

COMPREHENSIVE EROSION: THE 21ST CENTURY AMERICAN WAY OF WAR

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ABSTRACT

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COMPREHENSIVE EROSION: THE 21ST CENTURY AMERICAN WAY OF WAR

Each era has something to teach, for there is no single defining American way of war.¹

—Admiral Mike Mullen

Admiral Mullen's observation on the American way of war stakes out a very specific position regarding American grand strategy. His claim, the lack of a single American way of war, is but another engagement in a long campaign of historic debate. This paper examines the history of the debate over identification of a uniquely American way of war to determine if such a characterization is necessary and or useful for 21st Century practitioners.

The United States of America has maintained a preferred American way of war that accounts for technical evolution of the available means to conduct it. The 21st Century American way of war can be characterized as "Comprehensive Erosion," a preference demonstrated in the initial campaigns of the era and codified in joint doctrine.

To support the thesis, this paper is divided into five parts. The first section outlines the historic debate over the American way of war to determine if there is an identifiable way and discern if the way has changed over time. The second section examines the influence of technology on the preferred method. The third explores the characteristics of the 21st century strategic environment and the timeless problem of strategic conclusion. This section sets the stage for the fourth major division of the paper, an articulation of comprehensive erosion, the 21st century American way of war. Finally the conclusion demonstrates why continuation of the debate is useful and necessary.

An American Way of War

Attempts to characterize the American way of war received their intellectual start in Professor Russell Weigley's seminal work by the same name. His logical extension of Clausewitz's dictum on "the primacy of the destruction of the enemy force"² and his analysis of the American practice of war led him to conclude that the preferred American way of war was one of annihilation. Annihilation is the complete and immediate destruction of the enemy. Weigley's other end of the theoretical spectrum is attrition, an indirect method employed "by a strategist whose means are not great enough to permit pursuit of the direct overthrow of the enemy"³ This end of the spectrum is not an alien strategy for the United States.

America made a promising beginning in the nurture of strategists of attrition; but the wealth of the country and its adoption of unlimited aims in war cut that development short, until the strategy of annihilation became characteristically the American way of war.⁴

Weigley points to Grant's campaigns against Lee late in the civil war as the historical establishment of this strategy of annihilation. Moreover, he left little to the imagination regarding his underlying assumption on the enduring nature of this adopted American strategy when he titled his chapter on the European theater of operations in WW II, "the strategic tradition of U.S. Grant."⁵

Published in 1973, the Weigley thesis was almost universally accepted and became required reading for any serious student of military policy. More importantly, it stimulated considerable discussion and further study among historians and practitioners. Subsequent reflection and investigation on his argument was expertly laid out by a member of the next generation of military historians. In 2002, Brian Linn respectfully took Professor Weigley to task in *The Journal of Military History* with an

exhaustive analysis.⁶ According to Linn, the source of Weigley's definition of annihilation is Hans Delbruck's, "the first natural principle of all strategy is to assemble ones forces, seek out the main force of the enemy, defeat it, and follow up the victory until the defeated side subjects itself to the will of the victor."⁷

Linn goes on to point out that the historical definitions are not the ones used in contemporary officer education. "At West Point cadets are taught that a strategy of annihilation seeks the complete and immediate destruction of the enemy's combat power; a strategy of attrition seeks the gradual erosion of the enemy nation's will or means to resist."⁸ Linn's analysis points out a problem in the premise. Delbruck never envisioned a stronger side employing a strategy of attrition to grind down a weaker opponent.⁹

In the same article Linn offered an interesting anecdote on the 1922 U.S. Army War College understanding of the American way of war. Lieutenant Colonel Hjalmar Erickson declared two principles governing U.S. wars: they should be fought to conclusion and on soil other than our own.¹⁰ His premise has persisted in many circles to this very day.

J. Boone Bartholomees Jr., a modern day war college professor has further explored the annihilation attrition controversy. After examining the attributes of both strategies he offers a conclusion that runs counter to modern punditry. "Attrition may be the most effective form of strategy available in some types of war or for attaining certain political objectives."¹¹ Noted commentator Andrew Bacevich offers a more negative view of attrition. "Historically, the default strategy for wars that lack a plausible victory

narrative is attrition. When you don't know how to win, you try to outlast your opponent, hoping he'll run out of troops, money and will before you do."¹²

Finally, in a remarkable response to Linn, Weigley concurred with his critique, "it would have been better to designate the latter (attrition) throughout as a strategy of erosion."¹³ Weigley's conversion to erosion as the most appropriate descriptor of the American way of war is an important point, one that will become central in the development of a 21st Century version later in this paper.

The distinction between these ends of the theoretical spectrum is more important than elements of an academic debate. The underpinnings of this argument have influenced numerous military and civilian practitioners and theorists for decades. Max Boot commented in 2005:

As a description of the main U.S. approach to major conflicts, the American way of war has stood the test of time. Its time is now past, however. Spurred by dramatic advances in information technology, the U.S. military has adopted a new style of warfare that eschews the bloody slogging matches of old.¹⁴

The United States has undergone "a change of mindset that will allow the military to harness the technological advances of the information age to gain a qualitative advantage over any potential foe."¹⁵ Yet in other writings, Boot appears to contradict himself with the assertion that, "technology alone rarely confers an insurmountable military edge...."¹⁶ So which is it? Are we on the leading edge of a technological development that has fundamentally altered the means of war, opening new possibilities to evolve beyond the constraints of annihilation and attrition or is the promise another chimera concocted by armchair theorists? Further examination of the continuing debate on the American way of war may assist in answering the question.

