

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			PUBLIC
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
6. Office Symbol: C		7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): (U) A NEW AMERICAN WAY OF WAR? IDENTIFYING OPERATIONAL LESSONS FROM AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT IN SOUTHWEST ASIA, KOSOVO, AND AFGHANISTAN			
9. Personal Authors: MAJ Douglas E. Mason, USMC			
10. Type of Report: FINAL		11. Date of Report: 4 Feb 02	
12. Page Count: 22 12A Paper Advisor (if any): Col Dyer Lennox, JMO Dept			
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: American Way of War, Lessons Learned, Afghanistan, Kosovo, Desert Storm, SWA			
15. Abstract: This paper addresses the question of whether the conduct and outcome of the United States last three conflicts (Desert Storm, Kosovo and Afghanistan), represent a new American Way of War. For those that espouse the idea of a new American Way of War, its characteristics include increased Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance capabilities, the dominant nature of precision guided munitions, the increased effectiveness of Special Operations Forces, and the ability to project power from the continental United States. The characteristics and lessons that are mistakenly labeled as new either fit comfortably within the existing framework of the American way of war, or are misrepresented. Further, the apparent obsession on redefining the American way of war is obscuring more important lessons that should be gleaned from these three conflicts. These lessons include the current state of the relationship between fire and maneuver, the changing nature of close air support, the compression of the sensor to shooter "loop," and important coalition and jointness issues.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19. Telephone: 841-3556		20. Office Symbol: C	

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

Newport, RI

**A New American Way of War? Identifying Operational Lessons from American
Involvement in Southwest Asia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan**

By

Major Doug Mason

United States Marine Corps

A paper submitted to the faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the
requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views, and are not necessarily endorsed by
the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy

Signature: _____

04 February 2002

Signature: _____

Col Dyer Lennox, USMC

Professor, Joint Military Operations Department

Report Documentation Page

Report Date 04 Feb 2002	Report Type N/A	Dates Covered (from... to) -
Title and Subtitle A New American Way of War? Identifying Operational Lessons from American Involvement in Southwest Asia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan	Contract Number	
	Grant Number	
	Program Element Number	
Author(s)	Project Number	
	Task Number	
	Work Unit Number	
Performing Organization Name(s) and Address(es) Joint Military Operations Department Naval War College 686 Cushing Road Newport, RI 02841-1207	Performing Organization Report Number	
Sponsoring/Monitoring Agency Name(s) and Address(es)	Sponsor/Monitor's Acronym(s)	
	Sponsor/Monitor's Report Number(s)	
Distribution/Availability Statement Approved for public release, distribution unlimited		
Supplementary Notes		
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Subject Terms		
Report Classification unclassified	Classification of this page unclassified	

Classification of Abstract unclassified	Limitation of Abstract UU
Number of Pages 23	

Abstract

This paper addresses the question of whether the conduct and outcome of the United States last three conflicts (Desert Storm, Kosovo and Afghanistan), represent a new American Way of War. For those that espouse the idea of a new American Way of War, its characteristics include increased Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance capabilities, the dominant nature of precision guided munitions, the increased effectiveness of Special Operations Forces, and the ability to project power from the continental United States. The characteristics and lessons that are mistakenly labeled as new either fit comfortably within the existing framework of the American way of war, or are misrepresented. Further, the apparent obsession on redefining the American way of war is obscuring more important lessons that should be gleaned from these three conflicts. These lessons include the current state of the relationship between fire and maneuver, the changing nature of close air support, the compression of the sensor to shooter “loop,” and important coalition and jointness issues.

