

The United States Marine Corps and Fourth Generation of  
Warfare:

A Square Peg in an Unidentifiable Hole

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Big rocks became small rocks, and small rocks became big rocks.

*-Afghani elder regarding Taliban influence growth in his area*

The United States Marine Corps is evolving itself into inadequacy. For the past 60+ years, since midway through World War II, the Marine Corps has sought to become a maneuver warfare force, an ideal concept for third generation warfare. Recent world conflicts, however, have reverted to an earlier form of warfare characterized by asymmetric, population based tactics and strategies, and the loss of legitimacy of nation state powers. For the sake of argument, this will be referred to as fourth generation warfare, or 4GW<sup>1</sup>. That being the case, the United States Marine Corps has an obligation to re-evaluate itself culturally, organizationally, and systematically in order to better prepare itself to fight and win a 4GW conflict.

#### Background

The world landscape has shifted from conventionally accepted maneuver warfare, to 4GW, symbolized by the importance of influencing the local population, and insurgencies versus established governments. While this conventional maneuver and fourth generation warfare are similar (decentralized control, control of operational tempo, one force is out-resourced by another,

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<sup>1</sup> The examples presented within are isolated incidents that cannot be generalized across the entire Marine Corps. However, looking at multiple examples in the context of a single organization will help "paint" the challenge faced by the Corps.

and targeting of soft nodes or gaps), one vital aspect distinguishes them. 4GW intensifies the characteristics it shares with the maneuver warfare concept and couples them with a need to influence a local population, usually through a media source. "After all, terrorism cannot operate in a media-free zone. In Al Qaeda's world, if a tree falls with no video feed, the tree never fell."<sup>2</sup> In this area the conventional maneuver warfare force has little to no expertise.

The crux of the challenge for the United States Marine Corps is that a 4GW force can be trained to function in a conventional warfare setting, but the reverse is most certainly not the case. Support for this concept is found in after action reports from commanders fighting in the current asymmetric conflicts:

Approach training and each mission with a COIN mindset reinforced with the highest level of conventional warfighting proficiency achievable. Look at the fight as a whole from clear, hold, and build. Ensure that

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Miller, *Mumbai: Death's New Paradigm?*, 28 November 2008, <<http://foxforum.blogs.foxnews.com/2008/11/29/mumbai-deaths-new-paradigm/>> (30 November 2008)

the conventional kinetic actions are balanced with holding and re-building the area.<sup>3</sup>

Recent historical examples that support this sweeping conclusion as well. The 2006 Hezbollah-Israel War, or "July War", proved that a militant guerilla force, Hezbollah, will engage in a conventional war if it feels it can compensate for a lack of resources or combat power with superior tactics and/or training. The "July War" also exhibited that if a conventional force, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), focused exclusively on counterinsurgency operations, it will be found lacking:

In the conventional arena, the IDF ground forces performed unsatisfactorily. The fight at Wadi al-Saluki...revealed the failure of tank commanders and crewmen to use their smokescreen systems, the lack of indirect-fire skills, and the total absence of combined arms proficiency.<sup>10</sup> The IDF lost many of these perishable combat skills during its long years of COIN operations against the Palestinians.

Hezbollah proved to be a highly...professional fighting force, armed with some of the most advanced weapon systems in the world...the IDF greatly underestimated

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<sup>3</sup> United States Marine Corps, *Battalion Landing Team 1/6 After Action Review from Operation Enduring Freedom III*, 25 September 2008 (FPO AE 09510-3150, 2008), 22.

its opponent. From 2000 to 2006, Hezbollah successfully embraced a new doctrine, transforming itself from a predominantly guerrilla force into a formidable quasi-conventional fighting force.<sup>4</sup>

Optimistically, the Marine Corps can properly evolve its conventional maneuver warfare mindset to better address modern conflicts. Ironically, a design solution to this evolution can be found within the civilian business realm.

### Solution Architecture

First and foremost, it is crucial to identify and understand successful counterinsurgency practices.