Brian Linn was sufficiently influenced by Weigley's work that he subsequently wrote a book in an attempt to correct some of the perceived faults in the Weigley thesis. In, *The Echo of Battle*, Linn argues, "that the army's way of war has been shaped as much or more by its peacetime intellectual debate as by its wartime service."¹⁷ Critics of *The American Way of War* often point out that military policy or strategy is largely the product of wartime experience. Linn's point is that wartime execution of strategy is, thankfully, infrequent. The vast majority of debate on the proper employment of available means in strategy occurs during peacetime.

The end result of such contemporary peacetime (and wartime) debates produce expressions of strategy dependant on a new lexicon replete with terms like Dominant Maneuver, Network Enabled Warfare, Precision Engagement, and Full Spectrum Operations. The current U.S. Army Chief of Staff recently expressed the following statement, one focused on the notion of full spectrum operations and the impact of technology on the force.

While the Army has been progressively adapting since the end of the Cold War, we must take advantage of what we continue to learn in our current operations, leverage emerging technology and continuously adapt to build a balanced Army to meet the demands of 21st Century conflict. We need to continuously adapt to a versatile mix of tailorable and networked organizations, operating on a rotational cycle, to provide a sustained flow of trained and ready forces for Full Spectrum Operations and to hedge against unexpected contingencies ...¹⁸

Is an overarching or unifying theory possible or even necessary? The challenge of providing a uniquely American way of war in a single, universally applicable doctrine and developing a 'Full Spectrum Force' capable of executing the doctrine is daunting. Apparently answering such a challenge is also on the mind of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff as evidenced by his remarks in a little noticed speech at Kansas State

University in March of 2010. In this speech, Admiral Mike Mullen outlined three principles that provide the framework of his version of the 21st Century American way of war. “The first is that military power should not – maybe cannot – be the last resort of the state.”¹⁹ The second, “force should, to the maximum extent possible, be applied in a precise and principled way.”²⁰ Finally, “policy and strategy should constantly struggle with one another.”²¹ It is also important to note that Admiral Mullen expressed a belief in an evolving American way of war heavily influenced by the “most relevant threats to our national security and the means by which that security is best preserved.”²² The means referred to include the resources employed by the military instrument in pursuit of strategic objectives. Having explored the foundational history of the debate over a uniquely American way of war, the next section will conduct a closer examination of means and the influence of technology.

The Deleterious Influence of Technology

One of Clausewitz’s most famous and oft repeated ideas is that war is politics by other means.²³ The problem is many readers stop at this point, failing to discern the ramifications of his next sentence: “... and the commander in any specific instance, is entitled to require that the trend and designs of policy shall not be inconsistent with these means.”²⁴ Clausewitz simply states policy cannot exceed the capabilities of the means available to the commander. But he goes further. The nature of war, its logic, is timeless. Moreover, Clausewitz observed that the very nature of war is unchanged by any improvement of means.²⁵ Logically, if war’s nature were to change it would become something other than war. War’s grammar, how it is made or fought, is in constant motion however, always adapting and incorporating technological advancement in a quest to make the toil more efficient or effective. Destroying an enemy by dropping

rocks or nuclear bombs may result in the same outcome, but both are compelled by a common desire to impose your will on an adversary.

What then is the impact of technology on warfare? Military theorist Max Boot weighs in on the subject in, *War Made New*.

My view is that technology sets the parameters of the possible; it creates the potential for a military revolution. The extent to which various societies and their armies exploit the possibilities inherent in new tools of war and thereby create actual military revolution depends on organization, strategy, tactics, leadership, training, morale and other human factors.²⁶

Despite the heavily qualified nature of his statement, it does demonstrate the essence of technology's impact on warfare. Technology influences means and establishes both opportunities and vulnerabilities for practitioners. A historic example of this precept may further illuminate the concept.

The historic impact of technology on the nature and conduct of warfare and the subsequent development of military strategy is limited to its influence on the imbalance between available means. Successful practitioners of strategy best orchestrate available means (as influenced by technology) into decisive combinations to achieve a desired end. To illustrate the point, land power has been organized into three distinct groups for centuries. Ground retention units are known as infantry; firepower units are missile troops designed to inflict casualties from a distance; and the third, mobile or mounted soldiers, maneuver for positional advantage. All three groups compete for primacy of effectiveness. Historically, technological advancements in weaponry and ancillary capabilities for each group evolve unevenly, resulting in a high likelihood of one having advantage or increased capability over the others. A classic example is the effect of the conoidal bullet on infantry lethality in the middle of the 19th Century. This advancement enabled the infantry to gain comparative lethality advantage over its

battlefield companions resulting in completely different tactical arrangements. The issue then is not that technology influences means, but rather any imbalance among the means affects the methods of war. By extension this argument is applicable between land, sea, and air power as well as the means found in the diplomatic, informational, and economic elements of national power, all concepts which determine a 21st Century American way of war.

