarship by Dr. Audrey Cronin has persuasively compared the ongoing cyber-mobilization of Muslims around the world to the French

Revolution and the levée en masse. This has profound implications for human conflict in this century as Dr. Cronin has perceptively warns "Western nations will persist in ignoring the fundamental changes in popular mobilization at their peril."

Today's 24/7 news cycles and graphic imagery produce even faster and higher response cycles from audiences around the globe and offer powerful new "weapons" to those who can master them.

Today, many small groups have mastered "armed theater" and promoted "propaganda of the deed" to arouse support and foment discord on a global scale. There is a plethora of outlets now in the Middle East and an exponentially growing number of websites and bloggers promoting a radical vision. These outlets constantly bombarded audiences with pictures, videos, DVDs, and sermons. Ironically, in Iraq and in the Long War we are facing a fundamentalist movement that is exploiting very modern and Western technologies to reestablish an anti-Western social and political system. The 4GW school, in its initial offering, identified the potential for this phenomena and the associated religious and cultural factors that might inspire it.

Conclusion

Call it what you may, 4GW or Complex Irregular or Hybrid Warfare, it presents a mode of conflict that severely challenges America's conventional military thinking. It targets the strategic cultural weaknesses of the American Way of Battle quite effectively. Its chief characteristic—blurring and convergence—occurs in several modes. In the blurring of combat and conflict, combatants and noncombatants, and the physical and the metaphysical. The convergence of various types of conflict will present us with a complex puzzle until the necessary adaptation occurs intellectually and institutionally. This form of conflict challenges cherished but false American conceptions about warfighting, and will continue to thwart the West's core interests and world order over the next generation.

Because of their perceived success, call them what you may, but 4GW challengers will not be a passing fad nor will they remain low tech killers. Our opponents eagerly learn and adapt rapidly to more efficient modes of killing. We can no longer overlook our own vulnerabilities as societies or underestimate the imaginations of our antagonists. In a world of 4 GW or Hybrid Wars, the price for complacency and inept strategy only grows steeper.

Endnotes

1. T. X. Hammes, "War Evolves Into the Fourth Generation," *Contemporary Security Policy*, August, 2005, pp. 189-192.
2. Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Cambridge UK: Polity, 1999; Herfried Munkler, *The New Wars*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2005.
3. Antulia J. Echevarria, "Deconstructing 4GW," in *Global Insurgency*, Terry Terriff, Regina Karp and Aaron Karp, eds., Routledge, 2007, p. 237.
4. Lawrence Freedman, "A Comment on T.X. Hammes," *Global Insurgency*, p. 262.
5. T.X. Hammes, p. 192.
6. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds., Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 77.
7. The exception being William Lind, et al, *Draft FMFM 1-A, Fourth Generation War, Imperial and Royal Austro-Hungarian Marine Corps*, 2004.

8. See my "Complex Irregular Warfare: The Next RMA," Orbis, Summer 2006.

Links

[Boyd 2007 Conference Report](#) - DNI Net

[Boyd 2007 Conference \(Part 1\)](#) - ZenPundit

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{5} <http://www.shloky.com/?p=734>

{6}

http://www.fifthgeneration.phaticcommunion.com/archives/2007/07/william_lind_and_john_norman.php

{7} <http://council.smallwarsjournal.com/showthread.php?t=3173>

{8} <http://smallwarsjournal.com/comment/reply/6524#comment-form>

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