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#### ***Chart 2. Successful and Unsuccessful Counterinsurgency Practices.***

##### **Successful**

- Emphasis on intelligence.
- Focus on population, their needs, and security.
- Secure areas established, expanded.
- Insurgents isolated from population (population control).
- Single authority (charismatic/dynamic leader).
- Effective, pervasive psychological operations (PSYOP) campaigns.
- Amnesty and rehabilitation for insurgents.
- Police in lead; military supporting.
- Police force expanded, diversified.
- Conventional military forces reoriented for counterinsurgency.
- Special Forces, advisers embedded with indigenous forces.
- Insurgent sanctuaries denied.

##### **Unsuccessful**

- Primacy of military direction of counterinsurgency.
- Priority to "kill-capture" enemy, not on engaging population.
- Battalion-size operations as the norm.
- Military units concentrated on large bases for protection.
- Special Forces focused on raiding.
- Adviser effort a low priority in personnel assignment.
- Building, training indigenous army in image of U.S. Army.
- Peacetime government processes.
- Open borders, airspace, coastlines.

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<sup>4</sup> United States Army Combined Arms Center, *We Were Caught Unprepared: The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, 2008 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2008), 63.

<sup>5</sup> Sepp, Kalev I., "Best Practices in Counterinsurgency", *Military Review*, May - June 2005, 10.

Shifting a military organization from the right column to the left is no simple undertaking. It demands adopting a total "single battle concept" focus where all resources of an organization are applied, in concert with one another, toward a common goal. In the business world this is referred to as "globalization".

The following two passages were taken from an article detailing how to convert a multinational company into a global one. The first illustrates why a company must globalize in order to operate in the modern business world: "... globalization is a result of the capitalism domination and is related to the obsolescence of the nation-state system...the "region-state" system (is) a more contemporary model." <sup>6</sup>

As noted before, loss of power of the nation-state, specifically the monopoly on waging war, is a corner stone of 4GW. The second passage lists the five "dimensions" a company must change in order to achieve a state of globalization.

(These) dimensions of change, understood as essential to explain the transformation from one state to another, are namely: (1) "global integration of the

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<sup>6</sup> Guilherme Azevedo and H el ene Bertrand, *How to Convert a Multinational Company (into) a Global One?* (Rio de Janeiro: Pontif icia Universidade Cat olica), 2.



operations", (2) "strategic management pattern", (3) "covered world key-markets", (4) "dominant marketing approach", and (5) "type of organization vision"...<sup>7</sup>

Distilling the article, these five dimensions can be linked to the three areas that the Marine Corps must evolve in order to function in the 4GW environment; "culturally" to "strategic management pattern" and "type of organization vision," "organizationally" to "covered world key markets," and "systematically" to "global integration of the operations" and "dominant marketing approach." That stated, the first step in retooling a conventional maneuver warfare force for 4GW is to change its fundamental culture.

#### Culture

According to Azevedo and Bertrand, "A new organizational design has to be implemented where the headquarter of the operations plans and commands the competitive movements at a global level..." and "Local management must be involved in the central decision in order to avoid a lack of motivation and conflicts with the central planning..."<sup>8</sup> This provides a common vision for an organization and the vehicle for bottom up refinement, practices essential not only to a successful globalized

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<sup>7</sup> Azevedo and Bertrand, 6-7.

<sup>8</sup> Azevedo and Bertrand, 9.

business, but also the Marine Corps. On the contrary, bureaucratic and unsighted institutional practices hinder the Marine Corps' ability to currently operate, let alone evolve into a 4GW fighting entity.

