



The Asymmetric Threat:

Ranger during
Joint Training Field
Exercise 99-1.

557 Signal Company (Gerald T. James, Jr)

Listening to the Debate

By ROBERT DAVID STEELE

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Can this Nation be defeated by asymmetric means that strike at the known Achilles heels of the Armed Forces as well as key nodes in a largely unprotected civil infrastructure? A conference held in 1998 at the U.S. Army War College concluded that it can. The annual strategy conference on “Challenging the United States Symmetrically and Asymmetrically” questioned every aspect of *Joint Vision 2010* and identified the need to abandon our present force structure but not the budget to wage two nearly simultaneous major regional conflicts and a minor contingency (2+ approach). Although not endorsed by all the conferees, a substitute strategic vision might be a 1+iii approach: a major regional

conflict, a low intensity conflict or law enforcement support scenario, a major humanitarian relief operation, and a major electronic campaign (in the offense or defense).

The most difficult issue which arose during the conference was not threat identification or even response development, but rather the more ambiguous political question of whose job is it? According to many participants the military must not allow itself to be distracted from its primary responsibility to prepare for conventional conflicts, then either deter or win them. All appeared to recognize that the U.S. Government is not trained, equipped, or organized to deal with three of the four threat classes,¹ and therefore the larger challenge may be internal to the Federal bureaucracy as a whole—developing the concepts, doctrine, and organizational means of working across cultural, legal, and fiscal boundaries.

The Bottom Line

General Paul Van Riper set the stage at the conference by relating how the past fifty years have led to decisionmaking that has forgotten how to plan, cannot adapt to change, and is unable to stimulate a serious dialogue. From *JV 2010* to dominant battlefield awareness we face a proverbial naked emperor. With reference to information operations and asymmetric warfare, Van Riper said that no one can define information superiority or explain how we achieve it. Pablum publications now substitute for strategic thinking—and wishful thinking on warfighting for realistic planning.²

Desert Storm, regarded by many as the catalyst, vindication, or culmination of a so-called military technical revolution, must be considered with caution according to Van Riper. The enemy may have suffered a tactical defeat, but on the strategic level it not only retained power but grew in influence in both the Arab and Islamic worlds. In particular, the failed promises of aviation have not been scrutinized, and too many decisionmakers believe that strategic and tactical aviation can preclude the need to place infantry at risk.

Several distinguished historians, including John Guilmartin, Robert Doughty, and Donald Mrozek, examined lessons of the past and were most helpful in provoking thoughts on the future:

- Mobility is more important than mass.
- Technology is worth little without timely and insightful intelligence and geospatial data on a useful level of resolution.
- Weapons must fit targets; we cannot afford to take out hundreds of small targets with extremely expensive high precision munitions.³

- Time and space are far more available to an enemy than to ourselves—and can be traded for bodies and bullets.

- An enemy objective is to make us spread ourselves too thin—yet we persist in starting every confrontation that way.

State and Non-State Threats

A number of speakers provided a comprehensive review of the non-state threat. Their most telling observations included:

- America is its own worst enemy—procuring computers open to errors and omissions, inadvertent destruction of data, insider abuse, and outside attack (the least of our problems).

- U.S. vulnerabilities to asymmetric attack are largely in the civil sector (bridges, levees, dams, power and telephone switches, and downlinks for intelligence and operations). The most vulnerable is data managed by banks and major logistics elements including fuel suppliers.

- Enemies will succeed by waging war between the seams in our legal system, not our operational capabilities.

- Time favors an enemy using any information virus.

- Future enemies will choose carefully between stand-off, indirect (anonymous), and hands-on attacks.

- The political, economic, and technological climate favors both increased terrorism and asymmetric attack. This will lead to the privatization of security, militarization of police agencies, and gendarmification of the military.

- Existing criteria for victory are unachievable (decisive triumph, limited casualties).

- Current force structure is vulnerable to superior asymmetric maneuvering in time, space, and materials (such as infrasonic waves easily penetrating armor to harm personnel).

- The Nation remains vulnerable to campaigns that manipulate the international media and domestic perceptions, especially with regard to atrocities and casualties.

- The Achilles heel in U.S. overseas deployments will be dependence on volunteer civilian contractors to maintain complex technologies beyond the abilities of uniformed personnel.

- Most actors, especially from non-Western cultures and less-developed areas, are capable of taking pleasure in doing evil; thus the human factor should not be underestimated in conflicts.