Introduction

During the decade of the 1990s, the United States engaged in two significant armed conflicts: Desert Storm and Kosovo. The “first war of the 21st century”¹ commenced following terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, and the first phase of the conflict has been defined by combat action in Afghanistan. The duration of each of these conflicts was measured in months, American casualties were minimal, and military objectives seemed to be decisively achieved. Further unifying these three conflicts is the perception that each has reflected some degree of a revolution in warfare. Indeed, following the rapid collapse of the Taliban forces in Afghanistan, a spate of articles and television news segments trumpeted a “new American way of war.” Although the “new” aspects of Desert Storm, Kosovo and Afghanistan have been heralded to the point that they are gaining the stature of conventional wisdom, the American way of war has not changed. The characteristics and lessons that are mistakenly labeled as new either fit comfortably within the existing framework of the American way of war, or are misrepresented. Further, the apparent obsession on redefining the American way of war is obscuring more important lessons that should be gleaned from these three conflicts.

The American Way of War

Russell Weigley may not have coined the phrase “The American way of war,” but his work of the same title gave scholarly credence to the idea that the United States has a preferred manner of warfighting. In Weigley’s view, the foundation of the American way of war is that the object of war is to cause “... the complete overthrow of the enemy, the destruction of his

military power...”² From the Civil War through World War II, the United States showed a marked capacity to wage wars of attrition and annihilation, harnessing its vast industrial capacity, economic power and technological advantages “... to bring to bear a preponderance of the power in the most direct and decisive manner possible.”³ Historically the United States prefers the offense in war, believing it is the best way to achieve a decisive victory.

The Civil War gave birth to the American way of war as it was demonstrated in the 20th century. Union Generals Grant and Sherman ended the bloody conflict by engaging in a war of annihilation and attrition which fully utilized the manpower, industrial, and economic strengths of the North.⁴ With the possible exception of the Spanish American War, attrition and annihilation were the hallmarks America’s major wars from the Civil War through Vietnam.⁵ Eisenhower, for example, specifically rejected a war of maneuver against Germany on the Western Front after the failure of the Market Garden operations. Instead he implemented an attrition-based offensive by applying uniform strength across the entire front, allowing the Germans to expend their combat power on the Allied side of the Rhine River.⁶ It was not until the war in Vietnam that the American way of war, as it had evolved through the first six decades of the 20th century, proved insufficient. The defining element of Westmoreland’s strategy was attrition, and in application it failed to provide the flexibility and innovation that the conflict demanded. A generation of American military officers, shaped by their Vietnam experience, initiated a philosophical change from mass and attrition towards a concept shaped by maneuver warfare. This change was reflected in the army’s AirLand doctrine (with significant input from the air force), and in the Marine Corps doctrinal publication *Warfighting*.⁷

Another legacy of the Vietnam War was the widespread perception of a fickle American

public. Post-Vietnam military leaders attempted to develop a logical framework for applying military power while avoiding the pitfalls associated with murky missions and weak political and popular support. This framework was ultimately expressed in the Weinberger and the Powell Doctrines. These doctrines in turn have led to the term “decisive force” being added to the lexicon of the American way of war. That is, the United States seeks clarity of purpose in committing military force, and once the forces are committed, the military should be allowed to “play to win.”⁸

The 20th century added several additional aspects to the American way of war that are often not articulated. The United States fought World War II with a multi-dimensional force. Unlike the former Soviet Union which based its military strength around massive ground forces, the American military has balanced its combat power between equally strong and capable service branches. In World War II, this limited the size of the American army in Europe when compared to either the Germans or the Russians.⁹ Of consequence, the United States generally has a greater requirement to fight in a joint manner, since its combat power is spread among different services. The United States is a maritime nation by virtue of geography, but it is also an aerospace nation by virtue of technology - the United States invented the airplane, and since World War II has maintained an unmatched technological advantage in the aerospace industry. Air power is also maintained and employed by all four services, not just the U.S. Air Force.¹⁰

The average American serviceman is extremely innovative, and doctrine has never acted as a restraint against innovation. “American ingenuity,” while most often employed at the tactical level, has often had operational impacts, and can be thought of as an ingredient in the American way of war. By using scrap metals to weld blades for their Sherman tanks, American armor

was able to finally break-out from the bocage country in Normandy. Individual ideas and innovations regarding the helicopter eventually led to the development of vertical envelopment, air assault operations, and the helicopter gunship. Such troop-level innovations are an integral part of the American way of war, and will only increase in scope and importance as technologies become more prevalent throughout the military.¹¹