No one common higher headquarters level within the Marine Corps provides "commanders guidance" with respect to how the entire Corps will adapt and evolve. Instead, three to four higher headquarter offices proceed in their own directions, often creating a fractured and bipolar organization. For example, the Marine Corps 202k personnel increase focused on gaining combat power, but it did not address long term placement of these forces. Instead, the plan settled on a status quo force "laydown" that often dates back to circa 1940. As a result, the Marine Corps has seen an increase in its force structure superimposed over a base and station structure designed to WWII requirements (i.e. Camp Pendleton which has isolated camps, ranges developed for WWII vintage weapon systems, etc). Since training and education is conducted at these installations, one can identify the logical flaw.

Another key cultural attribute that must be addressed is that in order to minimize collateral damage, and by extension obtain and maintain local populace legitimacy, all levels of command must be willing to accept greater

risks. The Marine Corps has become so casualty-anxious that it has begun to answer minimal threats *to a whole unit* with maximum force. This assertion is best summarized by an after action report from the Korean War, specifically the Battle of Chosin Reservoir. A CCF soldier was asked to describe an American Marine. His first response was "excessive." He went on to ask why would you bring down an entire building and risk civilian casualties for just one sniper. It is arguable that the Marine Corps has not only continued this tactic, but also has "perfected" it in the past 50 years, notably during OEF and OIF. To paraphrase Major General J.F. Kelly, USMC, commanders on the ground in Iraq tend to gravitate toward kinetic action, which is in direct conflict with the tenets of conducting a successful counterinsurgency.<sup>9</sup>

A change in culture and mindsets are essential to evolving the Marine Corps, but will do little more than frustrate its members if the organization does not evolve as well.

### Organization

Organizational dogma has handicapped the Marine Corps ability to capitalize on the "centralized command,

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<sup>9</sup> Expeditionary Warfare School lecture, 20 February 2009, MajGen J.F. Kelly, USMC, Commanding General Multi-National Force-West Iraq, discusses time served Commanding General, I MEF (FWD).

decentralized control" concept. Decentralized control is crucial to the success of a 4GW force. Without it, autonomy could not be attained, operational tempo would be negatively impacted, and free form solutions to complex problems would be hampered. To achieve complete decentralization of control, however, means that a Marine commander must completely trust in his or her organization and fight the tendency for "hands-on command." This has proven to be difficult for commanders, and even harder for any advocate of true decentralization. The following example will illustrate this point:

The Marine Corps has long toyed with the idea of distributed operations (platoon sized units operating deep and autonomously within enemy territory with gear normally reserved for companies or battalions), going as far as conducting a live experiment in Afghanistan. The experiment was a success; the platoon commander met every measure of effectiveness with measurable results. However, in spite of this achievement, this method of operation has been abandoned because higher level commanders are not comfortable with small units having such great combat power.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This information came from within the responsible Marine Corps office, but due to non-attribution, the author cannot disclose the billet or name of the source.

This challenge is only intensified by the Marine Corps current budgetary mindset.

Azevedo and Bertrand state "the company may concentrate its effort in their core business, or in only some lines of product, and sell the other operations."<sup>11</sup> This statement speaks to keeping a product line simple and become "brilliant at the basics." In contrast, Marine Corps higher headquarters is too pre-occupied with maintaining or increasing budget levels, seeking to acquire the next best and/or safest technology. This diverts focus away from "brilliance at the basics" by building an over-reliance on, and over-confidence in, an ever increase array of gear an individual Marine is wearing instead of the knowledge base of each individual Marine.

A recent article by Bryan Mitchell in the Marine Corps Times asserts that the Marine Corps current acquisition programs are misguided and kept alive due to "invested institutional capital and reputations."<sup>12</sup> An example of acquisition imprudence is the mine resistant ambush protected (MRAP) vehicle into which the Marine Corps has poured millions, if not billions of dollars. This vehicle has but one application, countering the IED threat in Iraq.

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<sup>11</sup> Azevedo and Bertrand, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Bryan Mitchell, "The Wrong Direction?", *Marine Corps Times*, 8 December 2008, 10.