Three speakers offered insights on state-on-state conflict. One man's limited war is another man's total war; U.S. perceptions of information operations as a form of warning or limited attack are completely at variance with Russian perceptions of C⁴I assaults as core attacks against the very survival of the state. And it is not enough to win in the field—one must also win strategically.

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Lessons from the Gulf War include the nature of coalitions, the role of public support that can only be achieved if policies and objectives are explained and make sense, and the importance of timing in identifying and responding to challenges.

With regard to states but going beyond them, one speaker identified six functional areas of concern: anti-U.S. coalitions (Iran-Iraq or Asian economic block); new borders and contested new states (a Kurd republic challenging Turkey, Iraq, or Saudi Arabia); regime changes (North Korea, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia); conditions inhibiting the use of the military; critical dependence on allies; and criminalization of governments (Colombia or Mexico).

Summary Conclusions

The final panel of the conference began with a summary by John Williams, who noted that “getting into [enemy] heads is more important than getting into their bytes.” His point was drawn from a theme heard throughout the conference: understanding a potential enemy, its circumstances, and especially its culture may be more vital than any technological edge. Indeed, technology is not an advantage in asymmetric warfare but a vulnerability; the only recourse is greater understanding of threats, and hence an ability to address their root causes in time to avoid conflict.

The United States will continue to have difficulties dealing with complexity and nonlinear conditions, particularly because costly systems are driving us in one direction while reality is often moving us in another. Moreover, there are questions about combating challenges such as domestic terrorism and ambiguous threats. The Reserve components play important roles—but we have not defined their role in pursuing asymmetric strategies.

Williams advanced four additional areas that require further consideration:

- *Fallacy of misplaced concreteness.* We are too quick to accept our programmed systems and approved force structure as a given of value.
- *Offensive asymmetry.* We have not explored the areas where we have an advantage.
- *Nature of the planning process.* It does not deal with unanticipated radical shifts.
- *Civil-military relations.* We need to examine the role of the military officer in educating the civil sector and advocating specific strategies for dealing with threats to the Nation.

Major General Timothy Kinnan stated that we cannot afford the existing force structure but

the services behave like rats in a box, eating each other in the allocation process. We need to move away from 2+. Also, technology will not replace boots on the ground; its major contribution may be to let us all work together in real time and finally begin integrating all our components sensibly.

Major General Robert Scales made several closing points intended to guide future debate.

- States are unlikely to risk outraging us. They know where to draw the line between pushing for maximum gain and goading the elephant into extreme anger.
- Today the military appears to be splitting between Navy-Air Force reliance on airpower and Army-Marine Corps reliance on ground power as the fulcrum for victory.
- We must look beyond 2010 to rethink and create a new military. Ten years passes in the blink of an eye. We can take it slow on technological reforms and investments for a decade and see what time brings.
- The issue is one of balance, achieving interdependence rather than interoperability. We must start with a vision and think it through, not rush.
- Soldiers cannot be policemen; that calls for totally different mindsets, cultures, and reactions under fire.

If we focus on people, the priorities for the next decade or two can be leader development, training and education, doctrine, and experimentation.

A New Approach

Listening to the conferees debate these challenges to national security suggests a new approach for the future. The defense budget should not be reduced but rather boosted modestly with two conditions: that three of the four defense segments be moved to the commander in chief, U.S. Special Operations Command, Secretary of State, and Attorney General and that the entire intelligence budget—black, gray, and white—be fenced and left to the absolute discretion of the Director of Central Intelligence.

We must create four forces after next, each trained, equipped, and organized to deal with one of four warrior classes that will arise in the 21st century. It will be difficult because three of the four will not be military, but rather parties skilled at transnational law enforcement, feeding populations, and the minutia of electronic crime and economic espionage. To accept this fact and lead the charge from in front is a challenge to the Secretary of Defense and his senior officials.

One might also propose that a slightly increased budget should be reallocated as follows over the next six years:

- 60 percent (\$153.6 billion a year) to existing strategic nuclear and conventional forces, excluding special operations and low intensity conflict ⁴

technology will not replace boots on the ground

2nd Marine Division (Timothy A. Pope)

**Airmen and marines
on joint trail/jungle
patrol, Panama.**

- 20 percent (\$51.2 billion) to CINCSOC, provided that no less than 5 percent (25 percent of the allocated amount—\$12.8 billion) be earmarked for direct support, including full-time civilian manpower, to transnational law enforcement; this amount for law enforcement agencies is left with CINCSOC rather than lumped with the final 10 percent for electronic security because the intent is to have a military-based bridge to span the gray areas between paramilitary and coalition operations and direct support to law enforcement

- 10 percent (\$25.6 billion) to the Secretary of State to revitalize the U.S. Information Agency, Peace Corps, and selected sustainable development initiatives intended to deter or preclude conflict arising from shortages of water, food, and other resources and civil order⁵

- 10 percent (\$25.6 billion) to the Attorney General, who will serve as executive agent for government agencies responsible for various aspects of electronic security and counterintelligence.