There are alternative positions on technology's impact on war, ones that elevate the role of technology similar to one envisioned in a 2008 *New York Times* editorial: "Superior technology has been America's great comparative advantage on battlefields around the world for generations. It must continue to be so."²⁷ Perhaps the most extreme example of this excessive advocacy was personified by Hitler. In *A History of Warfare*, John Keegan observed that, "he [Hitler] was obsessed with the technology of war making, preening himself on his mastery of its details and holding unfailingly to the view that superior weapons could supply the key to victory...."²⁸ Some contemporary pundits, like Hitler, look solely within the realm of technological advancement in an attempt to discern the future of warfare. Noted theorist Colin Grey offered the following observation on just such a hypothesis: "The past, present, and future of warfare is sometimes treated as if it were synonymous with the history of technology, particularly weapons technology. The material culture of war is confused with war itself. Means and ends are reversed."²⁹ The confusion of ends with means is a dangerous business for any would be strategist, Hitler being an excellent case in point. Grey further opined on the proper role of weapons and technology with, "weapons and their support systems

are only the tools of war. They are, or should be, the servants of strategy and high policy.”³⁰

In the U.S. Army War College strategy formulation model the tools of war are its means. The means are assembled into various ways to achieve a stated objective or end. Army War College Professor Rich Yarger’s assertion that strategy is designed, “to increase the probability of policy success and the favorable consequences that follow”³¹ is an apt summation of strategy’s purpose. Organizing strategic thought into objectives (ends), concepts (ways), and resources (means) provides a useful and logical framework for expression and analysis. When coupled with scrutiny of the accompany risk in the strategy, an ends, ways, means approach provides a comprehensive model for the study and application of strategy. This model then places technology’s influence in its proper place, as Grey suggests, to that of a servant to strategy and high policy.

Max Boot offers a further cautionary statement on the other end of the theoretical technology spectrum. “But just as there is a danger of technological determinism, so there is an equal danger of ignoring the effects of technology ... no amount of élan could allow a soldier to outrun a machine-gun bullet.... The tools of war do matter.”³² But do the tools of the other instruments of power equally matter and does technology influence them in similar fashion?

In the U.S. Army War College strategy formulation model the instruments of power include Diplomacy, Information, Military Forces, and Economics. Like the military instrument, technology adapts the tools employed in each of the other three instruments. For example, a globalized economy and the impact of multi-national corporations provide new methods for nation states and non-state actors to influence

others. Diplomacy may be the most technology resistant instrument of power but given the imbedded nature of communication in diplomacy it is certainly not immune. The recent post election unrest in Iran comes to mind. This example may blur the lines between diplomacy and that of the third instrument of national power, information. It takes little imagination to discern the impact of steady, evolutionary technological advancement in the information realm. This new realm has led some contemporary commentators to declare the information domain the next dimension of terrain for modern combatants.

The 21st century may provide new terrain, namely space and cyber space, for the continuation of politics by other means. But like engagements inside the traditional historic landscape, any attempt at inflating the ramifications of warfare in this new geographic space is likewise limited by the influence on the imbalance among the means operating in the new terrain. The effective strategic leader must understand the incongruence of means in every geographic sphere and arrange combinations of capability in a way to overcome an adversary's resistance. Simply put, destruction of the enemy is an eternal verity of war and technological advancements may change the means but not war's nature. To conclude, Grey summarizes with the following observation, "technology cannot revoke war's very nature, which has risk, uncertainties, chance, and friction, as permanent constituent elements."³³ Thus we are left with the following premise to explore. If war's nature remains constant and its means are constantly evolving, then any strategic environment demands a novel approach to bring strategic conclusion to any endeavor involving the instruments of national power.

Successful strategic conclusion is the objective; regrettably it is an elusive objective and the problems associated will be explored in the next section.

21st Century Warfare and the Problem of Successful Strategic Conclusion

Section two determined that strategy is only indirectly influenced by technology. Strategy is the product of accurate assessment of the existing state of technology among the means and subsequent employment innovations organized into ways that achieve the desired strategic aim or end. In his Kansas State speech, Admiral Mullen linked the determination of an American way of war to the most relevant threats and the development of U.S. means. Recent campaigns in the Middle East have heavily influenced U.S. defense thinking on both. The population centric strategies resulting from the experience in Iraq dominate tactical and operational doctrine, material, and force development. Another campaign, also in the Middle East, may have a more lasting impact on U.S. strategic thought however. The campaign in question is the 2006 Lebanon campaign.

The hybrid nature of a non-state actor confronting a state actor across the entire spectrum of conflict harnessing traditional conventional military, diplomatic and informational capability, coupled with asymmetric terrorist means presents a relevant 21st century threat to develop an overarching American response. This threat spans the entire spectrum of conflict and is already being emulated in other regions of the world. The complexity of this hybrid challenge exacerbates the difficulty in establishing a clear cause and effect relationship in outcomes among the various levels of war. The inability to translate comparative tactical advantage into successful strategic conclusion has plagued military and political leaders for centuries. So what exactly is strategic victory

and why is it so hard to establish a cause and effect relationship among the levels of warfare?

Boone Bartholomees tackled the issue in his 2008 article, "Theory of Victory." "Victory in war is at the most basic level an assessment, not a fact or condition... what matters most is the ultimate perception of the situation, not the facts."³⁴ His assertion increases the complexity of determining victory because he has opened the aperture to include perceptions. A multitude of actors will have an equivalent number of perceptions and the various assessments may be equally valid. "If war is a political act, victory at the highest levels is correspondingly defined in political terms."³⁵ For example, Saddam Hussein could arguably declare the results of the first Gulf War were a strategic victory for him and the people of Iraq. Despite suffering an enormous tactical and operational setback, his strategic end of regime survival was achieved. Simultaneously the coalition could declare tactical, operational and strategic victory through the successful removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Interestingly, there is no consistent cause and effect relationship between the various levels of war. Strategic victory is not dependent on successful tactical or operational outcomes.

To illustrate this issue, Professor Bartholomees posits a sliding scale of success (See figure 1). There are many points that delineate degrees of success or victory on his scale. Most practitioners are comfortable with the defeat or victory ends of the scale but the ramifications of the points not winning and not losing can be disconcerting. Bartholomees presents a continuum of outcomes for describing success and achievement.

