Learning from a Decade-Plus of War

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Talking about lessons learned from 12 years of war could involve any numer of perspectives: the technical-military lessons, the strategic, operational, and tactical lessons, the interagency lessons, the civil-military relationship lessons, lessons from waging coalition war, operational lessons, institutional lessons, Iraq lessons, or Afghanistan, or the war against al-Qaeda.

I chose none of these. Rather, I organized my thoughts in four meta-categories.

Of course, my remarks in each category will be my own. No one should infer that I speak for anyone but myself. Being retired now for 5 years, I have a bit of detachment and have tried to use that space to present some observations worthy of a gathering of this caliber.

My observations are related to the defense discussions and writing that is going on within the D.C. think-tank, academic, policy, and military circles.

I just returned from a week long international conference on teaching national security subjects sponsored by the Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Study. It was held at Basin Harbor, Vermont. I can say that the attendees discussed many of the ideas I'll present—in all four categories.

Everyone in the think-tank, academic, policy, and military circles seems to be wondering about the same thing: what lessons are we drawing? And are they the right ones?

So let me get to my first category: what we should have known but ignored, had to re-learn, and are already forgetting.

Here it is: while the conduct of war has changed, is changing, and will continue to change, the nature of war isn't.

Obvious? It seems too simple to even mention. Maybe to us here, but maybe not to all.

Too many leaders—and I mean both civilian and military—confuse the conduct of war with the nature of war. From this confusion, comes a very dangerous conclusion:

That we can ignore what history has told us about war because this war is different—now we have a larger bomb, or smarter bombs, or more information, or more advanced technology, so war will be different.

Of course every war is different. Some aspects of each war are different from others in imporant and meaningful ways—different political circumstances and political aims, technological tools, geo-strategic considerations, financial situations, enemy forces, and other factors like these.

These differences can't be ignored. They are very important. But other aspects of war remain constant.

Early on, it was already clear that the united states was ignoring the constancy of some aspects of war.

In an essay entitled, "Has Warfare Changed? Sorting Apples from Orange," published in 2002 by the Institute of Land Warfare, for example, I listed ten areas in which we seemed to have given insufficient consideration.

I won't bore you with a list of the ten, but my conclusion was this: "We can wish otherwise. We can want short wars or clean wars or wars-at-a-distance. We can think that the tools we use to fight somehow change war's essence. Others have thought so. The stirrup changed war 'forever.' So did the longbow, the machine gun, the airplane, the nuclear bomb—or so claimed the advocates of each. These believers concluded, from their observations about how the conduct of war has always changed and is changing again, that the nature of war has also changed. The 'death' of war was even proclaimed—several times. Each prophet has proved wrong in turn, however. At the start of a war we believe falsely that this war is different—and it may be different in its conduct. But by its end, war's true nature is always reveals itself."

War is the realm of fog, fear, friction, and uncertainty. Wars are always brutal, but not always short. In war the enemy intentionally deceives and foils plans. War has its own logic, and it's not linear. War has it's own timelines, and they're not linear either. Ends and means in war must match. Understanding the kind of war one is waging is crucial to waging that war, and a war's end is a mutual affair.

These and other propositions describe the unchanging character of war. No advanced technologies will change them. And you cannot will or wish them away, though many try.

This leads to my second category: what we want to learn, but shouldn't.

Our national predelictions seem to be denial and amnesia. We act as though we can declare victory, say "never again" to ourselves, and move on.

For examaple, events in Iraq clearly demonstrate that simply declaring that a war is over doesn't work. The war continues in Iraq. Only U.S. involvement has ended.

Regardless of what your position is as to whether we should have invaded Iraq, our nation's interests are not served by an Iraq that is overly influenced by Iran, supporting Assad in Syria, and returning to pre-surge sectarian levels of violence, with resurging

al-Qaeda in Iraq and Shia militias and increased political instability.

Another example: even as we shift force from overseas bases to the United States, there is an insufficient discussion concerning transport (air and sea) and logistics. Deploying (getting there) and sustaining (staying there) are all but "off the radar screen," so-to-speak.

The idea seems to be "we're never going to do that again"—where "that" is deploy large numbers of ground forces—so we don't have to address in any realistic way, deployment, logistics, and sustainment capacity.

Denial and amnesia are part of both of these examples. They are also part of a third example.

Correctly, we realize that air and sea dominance are necessary components to any successful use of military force. They are necessary but they are not sufficient for victory in war—or for success in most other uses of military forces for that matter.

We seem to be already forgetting that winning wars generally requires not only destroying an enemy's means for resistance—or enough of them—but also controlling that which he values or which is critical to his survival.

Air and sea power can impose costs on an adversary and, on occasion, deny an enemy his objectives. In limited cases, this may be enough for success.

But it won't work in all cases. In fact, the more common cases are that land power is needed to control territory, infrastructure and populations—for most wars are fought and most crises occur, whether man-made or natural disasters, on land, where people live.

This requires boots on the ground, often for substantial periods of time. And of course, this is true not only of war, but also of humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, and peace keeping missions. Each of these are "people instensive" missions where deployment, logistics, and sustainment consideration are key.

This is an inconvenient truth that we in the U.S. don't really want to learn.