The Active-Reserve Mix

The part played by the Reserve components (both the Ready Reserve and National Guard) is vital. Given proposed alignments, their role in the next century may be two to three times greater. In conventional units, the active force

must restore its ability to fulfill intelligence, military police, combat support, and combat service support functions, with no less than 75 percent of all required capabilities in the active force and 25 percent in the Reserve. In low intensity conflict and missions in support of transnational crimefighting, the balance should be closer to 50-50, with the Reserve components providing the majority of foreign area officers, linguists, and other personnel with skills for special operations and low intensity conflict, and transnational criminal interdiction missions. A law enforcement reserve within the National Guard should be specifically considered.

For missions in support of the Department of State and international missions of mercy that involve political, religious, and environmental refugees, the Reserve components become far more important than the active force, and a 25-75 mix is appropriate. Major new units with regional, linguistic, and civil affairs skills should be



U.S. Army (Guadalupe Hernandez)

Abandoned Iraqi
BTR-50 with missiles.

prepared for short- and midterm deployment in support of noncombat humanitarian assistance and sustainable development missions.

Finally, to provide electronic and counterintelligence protection for the intellectual property supporting our security and national competitiveness it is appropriate to return to a 50-50 mix, with uniformed and civilian active duty experts providing a disciplined and knowledgeable continuity of operations. And the Reserve components can be placed across the communications and computing sector, serving as a network of citizen-soldiers who, after the Swiss model, understand the threat and can move easily between military and civilian occupations.

This discussion of the active-Reserve mix should inspire a broad dialogue about completely redefining the role of the Reserve components.

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Only a small portion must be trained, equipped, and organized to conduct traditional conventional military operations. Indeed it may be that the largest portion of

the Reserve force need not be uniformed nor be preselected and pretrained. Instead, we may find—and this is especially true of foreign area specialists and other experts—that we need a vastly expanded concept of the Reserves which allows short-term contract hiring of any expert anywhere in the world without obtaining a security clearance, a shave and haircut, or even basic military training!

The Public-Private Sector Mix

After putting their own houses in order, the greatest difficulty facing the Armed Forces and the U.S. Government is determining how best to

divide responsibilities between the public and private sectors. The following rules of thumb might inspire legislative and financial incentive programs.

- Conventional military operations—75 percent government, 25 percent private sector sustainment
- Low intensity conflict/transnational crime—50 percent each (with special emphasis on private sector reporting responsibilities and auditing records and containers in support of law enforcement and compliance)
- Refugee and cultural operations—50 percent each (with emphasis on nurturing overt action and information peacekeeping operations by private non-profit groups)
- Information operations and defending against economic espionage—25 percent government and 75 percent private (the Government can set the standards and oversee testing and certification laboratories, but the private sector must be convinced that it is ultimately responsible for protecting its own intellectual property).

Consideration of the private contribution to national security along a spectrum of complex and ambiguous threats suggests that a classified threat is not an actionable threat to the private sector. As Senator Daniel Moynihan noted, secrecy has significant policy and economic costs, including the inability to communicate to our most important allies (the private sector) the nature of the threat and their role in defending against it.

Intelligence

Traditionally, intelligence has been an afterthought within the defense community. We build extraordinarily expensive weapons and systems without regard for generalizations about strategic intelligence (acquiring systems limited to a few countries or lacking attention to mobility constraints characteristic of most areas of operation) or whether we have the sensor-to-shooter architecture and equally vital global geospatial data (we lack appropriate resolution for 90 percent of the world).⁶

Key to avoiding or resolving conflicts which threaten U.S. security and competitiveness is giving the Director of Central Intelligence the authority to rationalize national intelligence roles and missions and related capabilities. The intelligence community has three important but misguided agencies—the National Security Agency, National Reconnaissance Office, and National Imagery and Mapping Agency—that use bureaucratic stone walls within the Pentagon to avoid meaningful oversight. We process less than 6 percent of the signals and 10 percent of the classified imagery collected. The United States spends \$12.6 billion a year gathering classified imagery but

26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Mark D. Oliva)

**Marine evacuating
civilians from Albania,
Silver Wake.**

only \$10 million buying commercial imagery for peacekeepers and warfighters. We continue to accept the complete absence of maps for most of the world on the 1:50,000 level where we coordinate fires.