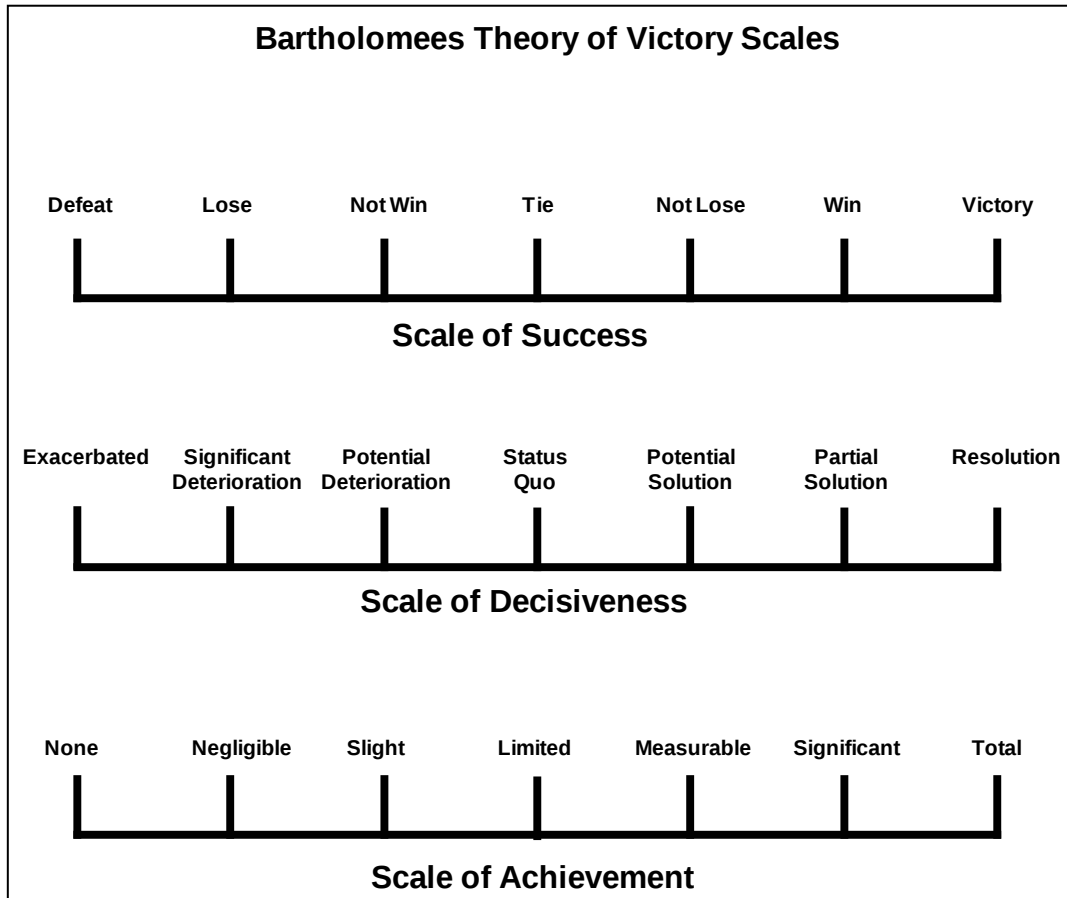


Figure 1. Scales in “Theory of Victory”³⁶

Taken together these three scales provide a framework to analyze victory at each level of war. Any result on one of the ends of the scale produces clear cut outcomes that require little revision over time; in short, they last because one side believes the claim of its adversary. Results at other points on the scale produce imperfect outcomes and difficulty in determining a clear cut victor.

The root cause of this difficulty is found in Clausewitz’s theory of overcoming resistance. To achieve strategic victory, one side must overcome both the means and the will of the adversary.³⁷ “Victory is achieved as Resistance approaches zero and an opponent can effect it by reducing either Means, Will or both.”³⁸ Destruction of an

adversary's means is a recognized method of achieving victory. Direct attacks on the will of the enemy have been more difficult to organize with combatants historically resorting to indirect methods through attacks on the means. The strategic aerial bombing campaign of WWII is the classic example of this method. Professor Bartholomees addressed the difficulty of direct attacks on the will and came to the following conclusion. "The one proven way to break will is to convince the enemy that resistance is futile... the only method currently available to directly attack will is information operations."³⁹ Since it is improbable that any combatant can reduce an opponent's means or will to zero there is added complexity in determining the most lucrative components of enemy capability to target.

Despite this difficulty there is an inconvenient truth about war: "Although war is a great evil, it does have a great virtue: it can resolve political conflicts and lead to peace... the key is that the fighting must continue until a resolution is reached."⁴⁰ Professor Weigley counters with a very different syllogism, however: "If its power of decision was the one virtue that war had ever had, then war never had any virtue."⁴¹ The difference of opinion between these two extremes is considerable. Strategic conclusion (peace) is conditional. "Since war is about, and only about, the subsequent peace, the stability of that peace not infrequently depends upon the enemy understanding that he has been defeated."⁴²

Armed with a better understanding of the role of technology on the means available and the difficulty of translating comparative tactical advantage into strategic success, the next section will examine if the United States has reconciled this dilemma with a preferred 21st Century way of warfare?

Comprehensive Erosion, the 21st Century American Way of War

Brian Linn offered one potentially positive outcome of the current crisis in Iraq. “Most importantly, Iraq has revitalized the old frontier – imperial heroic belief that securing the peace is as important as winning the campaign.”⁴³ If strategic theory truly deals with “ends which bear directly on the restoration of peace”⁴⁴ as Clausewitz posited, then there is utility in searching for a general theory or American way of war that accounts for the application of the instruments of power before, during, and after general hostilities.

