Is There a New Warfare?
by Carl Conetta

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The hypothesis has two parts. One part impacts national security policy, and the other one is about how we should develop, organize and modernize armed forces.

On April 16, 2003, speaking at a Boeing plant in St. Louis, President Bush outlined the hypothesis with specific reference to the Iraq and Afghan war: “We’ve applied the new powers of technology…to strike an enemy force with speed and incredible precision. By a combination of creative strategies and advanced technologies, we are redefining war on our terms. In this new era of warfare, we can target a regime, not a nation.”

The President wasn’t stumping for regime change when he said this, but advancing the idea that we have a unique new capacity to wage quick, decisive and clean wars. This hypothesis has been advanced in various forms over the past three years by Vice President Cheney, Richard Perle, Max Boot, Paul Wolfowitz, Donald Rumsfeld and many others.

The idea that we have a new capacity for low risk, low cost war gained broad currency during the conventional phase of the 2001 Afghan war. In many media portrayals, the war fulfilled a promise only partially glimpsed in the Kosovo conflict and first Gulf War. The media portrayed both the Afghan and new Iraq wars in this vein, using terms like “pinpoint,” “precise,” “a new style of warfare,” and stating the wars would be fought while “sparing civilians, buildings and even the enemy.” In short, the idea of a new, low cost warfare caught on.

Evaluating the hypothesis

Is this hypothesis true? Today, I will cast doubt on this hypothesis and talk about how the discourse on it relates to the current idea of military transformation.

But first I want to address another question. Why make such a big thing about newness of war? The goal is to overturn a long-standing presumption against war, the idea that war is a unique policy instrument not subject to utilitarian ideas - an instrument that should be a last terrible option, restricted to defense.

This presumption against war has been under assault since the Cold War. The three post Cold War administrations all adopted more activist military stances than the Reagan administration - though all differed on strategic rationale. The current administration has normalized the idea of maximum objectives in war - regime change - and adopted what it calls a preemptive stance. Some say it’s actually a practice of preventive war, a more permissive stance. But I think the present doctrine actually goes further than this and can be called “preclusive,” or "precautionary," war.

Inhibitions about going to war persist. Concerns about not just escalation and quagmire, but also about the inadvertent consequences of war and collateral effects remain. Collateral damage erodes the perceived legitimacy of a war and tarnishes the reputation of the prosecuting power, potentially weakening its alliances and standing in the world. Collateral damage complicates postwar stabilization, undermines efforts to win hearts and minds, and can spark revenge attacks.

These concerns weigh against war, and the new warfare hypothesis addresses them all to enable a more activist military policy, including regime change and precautionary war.

Afghanistan and Iraq: counting casualties

Do the Afghan and Iraq wars give us reason to rethink or rollback the presumption against war? Are the new wars fast, decisive, and clean? The new warfare hypothesis invites historical comparison.

I compare the two Gulf Wars. In the first Gulf War, 3,500 civilians and probably 20,000 Iraqi military personnel were killed. In the conventional phase of the 2003 war, there were 3,750 noncombatant deaths, give or take 15%. There were probably 9,200 Iraqi deaths among uniformed and irregular fighters.

On the coalition side, the first Gulf War claimed 358 lives, 245 of them in combat. In the conventional phase of the current Iraq War, 172 died from all causes, 136 of them in combat.

So overall, the civilian numbers are similar. In 2003, the number of combatants killed was down, about half of 1991 total on both sides, but because both sides had fewer troops engaged, the percentage of combatants killed was higher for both sides.

At face value, the numbers do not show a revolution in the cleanliness of war. It should be said, however, that since this war was for regime change, we might expect more dead. Indeed, the war did involve more ground combat than the first Gulf War. Desert Storm in 1991 saw less than 150 equivalent brigade days of ground combat. The equivalent brigade days of combat in the 2003 conventional war were between 400 and 450 - three times as much ground fighting.

Evidence for the advancing cleanliness of war may be counter-factual: it resides not in what happened but in what didn’t - much higher casualty rates.

The drop in Iraqi power

But to be comprehensive we must also consider the drop in Iraqi power between 1990 and 2003. There is a countervailing hypothesis that what we saw in Iraq was not new warfare but an enemy that did not fight.