Opposing this truth, is something we want to learn, an emerging conventional wisdom (as opposed to professional wisdom) which proposes a "raid and proxy" approach to success.

That is, light, lethal, fast, and remote use of advanced technologies (drones) and special operations forces is what we need most, and in those cases where this approach won't work, we'll use partners whose capacity we've developed.

Which brings me to the third category: what we should learn, but don't seem to be.

First, the post 9/11 world has confirmed that the main characteristic of the strategic en-

vironment in which we live is uncertainty and ambiguity.

The fact is we simply don't know where the next crisis situation may pop up, what type of crisis it will be, what kind of enemy will be involved, or under what geo-strategic conditions.

I ask simply, if we—the United States or anybody else for that matter—could predict the next war or the next use of force, and structure our armed forces accordingly, why haven't we been able to so far? We certainly did not predict the 9/11 attack and subsequent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Such an uncertain world puts a premium on political leaders having flexibiltiy and options. Why political leaders—because using force is always a political act, another aspect of the enduring nature of war.

At least in the U.S., in the past, size provided the flexibility and those options that previous adminstrations have found so useful.

Optimizing armed forces for a narrow range of tasks or for a specific future decreases flexibility and limits options.

Optimizing armed forces especially by increasing an emphasis on high-tech and remote and decreasing emphasis on human capital also decreases flexibility and limits options, for it forgets that the ultimate hedge against uncertainty and the ultimate adaptive system is a high quality soldier, sailor, airman, or marine with equally high quality leaders.

The conventional wisdom concerning military power—air and sea power, high tech and remote, raid and proxy—is taking us exactly in the wrong direction.

Sufficiently large, balanced forces—air, naval, land, and special operations—filled with high quality personnel and sufficient leaders are best hedges in an uncertain world and the only guarantors of adaptability.

Second, the post 9/11 wars have shown us again that decisions assocated with war—whether at the strategic, operational, or tactical level—are made under conditions of uncertainty and information deficit.

They are also decisions made with conflicting information, some of which includes deliberate deception on the part of the enemy.

Increasing the probability of "right" decisions—or at least ones "less wrong than one's enemy"—requires a healthy civil-military relationship in which straight-forward argument and dialogue can take place.

The probabilities of getting it "right enough" or "not too wrong" also increase when senior leaders—civil and military—have bureacracies that can understand changing realities and adapt directives quickly, then coordinate execution with sufficient unity and coherence.

Any objective analysis of the U.S. capacity in these areas finds as many shortcomings as strengths.

Third, the post 9/11 wars have only confirmed what was already clear several years after the end of the Cold War: conflicts are increasing.

Peace did not break out after the Berlin Wall fell—even though the U.S. and many other nations took a "peace dividend" and reduced the size and composition of their military forces. And one needs only attend to open-source information to see that peace is not breaking out now.

Furthermore, while America may be the sole superpower, no single power can resolve the kinds of problems the world now faces or will face in the foreseeable future.

The bipolar world of the Cold War is gone, but no stabilizing arrangement has followed. America has an important role in the world, but that role is yet undefined.

At least from my perspective, since 1989 varieties of U.S. Presidential policies—where each president seeks to disassociate his administration from the previous one—have replaced the consistency of U.S. bipartisan strategy that characterized the Cold War period, and our Congress has contributed to this phenomenon.

The result? Radical swings in the U.S. approach to using force and added instability to a world where uncertainty is already the main characteristic.

That brings me to my final category: what we know we should learn, but can't seem to.

The first item in this category is acquisition reform. Someone recently told me that there have been over 300 studies of the U.S. acquisition system and each recommended radical reforms. Yet no action. We know we should learn this lesson and act upon that knowledge, but can't bring ourselves to do so.

Why is this important? Well, our system wastes money first of all. But the acquisition system also diminishes U.S. flexibiltiy.

A system that takes as long as ours does to go from requirement identification to concept approval to initial design, and prototype to final productio, is not one useful in the kind of strategic environment in which we live and in which our armed forces must prevail.

I understand that acquisition reform is complex and difficult. But I also understand that it is necessary, especially now given both the financial situation the U.S. has put itself in and the strategic situation the U.S. is in.

A second lession that we know we should learn but can't seem to learn it concerns unnecessary military infrastructure.

America simply has too many unused or under-utilized facilities. Maintaining them costs money. Ultimately the cost of keeping them open when they're not necessary comes in

not being able to field the kind of force the U.S. actually needs. Once more, we know this but cannot bring ourselves to act on this knowledge.

Last, for 12 years now we have seen that waging war is a civil-military affair. Military force alone cannot resolve the kind of conflicts we're in now and forsee in our near and mid term future. Non-military "forces"—diplomatic, political, economic, and agricultural, as well as institution-building capacities—are at least as necessary as military, and in some case more decisive.

Again, this is clear. Yet, at least for the U.S., our approach to incorporating these "non-traditional forces" has been ad hoc, as if this phenomenon is an anomoly.

I think I'm safe in saying that we have not yet come up with a common, inter-agency process which fully incorporates these "forces" with military forces so as to have an integrated approach that yields sufficient unity of purpose and coherency in action—at the tactical, operational, or strategic levels.

I hope my four meta-categories have stimulated enough thought.

Content has been edited for formatting purposes.