Grand strategy is defined in JP 1-02 as, “an overarching strategy summarizing the national vision for developing, applying, and coordinating all the instruments of national power in order to accomplish the grand strategic objectives.”⁴⁵ In a 2008 report written to shape the Obama administration’s defense strategy, Barry Watts addressed the “symptoms of poor and declining American strategic performance,” determining that, “diagnosing the underlying causes requires a degree of clarity about what strategy is and the cognitive requirements for doing it well.”⁴⁶ For Watts, “strategy is about finding or creating decisive advantages between two sides. Decisive advantages, in turn, generally have to do with asymmetries between the two sides.”⁴⁷

Because asymmetries are a natural occurrence or effect caused by uneven evolution of technology among the various means, the strategist’s task is the identification of the inherent asymmetrical capability available, and the subsequent arrangement of these means into a unique combination or way. Watts summarizes it in this fashion, “Strategy in competitive situations boils down to identifying or creating advantages that can be exploited over time to progress toward one’s ultimate objective...”⁴⁸

Watts employs a clever Arab proverb as a corollary to this proposition, addressing the difficulty of predicting the future. *“He who predicts the future lies, even when he tells the truth.”*⁴⁹ Clausewitz, Watts, Grey, and Boot all appear to agree on this strategic principle to some degree. This strategist’s dilemma frequently results in a multitude of reasons why a unifying grand strategy is a chimera and any pursuit of it sheer folly.

Establishing cause and effect relationships between the employment of a particular strategy and an outcome is indeed problematic. Richard Betts published an exhaustive study of the problem in 2000, concluding. “To skeptics, effective strategy is often an illusion because what happens in the gap between policy objectives and war outcomes is too complex and unpredictable to be manipulated to a specific end.”⁵⁰ He goes on to support his statement with, “there is little demonstrative relationship between strategies and outcomes in war.”⁵¹ Logically, the lack of clear cause and effect could push leaders into abandoning the considerable effort required in the development of a unifying grand strategy. But consider the alternatives. Will a nation get better results by forgoing any strategic planning by placing its trust in luck, chance, or providence?

Strategy is the selection of choices among various options. “To eschew strategy in matters of strategic choice is to eschew reason.”⁵² Despite the considerable difficulty in creating long term strategy the United States of America has always had one in a de facto sense as evidenced by the great debate on the existence of an American way of war. As we enter the 21st Century we must assess the current state of technological advancement among the various means and update our grand strategy in order to make wise choices. Failure to do so will result in the haphazard employment of means in

nonsensical fashion in a hopeful attempt of avoiding unwanted outcomes. The remainder of this section offers a framework for just such a grand strategy.

In an Association of the United States Army Land power paper published in 2003 entitled, “Continuous Concentric Pressure,” John Bonin and Mark Gerner make the case for an alignment between American grand strategy and theater level strategic plans. Their central premise is, “pressure is applied by economic, political, information, and military means, each of which act in space and time to shape the security environment and, when required, to isolate and to defeat an enemy.”⁵³ The paper proceeds to examine the historic debate of a strategy of annihilation or attrition⁵⁴ concluding that, “the more relevant concept for today may be the flexible employment of the strategy of exhaustion.”⁵⁵ The clarity of their argument conjures up a vision of an anaconda, the very descriptor applied to the 19th Century Union strategy to defeat the secessionist south. Bonin and Gerner offer the U.S. strategy in Iraq as one of many historical examples to defend the thesis. Written before the onset of Operation Iraqi Freedom, their use of Iraq as a case study focused on the diplomatic, economic, informational and later military isolation of the regime.⁵⁶ Comparing the subsequent ‘surge’ to their strategy of ‘Continuous Concentric Pressure’ provides a remarkable validation of their work.

Figure 2 is taken from a chart used in the 2008 Congressional testimony of MNF-I Commander General David Petraeus. As indicated by the title and content there is considerable similarity with the strategy developed by Bonin and Gerner. The strategy’s description by GEN Petraeus’ is even more revealing.

This chart [Figure 2] lays out the comprehensive strategy that we, the Iraqis, and our interagency and international partners are employing to

reduce what AQI needs. As you can see, defeating Al Qaeda in Iraq requires not just actions by our elite counter-terrorist forces, but also major operations by Coalition and Iraqi conventional forces, a sophisticated intelligence effort, political reconciliation, economic and social programs, information operations initiatives, diplomatic activity, the employment of counterinsurgency principles in detainee operations, and many other actions.⁵⁷



Figure 2. Anaconda Strategy in Iraq⁵⁸

Close examination of the contents of the description confirms use of all of the instruments of national power outlined earlier in this paper. Diplomacy is used to shape the political landscape inside Iraq. Information in the form of strategic communication, interagency use of the internet, and information operations. Military force is applied by conventional and special operating forces as well as coalition partners in both kinetic and non-kinetic ways.

Earlier a description of grand strategy as defined in JP 1-02 included, “developing, applying, and coordinating all the instruments of national power in order to accomplish the grand strategic objectives...”⁵⁹ The Anaconda strategy to defeat Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) adheres to this definition in each instance. In his response to Brian Linn’s critique of *American Way of War*, Professor Weigley altered his original use of attrition and replaced it with erosion as a more fitting descriptor. He went on to describe, “the primary exemplar of this category, General George Washington, whose aim was not so much to impose attrition on the British Army... as to erode political support for the war in America on the part of Parliament...”⁶⁰ General Washington’s insight is prescient. Updating Weigley’s revised hypothesis to the demands of a modern, hyper connected operational environment results in a 21st Century American way of war of ‘Comprehensive Erosion.’ The strategy is labeled ‘comprehensive’ because it employs all four instruments of national power. Previous descriptions of the American way of war focused solely on the military instrument. The definition of Grand Strategy in JP 1-02 requires expansion of this notion. ‘Erosion’ was selected because it aptly describes the potential degradation of enemy capability before, during and after conflict. As discussed in section 3, enemy resistance is the product of means and will with success achieved through reduction or ‘erosion’ in either component. Thus ‘Comprehensive Erosion’ is consistent with current doctrinal literature, and provides suitable connectivity to the traditional expression of the American way of war.