A Balanced National Defense

The National Security Council may or may not be the body to provide day-to-day oversight of a balanced national defense. An alternative may be for the President to redefine and enhance the duties of the Deputies Committee and give a broader charter to the Attorney General and Secretary of State. The commander in chief, U.S. Special Operations Command, and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict also need special handling, possibly by integrating the duties of the latter with the Assistant

Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs beneath an under secretary for peacekeeping who then would serve as the second DOD member of the Deputies Committee.

A bolder idea involves creating a deputy vice president for national security with command and control oversight of the Departments of Defense, State, and Justice while establishing a deputy vice president for the national commonwealth with oversight over the remaining bureaucracy.

Whatever management reforms are adopted with the advice and consent of Congress, there is an urgent need to put this plan in motion. The time has come to increase the operational reach and spending authority of both the Attorney General and Secretary of State while downsizing our conventional force structure and simultaneously doubling special operations capabilities.

Until the Secretary of Defense acknowledges the role of the Director of Central Intelligence and fences the intelligence budget under his preeminent authority, we cannot strike the proper balance between collection and processing, secrecy and intelligence, and an obsessive focus on conventional enemies and a more informed focus on the vastly more subtle and difficult threats and opportunities we face in three of the four warrior classes. We have met the enemy and it is us.

We must rebuild our national security community. *Joint Vision 2010* is not the answer, but the military has the answer within itself. Only the Armed Forces have the expertise, discipline, and resources to fund this revitalization, but it must accept and demand the engagement of the Attorney General, Secretary of State, and Director of Central Intelligence to initiate change. The Secretary of Defense must propose a unifying leadership position to the President with overarching authority to integrate military, peacekeeping, and law enforcement capabilities. It is DOD that must provide a broad vision, fund achievement of that vision, step back into its proper role as master of strategic nuclear and conventional military capabilities, and serve as coordinator and facilitator for civilian government operations against more complex and ambiguous threats facing the Nation. If it does, we will enter the 21st century ready to combat all enemies, both domestic and foreign. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ The four threat classes that will arise in the 21st century are the high-tech brute (a state-based military with complex systems and heavy logistics trains); low-tech brute (a combination of criminals and non-state terrorist groups); low-tech seer (unarmed masses driven by religion, ideology, or circumstances); and high-tech seer (a blend of information criminals and economic spies). See Robert D. Steele, "The Transformation of War

and the Future of the Corps," *Intelligence: Selected Readings—Book One* (Quantico, Va.: Marine Corps University, 1992-93).

² Our systems acquisition continues to be characterized by the complete avoidance of tough issues of intelligence and logistics supportability. Programs such as the Army multi-billion dollar communications effort continue to assume that all needed data will be provided in digital form by the intelligence community or other sources and avoid planning for the hard tasks of discovering and digitizing critical external information (including maps and other foreign area information) and of communicating with coalition partners lacking space-age computers and the kind of bandwidth we consider commonplace.

³ According to unclassified reports on the Gulf War, the Navy exhausted its precision munitions in eight days. There was also discussion of the difference in cost between an 8-inch battleship round (\$800) and a Harpoon missile (\$80,000) and of evidence that many precision munitions actually missed the target—either because of design flaws or inadequate targeting data from the intelligence community.

⁴ Among other things such a cut should require a draconian reduction in U.S. subsidization of arms sales abroad and the end of virtually all military aid. Foreign aid need not be reduced, but it should be converted into peacekeeping dollars under the oversight of the Secretary of State.

⁵ American leaders downplay the environment even if at times (under Secretaries of State Warren Christopher and James Baker) it has been declared a national security priority. Rwanda and Burundi were not about a clash of civilizations but shortages of water and food combined with a breakdown of the state, which caused tribes to revert to traditional forms of organization and violence—never mind that it required mass murder. The best "intelligence report" in this area remains the annual *State of the World* from the Worldwatch Institute (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

⁶ The National Imagery and Mapping Agency (NIMA) acknowledges that 90 percent of the world is unavailable on the 1:50,000 level (10 meter resolution) at which most operations are coordinated. The best maps of the Third World, where most contingency operations are executed, are from the former Soviet Union, which has 1:100,000 coverage with contour lines at roughly \$300 per map sheet. Commercial image maps with contour lines can be obtained for \$6-10 per square kilometer on the 1:50,000 level. Despite defining a requirement for \$250-500 million a year, NIMA only receives \$10 million for commercial sourcing.