A final, but critical, element of the American way of war is that starting with World War I, the United States has fought its wars as part of a coalition or alliance. This has added both political and operational implications to American warfighting. Politically, leaders are forced to ensure that there is some commonality of purpose and objectives among the members of the coalition. Operationally, commanders are forced to incorporate oftentimes dissimilar forces within an operational command structure, or alternately commanders are forced to operate within the constraints imposed by the existence of a separate coalition force command structure, which forfeits unity of command and adds the operational requirement to develop unity of effort.

The “New” American Way of War

A major theme of literature concerning Desert Storm, Kosovo and Afghanistan is that each has ushered in a new era of warfare, perhaps presaging a “revolution” in military affairs, and each has in some way changed the American way of war. Although there is no agreement on the major features of each conflict, some of the most discussed features include advances in ISR, the dominate nature of precision guided weapons, the force multiplier provided by Special Operations Forces (SOF), the utility of ground forces (including the use of proxy forces for ground combat), and the utility of power projection, especially air, from the continental United States. In fact, these innovations are not revolutionary, but are evolutions of long held

capabilities and are enjoying increased effectiveness due to technology enablers.

Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR). The United States commenced Operation Desert Storm with a sense that technological advances had conferred a decided advantage on their ISR capabilities; the enemy's ability to achieve operational or tactical surprise (along the lines of The Bulge, or Tet) was nullified by the addition of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), like the Marine and Navy Pioneers, airborne sensors like Joint Surveillance Target Acquisition Radar System (JSTARS), and improved national satellite assets. Desert Storm, however, revealed several major weaknesses with ISR. UAVs proved to have limited range and short endurance. Airborne sensors fed "stovepiped" systems where information could only be shared by co-locating with the ground station or physically reproducing and delivering the tapes to consumers. National assets proved to be somewhat ill-placed (thanks to the Cold War focus on Europe), difficult to task in a timely manner, and suffered the same dissemination problems as other stovepipe systems. Battle damage assessment (BDA) proved to be difficult, which resulted in successive attacks on individual targets, and an inflation of the attrition caused to Iraqi ground forces (a governing factor in the CINCs operational plans).¹² Eight years later improvements in UAV technology and product dissemination were apparent in Kosovo, but targeting itself (especially near-real time) remained difficult, and BDA still lagged.¹³ Initial reports out of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan suggest that the ISR system has evolved still further, allowing for dynamic targeting using loitering aircraft, and near-real time BDA with high endurance UAVs.¹⁴

Ultimately the search for better, longer endurance ISR assets has been a continuous goal throughout the breadth of American wars. Whether the use of cavalry and other ground forces

in a reconnaissance role, the Union utilization of manned hot air balloons at Fredericksburg, the use of the aircraft since World War I, or the use of satellites from the 1960s, technology has been the enabler of incrementally more effective, longer lasting, and increasingly networked ISR capabilities. In the author's opinion, "persistent" ISR has always been a commander's desire, and is very much a common-sense proposition: longer, more thorough reconnaissance, with redundant coverage by multiple sensors and systems, is better than the converse. Current ISR capabilities are the result of a convergence of the long stated military requirements, evolution of fielded military platforms and increasingly sophisticated technology enablers. Persistent ISR may be reaching new levels of capability and utility, but it is not inherently a new concept in the American way of war.

Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs). Although precision guided munitions were used during the Vietnam War, and again in El Dorado Canyon (air strikes against Libya following their sponsorship of terrorist strikes in Europe), Desert Storm showcased the capabilities of precision weapons. Although their employment was limited by low stockpiles and airframe constraints (not all aircraft could employ them), PGM contributions to the air campaign exceeded their percentage of total bomb tonnage dropped. Guided munitions were utilized for the initial breach of the Iraqi integrated air defense system, and were used almost exclusively against targets in downtown Baghdad. Further innovations included the use of PGMs in "tank-plinking" and other non-traditional tasks like destroying the source of a deliberate Iraqi oil leak into the Arabian Sea.¹⁵ While only 10% of the munitions dropped during Desert Storm were precision guided, that number rose to 60% during the Kosovo conflict.¹⁶ In the late 1990s, PGMs again proved their effectiveness in attacking fixed targets and urban targets around

Belgrade, but proved less effective against dispersed ground formations in the wooded, hilly terrain of Kosovo. Balkan after action reports highlighted the advantages of networking PGMs and sensors, especially UAVs. Having learned from Desert Storm and Kosovo, nearly every attack and bomber aircraft in the inventory was capable of delivering PGMs against Taliban forces in Afghanistan, and the percentage of PGMs expended rose to nearly 80%.¹⁷ Airpower in Afghanistan enjoyed the fruits of the lessons learned analysis from Desert Storm and Kosovo, and took advantage of more capable UAVs and ISR systems.

Although their effects have received increased publicity (mainly due to the “viewability” of the cockpit videos released to the press), PGMs have followed a clear evolutionary path. From the Norden bomb sight, to television guided bombs, to laser and GPS guided munitions, precision weapons have been in the American arsenal for a long time, and their use is reflected in joint operational staff organization and doctrine. The use and utility of precision munitions are not new to the American way of war, what *is* new is the quantitative increase in the availability of the munitions, their decreasing cost, their improved enabling technology, and the fact that in Afghanistan almost every (non-transport) aviation platform was configured to carry them.¹⁸

Special Operations Forces (SOF). The “trinity of Special Operations, airpower and Afghan allies on the ground” as “a new American way of war, a new operational concept,” is a theme that has been seen in one form or another in headlines throughout America’s involvement in Afghanistan.¹⁹ The new American way of war at play here is that special operations forces employed in concert with proxy forces, and backed up by American air power using precision-guided munitions, is a new paradigm in warfare (especially American warfare). SOF did not play a major role in Desert Storm, due to a combination of Central Command skepticism, lack

of ground mobility, and the disadvantages associated with operating in a desert environment. General Schwarzkopf was not enamored of SOF, and did not initially envision a role for them in his campaign plan.²⁰ Ultimately they were committed to the combat search and rescue mission, and to scud hunting efforts. In the open desert, SOF effectiveness suffered from a lack of ground mobility, and from frequent compromises by local inhabitants. SOF forces were not employed at all in Kosovo (due to restrictions regarding utilization of ground forces), even though placing Special Forces with the Kosovo Liberation Army would have been an extremely logical and doctrinal mission.

The incredible effectiveness of SOF in combination with precision munitions should not come as a surprise to any observer. “Eyes-on” is a staple of close air support (CAS), and the increasing capability of PGMs only enhances this symbiotic relationship. Similarly, using SOF to train indigenous forces is not a new concept. Such training was employed by the United States in Greece following World War II, in Vietnam, and in countless peacetime engagement training exercises in the three decades since Vietnam. Indeed, Special Forces in Vietnam were utilized in a manner very consistent with their usage in Afghanistan (training Montagnard tribesman), but were less successful. Ultimately the reason that SOF has not proved useful in every conflict is because the utility of their employment differs significantly based on the overall mission and operational factors such as space, force and time. Since SOF loses or gains utility across the spectrum of conflict based on operational factors, one may reasonably assume it can’t be an individual component of the American way of war.