Figure 3 visualizes the strategy’s framework. The chart is broken down into the four instruments of national power as articulated in the U.S. Army War College guide to strategy. The technology influenced means inside each quadrant are assessed,

resulting in potentially useable asymmetric advantage when combined or employed in unique combinations or ways. These ways are directed against designated enemy capability in order to achieve a desired objective or end.

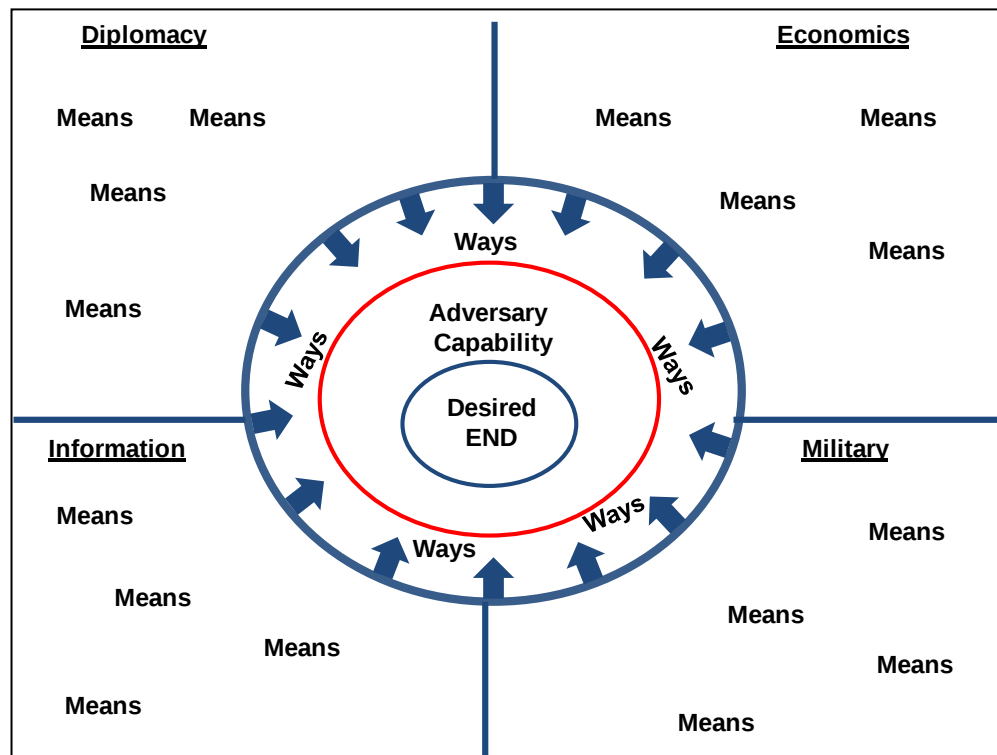


Figure 3. Comprehensive Erosion

The object of strategy is to simultaneously reduce both the means of the adversary and the will to employ them. In his Kansas State speech, Admiral Mullen outlined the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach to successfully accomplish this simultaneous reduction. "Should we choose to exert American influence solely through our troops, we should expect to see that influence diminish in time."⁶¹ He went on to declare the employment of the other instruments of national power a precondition for employment of troops in certain situations.⁶² As he concluded his remarks, Admiral Mullen made his most significant declaration on the future role of the military instrument.

“We must not look upon the use of military forces only as a last resort, but potentially the best, first option *when combined with the other instruments of national power* (emphasis added).”⁶³

Combining the instruments of national power to erode enemy capability before, during, and after conflict is the hallmark of comprehensive erosion. A brief example on how select means found in the non-military instruments will illustrate the advantage of employing comprehensive erosion as the 21st Century American way of war.

The traditional view of the diplomatic instrument of power is relegated to smartly dressed ambassadors or heads of state discussing treaties across a table. The famous peace treaties that have ended conflict, the allied conferences of WWII, and the more recent Dayton accord are all examples. A more modern view of the instrument rests in the establishment of good governance in weak, fragile states or in rebuilding governmental capability post hostility.

Like the other instruments, the establishment of good governance is applicable before, during and after hostilities. The recent offensive in Afghanistan demonstrates this imperative. “For the first time, NATO and Afghan officials have assembled a large team of Afghan administrators and an Afghan governor that will move into Marja the moment shooting stops. More than 1,900 police are standing by.”⁶⁴ In the same *New York Times* article, General McChrystal declares, “We’ve got a government in a box, ready to roll in.”⁶⁵ His government in a box catchphrase is a pithy way to remember the importance of simultaneous application of all instruments to reduce enemy means and will. In this instance the creation of Afghan governance in a permissive security environment further reduces the power of shadow Taliban functions. Lasting success of

good governance is closely linked, possibly dependent, on the next instrument of power, information.