The decline in Iraqi power from 1991 to 2003 reflected the impact and lingering effects of the first Gulf War, the disruptions associated with the Kurd and Shiite rebellions, and combat actions associated with no fly zone enforcement. During the 12 years after the first Gulf War, Iraqi per capita GDP averaged between 25% and 30% of the 1989 level, official defense spending declined 85%, and the value of arms imports fell 95%. Expenditures per soldier were probably one third of what they were in 1991. As a result, the modernization of the Iraqi military virtually ceased and training and force maintenance activities were barely performed.

These differences explain the low costs of the second war. And these developments also add something to the cost of the war. The destruction of Iraqi infrastructure in 1991 and the sanctions that followed cost 200,000 lives, according to the best estimates. This figure must be factored into the supposed cleanliness of the war.

Comparisons with wars since WWII

Now I’ll move to the comparisons between recent wars to other relevant wars since World War II. The question remains whether our recent wars set a new standard for speed, decisiveness, and cleanliness. Looking over the past 50 years, we find that the only unambiguously unique thing about today’s wars is the highly favorable casualty-exchange ratio, or attrition ratio. For the conventional phase of the recent Iraq War, among combatants, there were 60 Iraqi losses for every coalition death. This ratio compares to the best ratio achieved by the Israelis in their wars with Arab armies, which was 4 to 1. The exchange ratio reflects a coalition casualty rate of one-tenth of 1%; a historically low cost for battle.

But the characterization of the new warfare as low casualty is supposed to extend to enemy troops and especially noncombatants. This figure is relevant to maintaining legitimacy and avoiding backlash. By this measure, the 2003 war was not unique. The death tolls were comparable to the 1956, 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars and Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon. Also comparable were the 1965, 1971 and 1999 India-Pakistan wars.

A good estimate of the war dead on all sides in the recent Afghan war is more than 4,500, including 1,100 civilians. This is much less than the recent Iraq war, but still in range of several of the conflicts mentioned. In Iraq, total dead on all sides is about 5,000-6,000, with the would-be peace being more costly than the war, especially for the United States.

Fast and decisive?

What about the other qualities of the new warfare - "fast" and "decisive?" Rapidity in the Afghan and two Iraq wars also was not unique among the significant wars of the past 35 years, including the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli wars, the India-Pakistan war of 1971 (ending with the dismemberment of Pakistan) and the main combat of the 1978 Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia. Among these conflicts, both the 1971 India-Pakistan war and the Vietnamese takeover were fairly decisive, but in neither case did the victor completely destroy or dismember the other side's armed forces. Of course, neither of America's recent wars has won a stable peace.

In sum, only one part of the new warfare hypotheses is valid: the Afghan and Iraq wars show that the United States now has the ability to win decisive battlefield victories at the historically low cost to our forces. However, this ability may not be replicable, given the weakness of the opposition in these wars. And battlefield decisiveness is only a stage of victory, as we see today. Causalities were not uniquely low, nor low enough to avoid serious strategic consequences.

Military transformation

The second iteration of the "new warfare hypothesis" is about how we organize, modernize, and use our armed forces, rather than about national security strategy. The second iteration of the hypothesis thus addresses military transformation. This part of the hypothesis embraces the "fast, decisive and clean," description of recent wars but goes further to say these outcomes are the first manifestation of a program of military transformation. This part of the hypothesis attempts to conscript the recent US victories to support a unique theory of transformation.

This theory says that old war involved massed firepower, attrition, close combat, deliberate, sequential engagement of the enemy along fronts, separate but coordinated efforts by services, and eventual victory by sheer weight of people, firepower and material. By contrast, in the new warfare, partially tested in Iraq and Afghanistan, victories are won by out-thinking and out-maneuvering the enemy and attacking the coherence of the enemy's armed forces and command. This sort of attack is supposed to demoralize the enemy and induce paralysis. The ability to achieve this depends on jointness, exploitation of information technology, and development of "information age" organizations.

Information power is supposed to substitute for mass by improving situational awareness, precision and range in attack, coordination among friendly units and making support service more efficient. These improvements in turn allow forces to be smaller, lighter, more dispersed, faster, and more agile.

How are these forces supposed to be used? There are three central concepts: information superiority or dominance, rapid decisive operations (identifying and attacking the enemy's "centers of gravity,") and "netcentric" or "network centric warfare." These are the three ideas the Office of Force Transformation would

like to see driving transformation.

Many claim that this new warfare explains why the recent Afghan and Iraq wars are decisive and clean.