Ground Forces. The collapse of the Taliban in November and December of 2001 resulted in the written press and television correspondents making another claim regarding America’s

new way of war. Specifically, the idea that ground forces are now best used to cause the enemy to assume a posture that is then vulnerable to air power. The Taliban assumed fixed defensive positions because of the ground threat posed by the Northern Alliance, and in doing so, they were highly susceptible to American air power.²¹ If the Taliban dispersed to present a less inviting target to air power, they were vulnerable to pursuing ground forces. While touted as a new concept (“a tectonic shift in the nature and character of how ground forces fight”),²² this was in fact a classic example of combined arms warfare, which the American military has been practicing since World War II.²³ Simply defined, combined arms warfare is about “placing the enemy on the horns of a dilemma.”²⁴

At the tactical level an example of combined arms might include maneuvering ground forces against enemy positions while simultaneously engaging him with air and artillery - his reaction to any one threat increases his vulnerability to the other threats. An operational example can be drawn from Desert Storm, where the Iraqi army was attrited by airpower in the defensive positions that they assumed to defend against Coalition ground forces.²⁵ Conversely, the lack of a multi-dimensional threat in Kosovo meant that the Serbs could disperse in the face of NATO airpower without increasing their vulnerability. Kosovo planners attempted to exploit what they thought was a lesson learned from Desert Storm (namely airpower’s effectiveness against ground forces), without taking into account the differences in the operational factors of space and force. Although strikingly displayed in Afghanistan and Desert Storm (and conspicuously absent from Kosovo), combined arms warfare is not a new component to American warfighting.

More novel than combined arms is the use of proxy forces as the main element of a ground

force. There is reduced risk to US forces by employing proxy forces, but there is also an increased risk of not accomplishing the mission. In Afghanistan, American objectives included the capture of ranking Al Qaeda and Taliban personnel. To accomplish this, it was necessary for ground forces to establish a cordon around suspected positions, and to strongly patrol the border with Pakistan. Since American troops were not available in appreciable numbers, this task fell to the Northern Alliance. In execution, the Northern Alliance proved more interested in preserving their own combat power than remaining true to the original American intent.²⁶ A reasonable assumption is that a joint force commander would prefer unity of command vice the unity of effort one is often forced to accept when employing coalition partners. Thus in balancing mission accomplishment and risk, the use of proxy forces becomes highly situational dependent, and cannot be considered as a new element of the American way of war.

Power projection from the Continental United States. All three conflicts generated debate over America's ability to conduct air strikes with forces stationed in the United States. B-52s based in Louisiana conducted strikes at the opening of the Gulf War, and B-2s sortied from Missouri for both Kosovo and Afghanistan.²⁷ While the execution of such missions is indeed new in practice, the concept itself was well defined as a capability of Strategic Air Command during the Cold War. As far back as World War II, the United States developed a conceptual "flying wing" to be used against Germany on transatlantic bombing missions in the event Great Britain fell to an Axis invasion. The greatest benefit of using CONUS based airpower to project power in a crisis is that it avoids the need to seek basing rights in foreign countries, and the related requirement to build the necessary support structure at foreign airfields, deploy large numbers of support personnel and provide for their security.

Unfortunately, using bombers based in the United States results in a low number of sorties, increases crew fatigue, and still requires significant diplomatic work to secure transit rights over foreign air space. While B-52s may fly from CONUS for convenience (they were forward deployed to Diego Garcia for both desert Storm and Afghanistan), B-2s fly from CONUS out of necessity. The support “tail,” (including personnel, equipment, and materials) needed to refurbish the stealthy “skin” of the aircraft after each mission is enormous, and essentially non-deployable.²⁸

Alternate Lessons Learned

While the argument has been made that many of the “new” features of warfare attributed to Desert Storm, Kosovo and Afghanistan are not new to the American way of war, it is undeniable that the American way of war is evolving, driven by dramatic advances in enabling technology. This evolution creates the necessity to identify operational lessons in hopes of applying them to future conflicts. The key to gaining comparative advantage operationally is to apply the lessons to future conflicts (after careful and honest analysis), rather than attempting to recreate the conditions where success was obtained in that last war.²⁹ In that context, a realistic assessment of lessons learned from Desert Storm, Kosovo and Afghanistan includes the following thoughts (some of which are “new“, and some of which have been relearned several times):

