
The 1995 RMA Essay Contest: **A POSTSCRIPT**

By ANDREW W. MARSHALL

As the preceding articles demonstrate, there is a serious debate today over whether we are going through a period of revolutionary change in warfare and what that change may be. Many of those who have studied this question believe that we are indeed in the initial stages of a revolution in military affairs (RMA) that will result in dramatic conversions in the character of war.

The current era resembles the decades of the 1920s and 1930s when major shifts occurred in land, sea, and air warfare. Several lessons emerged from that interwar period, including the fact that the military organizations that performed best in World War II were those which innovated most successfully in the interwar era. The most critical factor to success was not technological surprise but the adoption of innovative operational concepts and organizations to exploit commonly available systems. Perhaps the most important aspect of successful innovation was the articulation of a clear and compelling vision of warfare early in the process of change. The origin of *Blitzkrieg*, aircraft carrier strike forces, amphibious warfare, and long-range airpower theory can be traced to the years immediately after World War I, a critical period in theoretical work and experimentation.

While there appears to be a growing consensus that major changes in warfare are underway—similar in scope to those of the interwar period—a coherent vision of how warfare might look by the year 2015 and beyond seems lacking. Desert Storm provided a glimpse of some likely systems and technologies; but the operational concepts and organizations to fully exploit them have yet to be developed. Profound innovation appears more challenging today than in the 1920s since critical aspects of future warfare may center less on tangible platforms than on concepts—especially those related to command and control, which are difficult to envision, model, and simulate. At the same time, the rapid pace of technological change may demand a much faster rate of innovation than we have ever experienced.

Although there are service initiatives to deal with RMA, none have focused on stimulating critical thinking within the broad population of potential innovators. This highlights the importance of initiatives like the *Joint Force Quarterly* RMA Essay Contest. Such a competition offers a rare incentive for individuals concerned with military affairs to depart from near-term operational issues and focus on long-range visions which portend profound change. This year's entries made it clear that the contest achieved its purpose of stimulating such thinking. The backgrounds of the entrants—especially heavy active duty and junior officer participation—was particularly encouraging.

The 1995 contest has established a solid basis for theoretical discussion. Nevertheless, we undoubtedly have a good way to go in thinking through all the implications of this ongoing RMA. It is likely to take many years of concerted effort, through many initiatives, to generate the breadth and depth of thought needed to deal with the military challenges of the 21st century.

In addition to generating ideas, the contest served to expose officers to new concepts and the need for change—especially those who will lead the Armed Forces when this RMA culminates. Thus it is important that this competition of ideas continue with maximum participation. Those of us in the business of long-range thinking look forward to the entries in next year's contest. **JFQ**

Andrew W. Marshall is director of the Office of Net Assessment within the Office of the Secretary of Defense.