Historical thinking on transformation

There are two main historic trends of transformational thinking. The first stems from the Cold War effort to deal with numerical inferiority in Europe. The second trend comes from the defense reform movement, which focuses on the rise of new strategic agents and the need to respond to them. There are various strains within this trend. Some would say that the Iraq war shows the need to look less at net-centric warfare than counter-insurgency. Others point to the need to develop peace operations and nation-building capability.

The defense reform movement drove integration. In its most moderate incarnation, this movement translated into a push for jointness, which has become the mainstream Pentagon thinking.

This vision of reform looks to a world with new enemies creating challenges on a smaller scale and in a wider variety of circumstances than US forces are accustomed to. Some of this push for reform showed up in the recent global posture review, which I think is generally good.

A lot of this push for reform also comes from budget hawks, who point out that the United States has gone from around one quarter to one half of the world's military spending since the Cold War.

Transformation: evidence from recent wars

What did we see in the recent wars that might speak to transformation efforts? From after action reports, we can look at what changed and what worked.

GPS receivers have clearly achieved ubiquity, which facilitates blue force tracking. But problems still exist across service lines, and thus we've not erased fratricide, which still accounts for 10%-25% of US dead.

The capacity of **all weather, day-night strike** has generalized across aerial strike assets. This change plus JDAMs allows a few hundred sorties to do what thousands could do during Desert Storm.

Aerial precision strikes have been augmented by a full complement of JSTARS aircraft and datalinks among aerial assets.

The formulation of Air Tasking Orders is down from 72 to less than three to four hours, and the orders make room for some dynamic and time-sensitive targeting. In the later case, the decision-attack cycle has been reduced to 45 minutes or less. That said, dynamic and time-sensitive targeting comprises less than 5% of strike missions. The more deliberate 72-hour targeting process cannot keep up with the pace of rapid maneuver. And problems with Close Air Support remain serious enough to leave the Army resistant to full reliance on it.

Especially noteworthy, was the **integration of Special Forces** in the targeting cycle, the integration of UAVs and AC-130 gunships, and the general increase in the use of UAVs. But UAVs were not fully integrated into the command structure.

New linkages were established among corps, theater, and component headquarters that could

support greater data-sharing in real time among staff. Some commanders spoke of an unprecedented view of the battlefield. Some generals have said that the ideal of sharing a common operational picture was achieved.

These advances are said to be islands, or pockets of netcentric warfare. In truth, only the capabilities for aerial reconnaissance and precision strike come close to this vision - and even these are better regarded as forming a reconnaissance-strike complex, which is a more limited idea and one that is not new. The rest of the evidence shows some improvement in command, control, communication and cooperation. There is impressive progress but not the arrival of network-centric warfare.

In fact, what we see is a variety of service-centric and often incompatible C4I systems, some of which were kludged on the eve of war, especially at high levels of command, where they worked reasonably well.
Our capacity to strike from the air has improved in quantity and speed. But our capability to prioritize targets and evaluate damage lags behind - intelligence and analysis lag behind target acquisition. This problem may be getting worse as the pace of operations increases.

There is also a problem with getting actionable and timely intelligence down below the corps and division level, especially regarding disposition of enemy war-fighting units. A lot of the fighting in Iraq was what's called meeting engagements - meaning our forces didn't know what they were running into, so intelligence cannot have been great. And getting the aerial strike complex to serve ground units remains a problem.

Problems like this led one general to speak of a "digital divide" between those above and below the division level. There are complaints that there is no common operating picture below the corps level. Also, staff have been saturated with information, but too little is relevant or actionable. Even so, they often don't get what they need in a timely fashion, such as current satellite imagery and information on enemy units.
Tactical level communications are having a hard time keeping up with the pace of operations. Terrestrial systems are not as good as they need to be across the theater. And communication capacity is a problem; bandwidth is often insufficient.

Logistics have improved since Desert Storm, especially in regard to getting to the field. But getting materials to tactical units was a problem, especially when these units were maneuvering. Logistics systems remain fragmented across service lines, not integrated and netcentric.

Because of blockages in joint support systems, such as intelligence and logistics, jointness declined during the wars. Some relied on ad-hoc, bubba networks for supply.

In sum, the wars are not proof of the emergence of network centric warfare, despite what you hear. The main advances are in precision-strike ability, both quantitatively and in terms of timeliness. The same amount of sorties can now hit ten times the targets.

Mostly it is the old-fashioned power of ground forces - the continuing strength of skilled people, good equipment and advances in armor - that brings battlefield victory.

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