



Has Warfare Changed? Sorting Apples from Oranges

by

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Information age technologies have caused a revolution in military affairs. The claim is almost trite. One needs only to read the newspapers, listen to the radio, watch television, or travel to realize, however, that there has been no corresponding revolution in the human heart or in human affairs. Military and civilian strategists alike must attend to this paradox, for from it springs an important distinction: the difference between the conduct of war and the nature of war. Not only are the conduct and nature of war different, but also the former is ever-changing while the latter is not; further, the difference has important practical consequences.

The Conduct of War

The conduct of war has always changed, sometimes dramatically, depending upon the tools at any given historical period. “The factors that influence the conduct of armed violence,” writes the author of *The Principles of War in the Information Age*, “are constantly evolving.”¹ The stirrup, the longbow, gunpowder, the pocket watch, compasses and accurate maps, motorization, mechanization, the telegraph, railroads, radios, the airplane, nuclear power, the satellite, the computer, the Internet, miniaturization, global media and a host of other technologies—each has had its turn in changing the way war is conducted.² The flow of changes in the conduct of war and the relationship of technology to those changes is well documented. In studying the history of war’s conduct, Martin van Creveld concludes very simply,

The most important insight it is possible to gather from knowing and understanding the past is that what is should not be construed as what has always been, nor what necessarily must be, nor as what can be.³

In almost every case, technologies are applied first in an attempt to improve the prevailing method of fighting. Then, once the full capabilities of new technologies are fully grasped, new methods of

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fighting emerge. Often these new methods then produce new organizations and training requirements as well as new demands on military leaders.⁴

Although technology is a very important element in determining how the conduct of war changes, it is never the overwhelmingly dominant factor. Rather, the ability to use the technology better than one's opponent is dominant. Since 1469, claims Christopher Bellamy in *The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare*, four key elements are identified with the conduct of war: technology and the ability to use it; organization and size of an armed force; tactics and strategy; and methods of command and control.⁵ Put another way, combat power is not just a function of technology. Combat power results from balancing, better than one's opponent, the following set of factors: doctrine, training, leadership, organization, technology, and the fighting character of one's soldiers, airmen, sailors and marines.

Finally, one of the main conclusions of J.F.C. Fuller's *The Conduct of War: 1789–1961* is that political and economic changes also affect the ways in which wars are conducted.⁶ For example, a government or organization with strong popular support wages war differently from one whose support is tenuous. Democracies often wage wars differently from dictatorships. Robust economies or organizations with large financial resources can sustain a war to a scale different from those with more meager means.

Such has been the history of war, and no change in this pattern appears evident. The way Rome conducted its wars hardly resembles the ways in which the American Civil War or the Napoleonic Wars were fought, which hardly resemble World War II's fighting. Further, the Gulf War introduced aspects of fighting that would have been unimaginable to generals and political leaders of previous wars. War is simply the "chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case" that Clausewitz claimed it to be.⁷

The chameleon, however, is also Janus. For the face of change and adaptation is only one of war's faces. The other is constancy in a variety of aspects that can best be described as the nature of war.

The Nature of War

So much has been written about how information technologies have been and are changing war and its conduct, that some have been fooled into believing that the nature of war is being altered forever. Such belief is false, however. Such belief is also dangerous, especially for military or civilian strategists, for it seduces the believer into making decisions and taking action that may not achieve their intended outcomes. The false believers—concluding from their observation that the conduct of war has always changed and is changing again, and consequently that the nature of war has changed—will base their recommendations, make decisions and take actions understanding only half of the phenomenon with which they are contending. Just as one would not enter a contest understanding only half of the contest rules—especially a contest involving death, destruction and the risk of national treasure and reputation—one should not enter a war understanding only half of its character.