Winning the war of ideas or the use of the information instrument of power was an important component of the American way before there was a United States of America. From Thomas Paines, "Common Sense," to the use of Voice of America and Radio Free Europe, American employment of the information instrument has rested on an underlying assumption that ideas such as liberty and freedom matter. This 200 plus year employment history will be further magnified in the globally interconnected 21st Century. Since Clausewitz declared war is politics by other means, the use of information to galvanize popular will has evolved into an offensive capability to erode an adversary's will. Current social media tools provide a ready means to distribute information globally, without undertaking expensive distribution system development. The use of full motion video to provide graphic communication of events and ideas to a worldwide audience beyond the control of a nation state promises to increase the importance of information operations for years to come.

Since means and will are the components of resistance, any innovative use of improved communication is a welcome addition to the American way of war. Of all the instruments of power, information may prove to be the most adaptive, limited only by the imaginative mind of human combatants. If the use of information means by terrorist organizations is any indication, that use may be limitless.

Reducing the economic means of terrorist organizations provides an apt example of the power found in comprehensive erosion. In a March 2010 *Forbes* story on the financial solvency of al Qaeda, Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and

Financial Intelligence, Stuart Levey, described the importance of money to a terrorist organization: “It is not just about funding the attacks, they must pay the operatives and families of suicide bombers, bribe public officials, travel, purchase travel documents and provide training.”⁶⁶ Eroding the monetary means of al Qaeda demands expertise outside the military instrument. Only a comprehensive approach that employs a whole of government can accomplish this objective. Designating individuals as terrorist financiers, singling out charities used as fronts, freezing assets, and prohibiting legitimate businesses from transactions with known terrorist financial agents are all means available to the economic instrument. In sum, they represent a unique contribution to erode threat means not found in the other instruments.

The economic instrument is not limited to erosion of threat means. The creation of viable economic enterprise provides resiliency in populations challenged with competing ideas. It is imperative to strengthen resolve in at risk populations before they become tools of ideologically motivated threats. Moreover, application of this instrument is not limited to confronting non-state actors. Arguably the cold war was brought to strategic conclusion as much by the power in the promise of economic prosperity found in free markets as the strength of the confronting military means.

As evidenced by our doctrinal literature and operational execution in Iraq, Afghanistan, and arguably many other times in our history, the United States has employed comprehensive erosion as both a grand and theater level strategy. In many ways we have remained true to the enduring nature of war while adapting to the ever changing conditions brought on by technological advancement.

Conclusion – What Does it all Mean?

“Tell me how this ends.”⁶⁷ General David Petraeus is famously reported to have asked this question of historian journalist Rick Atkinson early in the Iraq campaign. Today, his question is used to provoke debate on the strategic choices followed in Iraq. His question is eminently applicable to this work however.

Arguably the United States has always had a preferred way of war. The preference is based on an assessment of technology influenced means, arranged into unique combinations or ways and directed against a stated end. When done properly, the ways have created asymmetrical advantage over enemy capability resulting in successful strategic conclusion. Grand strategy in the 21st Century is no different; it is all about the end. Clausewitz pointed out the importance of the question early in his work: “The first, the supreme, the most far reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something alien to its nature.”⁶⁸

In all probability the debate over a distinctly American way of war will continue for as long as there is a United States of America. Any time our nation is involved in conflict somewhere in the world, or there are questions over the proper employment of newly developed means, commentators will invoke the American way label to make their point. A 2009 *New York Daily News* op-ed illustrates. “Military analysts who a decade ago were touting the wonders of precision-guided munitions now cite counterinsurgency as the new American way of war.”⁶⁹ Not satisfied with this statement, Mr. Bacevich went further, commenting on a perceived new form of attrition. “The revival of counterinsurgency doctrine, celebrated as evidence of enlightened military practice,

commits America to a post modern version of attrition. Rather than wearing the enemy down, we'll build contested countries up."⁷⁰ Mr. Bacevich's notion of a post modern evolution of attrition appears to agree with the opening epigraph of this paper that quoted Admiral Mullen. "Each era has something to teach, for there is no single defining American way of war."⁷¹

Both men are wrong. As long as Clausewitz's theory concerning resistance remains valid, then comprehensive erosion or a subtle variation of it will remain the American way of war. Comprehensive erosion is a suitable link between America's historic past and future. It is the 21st Century American Way of War.

Endnotes

¹ Mike Mullen, "Landon Lecture Series Remarks," 3 March 2010; available from <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?ID=1336>; Internet; accessed 10 May 2010.

² "The destruction of the enemy's armed forces, amongst all the objects which can be pursued in War, appears always as the one which overrules all others." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 87.

³ Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War*, (Bloomington, I.N.: Indiana University Press, 1977), xxii.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 312.

⁶ Brian Linn, "The American Way of War Revisited," *The Journal of Military History* 66 (April 2002):504.

⁷ Hans Delbruck, *History of the Art of war*, vol 4, *The Dawn of Modern Warfare*, trans. By Walter J. Renfro (1985; reprint, Lincoln; Univ. of Nebraska press, 1990), 293; quoted in Brian Linn, "The American Way of War, Revisited," *The Journal of military History*, vol. 66, No 2. 9Apr., 2002):503.

⁸ Linn, "The American Way of War Revisited," 504.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "That same year, LTC Hjalmar Erickson explained that although the United States had no formal doctrine (or way) of war, a study of history revealed two central principles: "first of all, our

wars have been fought to a conclusion; that is we have not had to fight a nation twice over the same question; second, with two exceptions, our wars have been fought on other territory than our own. It can be said that our people will expect to fight future wars to definite conclusions and, other things being equal, to carry war into enemy countries so as to avoid hostile occupation of our own." Linn, "*The American Way of War Revisited*", 525.

¹¹ J. Boone Bartholomees Jr., "The Issue of Attrition," *Parameters*, (Spring 2010) 5.