The MRAP cannot be embarked easily aboard amphibious shipping and cannot be used effectively in the mountains of Afghanistan. Yet, out of self-imposed casualty-anxiety and because of monies spent, the Marine Corps not only continues to purchase these vehicles, but also is now looking into purchasing additional armor kits. The enemy will always be able to develop a bigger bomb to counter increased protection, but he will never be able to develop a bomb to counter increased education and knowledge.

With cultural and organizational changes comes the need to fix the system itself.

#### System

The systematic challenges faced by the Marine Corps stem from three basic points: inundation of scheduled pre-deployment training standards, the lack of free-form training events, and training instead of education. The Marine Corps pre-deployment training programs attempt to cover everything which makes Marines proficient at nothing: "To be strong everywhere is to be strong nowhere."<sup>13</sup> This violates two tenets of 4GW: brilliance at the basics (proficient in conventional warfare), and small unit freedom of action (decentralized control). The first point is obvious. If a Marine is saturated with training

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<sup>13</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Oxford University Press, 1971).

requirements or standards, other areas will be sacrificed, most often in the form of *basic* infantryman training. Second, numerous requirements demand a strictly managed schedule. A strict schedule requires deconfliction by script to ensure only what is necessary is gleaned from the training event before the unit proceeds to the next programmed point. Scripting everything negates the possibility of free thinking/free action exercises.

The Marine Corps implements no institutionalized "free thinking" exercises, such as TDGs/TDEs, that force making decisions based upon commander's guidance and environmental considerations. Small unit leaders, generally at the platoon level or below, regularly utilize TDGs/TDEs, but no Marine Corps wide endeavor exists. Unfortunately, the current organizational training paradigm does little to address this deficiency either.

The current training received should adequately prepare Marines for deployment and not require on the job training adaptation. Instead, the only true tactical victories are being achieved by Marines who do adapt current training practices. This type of adaptation requires comprehensive cultural knowledge and awareness and a keen understanding of the enemy's weakness. The assumption that all Marines have attained this level of

understanding is naïve to a fault. However, Marine Corps could ensure greater application of knowledge and understanding by institutionalizing such thinking ability. For example, an increase in emphasis on martial education would achieve even large systematic gains.

Training prepares the end user for the known and education for the unknown. Today's conflict environment is unknown. It is logical to assume then, that the Marine Corps would place a higher emphasis on education vice training. As discussed earlier, this is not the case. Pre-deployment training events, needs of the unit, and low density/high demand billets and/or skill sets all too often prevent Marines from taking advantage of the educational opportunities available to them.

#### Counter Arguments

Some will dismiss this paper as nothing more than an uninformed complaint. This paper should not be seen as an indictment of the Marine Corps, but rather an inward focus from one of its own looking to make a positive change.

A valid argument is that since its inception, the Marine Corps has largely been successful in every conflict fought by utilizing conventionally accepted maneuver warfare type tactics, techniques, and procedures. The Marine Corps does, in fact, have a winning record in terms



of wars fought. To whom should this credit go—to the standing doctrine and plans or to the young men and women who, sometimes in spite of that doctrine, recognized shortcomings and adapted and overcome—is arguable.

Another valid argument is that in the current operating environments of Afghanistan or Iraq the Marines have produced relative calm and security in areas that were once considered untamable. However, was that success due to the training received prior to arriving "in country," or due to the Marines' ability to recognize the situation for what it was, and adapt on the move. The answer is found in a quote from Colonel Stacy Clardy, USMC, "The Marine Corps did very little in preparing us for COIN...zero." in speaking about preparing his regiment for combat operations in Iraq in 2007.

### Conclusion

The Marine Corps must mend the fractures found within its higher headquarters, and focus on doing more with less, instead of chasing budgetary goals. Free-form training exercises and education should be promoted to their fullest, and a hard internal assessment of risk versus gain is essential. Decentralized control must be fostered and small unit leaders trusted. Most of all, the focus of becoming a premier, yet exclusive, maneuver warfare organization must

be abandoned. Only then will the Marine Corps be capable of succeeding in today's irregular warfare environment.

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