The constancy of war's nature can be understood in the following ten propositions:⁸

1. **War's causes lie in the human heart.** History shows us that nations, tribes, city-states, criminal cartels, terrorist organizations, religious groups and corporations all have waged war at one point or another. In each case, the entity waging war, whether offensive or defensive, had to plumb its heart to find a motivation strong enough to enter war's territory. Hate, envy, fear, arrogance, greed, power, lust, love, "god," ambition, revenge, justice and a host of other items—positive and negative—that lie at our core as human beings are the root causes of war. Of course, there are contributing factors—squalor, unequal distribution of wealth, injustice, resource scarcity, overpopulation, governmental failure—to name just a few. Eliminating these contributing factors, however noble and necessary, will not eliminate the root causes of war. Attending to the contributing factors,

conditions and precipitating events might reduce the likelihood of war, but it would not end war—not as long as human beings are what we are.⁹

2. **War is the realm of reason and emotion.** War is an instrument—sometimes of nations, but not always. Like any other instrument, war’s success is determined by fulfillment of its function: to achieve the aim of the group using it. Reason applies in prosecuting war: rationally connecting ends and means, devising strategies and applying resources to strategies, creating coalitions, employing units or weapons or logistics as well as the many other aspects of conducting war.

Reason also applies at the tactical fighting level. Which route to use, when to attack, how to deceive an enemy, how to suppress an enemy as one moves, choosing where to defend or ambush—all are examples of reason’s utility. One needs reason to fight a war, but reason is not sufficient. To start or sustain a war, something more is needed.

Try to convince a person to risk life itself for a “reasonable” goal. It’s very hard, nearly impossible. No, to start a war one needs to strike the chord of emotion. Enter a war lightly, and risk failure. Find an emotion strong enough, and one will have found a place where his group is willing to fight to the death. Emotion is just as important as reason to sustain war. Courage, sacrifice, duty, loyalty, determination—all are necessary to win, on the battlefield or at home, and all have emotional as well as rational components.

Recent suicide attacks, as well as the long history of such attacks preceding 11 September 2001, demonstrate the emotional component at its extreme. Defending to the last person, continuing an attack—on the ground, in the air or on the sea—against all rational odds, are well-recorded phenomena in war’s history. This is the stuff of which heroes are made. These, too, are examples of war’s emotional component.

The realm of war is the realm of reason and emotion. For sure there is science in war, but war is far from science, far from an engineering problem. And the longer the war lasts, the more the “nonscientific” aspects of war dominate. No doubt, to wage a war successfully one needs sufficient physical capacity, economic capacity and prudent applications of means to ends. Equally without doubt is this: One needs sufficient emotional strength. Napoleon’s guide of “the moral is to the physical as three is to one” still applies.

3. **War is a clash of wills.** War’s clash certainly consists of using weapons—nowadays some of these weapons may even be “nonlethal”—but the clash is really a conflict of wills. Brute strength counts for a lot, but unless one side is overwhelmingly strong and uses that strength skillfully, a stronger will matters more than physical strength. If an enemy can use just enough strength to persevere until his opponent’s will slacks, the weaker enemy will win. Witness Vietnam.
4. **War is inherently ambiguous.** The unexpected lies at every corner of war. Every enemy is cunning, using guile as much as guts. He tries to change weakness into strength. He hides, he deceives, ever looking to achieve an advantage. What one sees is often what one’s enemy wants seen. One never knows for sure what the enemy is up to, how he will react. One can make educated guesses and can increase or decrease the probability of being correct. One can have what is believed to be accurate, “real-time” information that is coupled with an exact decisionmaking process and precision munitions—and still be wrong. In war, ambiguity can be reduced but not eliminated—not as long as one fights other human beings. The fog of war can be made thinner via integrated information technologies, but the fog will never be lifted fully. Fog is a permanent condition of war, varying only in degree.
5. **War is about using force, or threatening to use it.**¹⁰ Entering into a war means that one intends to force another to do what inherently the other does not want to do. Sometimes one can achieve this end without actual use of force, but rarely and not for very long. Sooner or later comes the

clash, and the side with less force—or weaker will to use force, or less skill at using force—loses. If one is unwilling to use the force necessary to achieve his end, he should not enter the war to begin with, for doing so wastes lives and resources. Further, when one “quits” for lack of the means or the will to finish, the consequence is often profound, negative results socially, economically and politically.