Relationship Between Fire and Maneuver. There is an inherent tension between fire and maneuver that is heavily affected by technology and the operational factor of space. For the context of this lesson learned, the application of air delivered ordnance against ground targets is included in the term “fires.“ Desert Storm and Afghanistan suggest that in open terrain, the

relationship between fire and maneuver is currently dominated by firepower. A comparison of the Kosovo case study against Desert Storm and Afghanistan also suggests that the effects of air delivered munitions are increased when friendly ground forces operate in concert with air forces. In either case, fires and maneuver are complementary, and in combination can create true synergy, where the sum of their combined effects is greater than the sum of their individual effects.

If fire and maneuver are complementary, what lessons can be drawn regarding the size of the ground force needed to fight in a combined arms manner? Put simply, the ground force, whether coalition, allied, conventional U.S., SOF, or a combination of all, needs to present a credible one-dimensional ground threat to the opposing force. A “credible” threat does not mean that the United States must attain a numerical advantage on the ground, or even numerical parity. Indeed, the current ascendancy of air delivered munitions in the dynamic relationship between fire and maneuver, and successful application of combined arms may suggest a reevaluation traditional force ratio norms - such as the idea that an attacker needs a three to one advantage over the defender. To some extent, the credibility of the threat rests in the opponents mind, and he must believe that if he does not posture his force correctly, opposing ground forces *on their own* (although they would never be employed by themselves) have the ability to conduct successful operations against him. Once an opponent is convinced of the credibility of the ground threat, and makes force dispositions accordingly, true combined arms warfare can be applied. The enemy cannot optimally dispose his force to face both air and surface threats simultaneously. It is important to note that the idea of a credible threat is in direct opposition with the theory that “the future of land combat is going to be ... empty battlefields occupied very

thinly by very high-performing, tightly bonded, well-equipped close combat soldiers whose main purpose is to find and fix the enemy and let precision do the killing.”³⁰ As University of Chicago professor Robert Pape maintains, “Air and ground forces work like hammer and anvil to put the enemy in a pincer, but there’s a danger in thinking that it’s all hammer and no anvil, that air power alone with maybe only a few Special Forces, is the key. You need the ground element.”³¹

Airpower Issues. While the purpose of close air support Close Air Support (CAS) continues to be air action against targets in close proximity to friendly forces, which require detailed integration of the air mission with the ground forces, the nature of CAS is changing.³² Some have even made the argument that there is a new air function, that “the use of special-operations troops as spotters for offensive precision-guided air strikes” falls “somewhere between two well-established operations: ‘air interdiction’ and ‘close air support.’”³³ Until recently, the important parts of CAS included having a skilled Forward Air Controller (FAC) on the ground who could effectively use terrain masking and suppression of enemy air defense (SEAD) techniques to get an aircraft safely to a target, and who could then “talk” the pilot’s eyes onto the correct target. Equally important was a skilled pilot who could acquire the target and accurately deliver his “dumb” iron bombs. The emerging paradigm is that a high density of target designating equipment dispersed throughout the force allows multiple “vanilla” observers (not just Forward Air Controllers), to provide effective terminal guidance for smart munitions. These smart munitions can be launched well outside the threat envelope, and perhaps by a UAV - not a skilled pilot.³⁴ Although this has great tactical implications, there are still operational implications - our current air command and control system for CAS is built around the old

paradigm, and staff functionality still treats air differently from other fires.

Very much related to the changes in CAS is the compression of the sensor to shooter loop. A preponderance of the air sorties over Afghanistan took off without knowing what their targets were.³⁵ Direct links between sensors and shooters allowed near-real time targeting, battle damage assessment, and re-attack capability. As controversial as the issue is to many officers, some form of network centric warfare has arrived. Accordingly the operational issue revolves around the fact that Network Centric Warfare is still very much a theoretical construct, and operational functionality has jumped ahead of concept development.