¹² Andrew J. Bacevich, New York Daily News, December 23, 2009 Accessed on 23 December 2009 at <http://ebird.osd.mil/ebfiles/e20091223724011.html>

¹³ Russell Weigley "Response, *The American Way of War Revisited*," *The Journal of Military History* 66 (April 2002):531.

¹⁴ Max Boot, "The New American Way of War," *Foreign Affairs* 82, no.4 (JI/Ag 2003): 41.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Max Boot, *War Made New: Technology, Warfare, and the Course of History, 1500 to Today* (New York: Gotham, 2006), 9.

¹⁷ Brian Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War*, (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 234.

¹⁸ George Casey, "The Army of the 21st Century," *Army*, October 2009, 30.

¹⁹ Mike Mullen, "Landon Lecture Series Remarks," 3 March 2010; available from <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?ID=1336>; Internet; accessed 10 May 2010.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ " ... war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 87.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ "The invention of gunpowder and the constant improvement of firearms are enough in themselves to show that the advance of civilization has done nothing practical to alter or deflect the impulse to destroy the enemy, which is the very idea of war." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 76.

²⁶ Max Boot, *War Made New*, 9,10.

²⁷ "A Few Big Ideas," *NY Times*, Available from http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/31/opinion/31wed1.html?_r=1&ref=opinion; Internet, accessed 31 Dec 2008.

- ²⁸ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 371, 372.
- ²⁹ Colin S. Grey, *Another Bloody Century* (London: Phoenix, 2006), 153.
- ³⁰ Ibid., 154.
- ³¹ Harry Yarger, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), 1.
- ³² Boot, *War Made New*, 9.
- ³³ Grey, 159.
- ³⁴ J. Boone Bartholomees, "Theory of Victory," *Parameters* (Summer 2008): 26.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 27, 28.
- ³⁷ "If you want to overcome your enemy you must match your effort against his power of resistance, which can be expressed as the product of two inseparable factors viz. the total means at his disposal and the strength of his will." Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 77.
- ³⁸ Bartholomees, "Theory of Victory," 34.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 35.
- ⁴⁰ Edward N. Luttwak, "Give War a Chance," *Foreign Affairs* 78, No. 4 (Jl/Ag 99): 36.
- ⁴¹ Russell Weigley, *The Age of Battles: The Quest for Decisive Warfare from Breitenfeld to Waterloo*, (Bloomington, I.A.: Indiana University Press, 1991), xiii.
- ⁴² Grey, 158.
- ⁴³ Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War*, 241.
- ⁴⁴ Clausewitz, 147.
- ⁴⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Pub 1-02 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 12 April 2001), 525.
- ⁴⁶ Barry Watts, *US Combat Training, Operational Art, and Strategic Competence: Problems and Opportunities* (Washington D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments), 57.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁰ Richard K. Betts, "Is Strategy an Illusion," *International Security* 25, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 5.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Watts, 61.

⁵³ John Bonin and Mark Gerner, "Continuous Concentric Pressure," (Arlington, VA.: The Institute of Land Warfare, 2003), 1.

⁵⁴ There is considerable interchange in the labels of the various strategies. Attrition, erosion and exhaustion are frequently used to mean the same thing, i.e. the gradual diminishment of an adversary's resource over time. For the purposes of clarity, this paper will adopt Bonin's and Gerner's use of Annihilation and Exhaustion.

⁵⁵ Bonin and Gerner, 4.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁷ David H. Petraeus, "Congressional Testimony 8-9 April 2008," available from http://opfor.com/2008/04/general_petraeus_congressional.html; Internet; accessed on 17 Sep 2009.

⁵⁸ David H. Petraeus, "Charts to accompany the Congressional testimony of GEN David H. Petraeus 8-9 April 2008, available from http://opfor.com/2008/04/general_petraeus_congressional.html; Internet; accessed on 17 Sep 2009. Chart 8.

⁵⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Pub 1-02 (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 12 April 2001), 525.

⁶⁰ Russell Weigley, Response, "The American Way of War Revisited," *The Journal of Military History* 66 (April 2002): 531.

⁶¹ Mike Mullen, "Landon Lecture Series Remarks," 3 March 2010; available from <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?ID=1336>; Internet; accessed 10 May 2010.

⁶² "In fact, I would argue that in the future struggles of the asymmetric counterinsurgent variety, we ought to make it a precondition of committing our troops, that we will do so only if and when the other instruments of national power are ready to engage as well." Mike Mullen, "Landon Lecture Series Remarks," 3 March 2010; available from <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?ID=1336>; Internet; accessed 10 May 2010.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Dexter Filkins, "Afghan offensive is New war Model," *New York Times*, 13 February 2010; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/13/world/asia/13kabul.html?>; Internet; accessed on 19 February 2010.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Nathan Vardi, "Is al Qaeda Bankrupt?" *Forbes*, 1 March 2010; available from http://www.forbes.com/forbes/2010/0301/terrorism-funds-finance-osama-al-qaeda-bankrupt_print.html; Internet; accessed 2 March 2010.

⁶⁷ Linda Robinson, *Tell Me How this Ends: General David Petraeus and the Search for a Way Out of Iraq* (New York, Public Affairs 2008) 68.

⁶⁸ Clausewitz, 88.

⁶⁹ Andrew J. Bacevich, *New York Daily News*, December 23, 2009; available from <http://ebird.osd.mil/ebfiles/e20091223724011.html>; Internet; accessed on 23 December 2009.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Mike Mullen, "Landon Lecture Series Remarks," 3 March 2010; available from <http://www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?ID=1336>; Internet; accessed 10 May 2010.