Furthermore, the amount of force necessary to win is in direct proportion to the worth one’s adversary has placed on the desired goal and the depth of the emotional chord that adversary has struck among his group. “Think before you jump” could be the sign at war’s door. The more important the enemy’s goal, the greater will be his resistance and willingness to sacrifice to achieve it. The greater an enemy’s resistance and willingness to sacrifice, the more force and will (and perhaps time) are necessary to prevail against him. How much force one has is important, but only in relation to the lengths the enemy is willing to go—and for the time the enemy is willing to endure.

6. **War updates; it does not replace.** While the conduct of war is ever-changing, war’s old methods never really go away. In World War I, for example, the trench knife and bludgeon coexisted with the machine gun, the airplane and the tank. In Korea, bayonet charges existed side by side with jet fighters. In Vietnam, close-in fighting and hand-to-hand combat existed with sophisticated technologies.

Seen another way: War is a dance of at least two parties, each using the means it has at its disposal, each trying to “lead” the other. The pitchfork may fight the gun, the horse oppose the tank, the suicide bomber combat the precision-guided munition. Hence, asymmetry is perennial in war’s character. One opponent exploits whatever weakness he sees in the other. Strength against weakness replaces strength against strength. In this sense, adversaries learn from one another; what worked in the early stages of war will rarely work later. What was possible under initial circumstances may not be possible as war continues. Witness Mogadishu.

War never discards a proven tactic or weapon. War is patient; it waits for another opportunity to use “what worked” before. *Mutatis mutandis*, the old Latin phrase says: “The more things change, the more they remain the same.”

7. **War is an extension of politics.**¹¹ “Politics” in this instance refers to the interaction within human communities, not to nation-states. Communities—sometimes nation-states, other times not—start and wage wars. Some place “war” into a very narrow pigeonhole, then label all other uses of violence and force as something “other than war.” This kind of categorization, however useful it may be in certain fields, is inaccurate as a description of the phenomenon.

War is a form of community expression—politics in the classic sense—of a willingness to use organized, armed violence to attain community aims. Waging war, therefore, entails both the defeat of enemy forces and their will to fight and the defeat of the community’s corporate ability and will to use violence. Such defeat requires combat and diplomacy.

In war, combat and diplomacy are closely related. One without the other is lunacy. Combat, outside the context of diplomacy, approaches murder. Diplomacy without the capability and will for combat is akin to talking at the wind.

8. **War has its own logic.** Act–react–counteract—this is the cycle of war and one aspect of war’s logic. One side acts, the other reacts, the first counteracts. If one is smart, his reaction can defeat or prevent the enemy’s counteraction. If one is very smart, his action can preclude the enemy’s reaction and counteraction.

The point is, however, war is cyclic, and in each cycle force and violence tend to escalate. The second aspect of war's logic is this: War may start out as a simple act with a limited aim but end in something much different, something never intended at the start. Witness our Civil War. In the world of technology and engineering,

two plus two are four and results are directly proportional to the amount of effort applied. Furthermore, it is the world of again and again. In it, the same cause will always produce the same effect. . . . War, far from being an exercise in technology, is primarily a contest between two belligerents. . . . The underlying logic of war is . . . not linear but paradoxical. The same action will not always lead to the same result. The opposite, indeed, is closer to the truth.¹²

Once the clash of war starts, it is very hard to break the cycle or to predict the outcome. Of course, war has its own natural limiting factors—for example, there is only so much money before one is bankrupt, so much emotion before one is spent, or so much geographic space before one cannot expand any more. But before the warring communities reach these limiting factors, war grows and morphs on its own, according to its own logic. War's logic—cyclic and paradoxical—once again demonstrates why war cannot be approached as an engineering problem, why when one enters the realm of force, one enters the realm both reason and emotion.