A great many analysts have correctly cautioned against drawing too many lessons learned from any past conflicts, due to the unique nature of each. One lesson that can be learned and applied is that the operational factor of space, specifically terrain, still matters. Airpower proved to be particularly effective in the open terrain of Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Airpower was less effective in the rolling wooded terrain of the Balkans (and was also limited in employment by the decision not to use the full range of joint forces). The United States, however, has yet to engage an enemy in a heavily wooded or jungle environment within the context of evolving warfighting capabilities. Communications, GPS and laser designators are all adversely affected by triple canopy jungle.

In addition to recognizing the timeless importance of terrain, another operational lesson learned is that the ideas of the great air power theoreticians of the early 20th century may not be timeless. Douhet and Mitchell, and acolytes such as John Warden later in the century, were incorrect in one of their most basic assumptions.³⁶ Douhet, Mitchell, and Warden all believed that air power is best used against “strategic” targets that attack the enemy’s decision-makers

and the will of the population. They also believed that there was little to no utility in squandering precious air assets to attack an enemy's army.³⁷ The case studies suggest that airpower can now attack armies with devastating effect, especially if used in combination with other joint forces to create combined arms effects.

Coalition Issues. The heavy reliance on technology in the American military has negative implications for our allies and coalition partners. Simply put, those who would stand next to the United States on the battlefield are finding it increasingly difficult to “plug-in” to American battlefield systems (principally accessing or contributing to the ISR network). For the joint commander coalition partners become a “B-team,” representing less capable forces that have inherent employment limitations.³⁸ An operational lesson learned is that those tools in the joint kit bag that enhance coalition force effectiveness, namely Special Forces and Marine Liaison Element (formerly called ANGLICO) are indispensable combat multipliers, and can rapidly be over-tasked.

Jointness. Very much related to coalition concerns is the lesson (which often seems to be too obvious to mention), that the more joint tools a commander can bring to bear, the more flexible and effective his forces will be. Unfortunately a great many analysts suggest that the case studies suggest just the opposite. Army heavy forces are too heavy to deploy, and have made themselves irrelevant on the battlefield; SOF and proxy forces can replace American ground forces altogether; the “tooth to tail” ratio in the American military is out of balance.³⁹ As one analyst noted, “since it is impossible to predict the military challenges the nation will face in the future, we need a lot of powerful military hardware and a lot of personnel. One reason the United States military consistently excels is that its expensive, outsize character means it has

plenty of whatever turns out to be required.’⁴⁰

Conclusion.

The American way of war has been characterized by wars of annihilation, where distinct objectives are articulated, and the military is allowed to apply decisive force in order to win. Additionally, the American way of war is shows a marked reliance on technology and industrial might. A professional military keeps the peace, but is fleshed out by volunteers and conscripts in time of national emergency. The United States fights its wars with allies and coalition partners. Americans have demonstrated a continuing ability to innovate and adapt tactics, techniques procedures and doctrine to emerging and evolving technology. The conduct of America’s three most recent armed conflicts, Desert Storm, Kosovo and Afghanistan, has generated a great deal of speculation, some of which proclaims that the United States has developed a new way of war. To believers, this new American way of war is dominated by information systems and characterized by improved ISR, precision munitions, increased utility of SOF, and decreased relevance of American ground forces (coalition partners can serve as proxy forces on the ground). While the three conflicts have demonstrated evolved tactics, techniques and procedures, and have employed amazing enabling technology, each innovation fits squarely within the traditional American way of war. Many of the more pertinent lessons to be drawn from these conflicts have been left unstated. These lessons include the inherent tension between firepower and maneuver, the synergy to be gained from combined arms leveraging new technologies, the latent flexibility and power in utilizing all the capabilities in the joint force, the changing nature of CAS, the challenges of fighting with coalition partners and traditional allies, and the potential to gain efficiency by reorganizing the joint staff structure.

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