9. **War hides in the corners of collective memory.** The farther a community is from its last experience of war, the more likely it is to forget about war's ruthlessness and resilience. "Something like that [referring to some horrible or barbaric act] could never happen again," is a claim that describes less about reality than it does about self-deception and communal amnesia.

The history of human beings and their communities is replete with examples that war's barbarity is ever-present below a veneer of civility. We may wish it otherwise; we may hope that rational, liberal, urbane and moral motives have finally triumphed over "the dark side" of human nature. Wish and hope, however, crumble quickly before fact.

Allowing war's nature to find a corner in which to hide increases the probability of war's resurgence. It also helps explain why the phrase "this war will be different" is so often found in the records of our history.

10. **War has two basic forms: exhaustion and decision.** One way to bring an enemy to the bargaining table to negotiate terms is to fight a war of exhaustion. To do this, one must have more resources than the enemy, and be willing to apply those resources until the enemy is tired. Otherwise, the enemy will prevail. To defeat an enemy who does not think in terms of cost/benefit analysis, one should not choose this form of war.

If one is looking not to negotiate but to end a conflict on his own dictated terms, he is fighting a war of decision. To succeed, he must have sufficient resources and apply them broadly and so conclusively that all of the enemy's options are taken away—instantaneously or over time. In fighting a war of decision, the point is to eliminate the enemy's choice, to leave him no conclusion but defeat.

Wars of exhaustion and decision may be quick or prolonged; that's not the point. In either form of war, each combatant tries to paralyze the other, to intimidate the other, or in extreme cases, to exterminate the other. Death and destruction and attrition—the results of using force and violence—occur in either type of war. One's goal and the way he applies force determine the form of war. Finally, there are near-endless variants between exhaustion and decision. What starts as a war of decision may become one of exhaustion, and vice versa. If war lasts a long time, one's strategy may change several times, as circumstances, means and the condition of the enemy change.

These ten propositions are not a full description of the nature of war, but they are complete enough to demonstrate that war's stable nature differs from its ever-changing conduct. The propositions demonstrate further that to claim "the nature of war has changed" because of the introduction of new technologies, new tactics or strategies, or new organizations is to profess a false claim and to risk failure. Finally, the propositions demonstrate that to understand the conduct of war is to understand only half of what war is all about—perhaps the less important half.

Conclusion

There has been much talk about the changing nature of war, but military and civilian strategists ought not to be seduced. The way human beings conduct war, the technologies we use, our fighting styles, our organizations—these and other aspects of fighting have changed and will always change. But these are merely incidental in the classic sense. They speak to war's nonessential component that has changed throughout human history. The essential nature of war, however, has not changed, is not changing, and will never change as long as human beings prosecute it.

No amount of technology will change the nature of war. War remains a matter of the human heart, a product of who we are as human beings. Unfortunately war is part of the way we relate to one another. Certainly we are not doomed to fight forever. We make choices that increase or decrease the probability of fighting. We can increase or decrease the factors that contribute to the initiation of war. But once the fighting begins, war is governed by its unchanging nature:

1. War's causes lie in the human heart.
2. War is the realm of reason and emotion.
3. War is the clash of wills.
4. War is inherently ambiguous.
5. War is about using force, or threatening to use it.
6. War updates; it does not replace.
7. War is an extension of politics.
8. War has its own logic: cyclic and paradoxical.
9. War hides in the corners of collective memory.
10. War has two basic forms: exhaustion and decision.

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.¹³ Each prophet has proved wrong in turn, however. We start a war believing 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 .

Endnotes

1. Robert R. Leonhard, *The Principles of War in the Information Age* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1998), p. 5.
2. There are many books and articles that outline the changes in the conduct of war and the relationship between technology and those changes. Martin van Creveld's *Technology and War* (cited below) is one. Three others are: Christopher Bellamy, *The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990); J.F.C. Fuller, *The Conduct of War: 1789–1961* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992); and Larry Addington, *The Patterns of War Since the Eighteenth Century* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1984). For a shorter description of the changes in the conduct of war and technology's role, see General (retired) Gordon R. Sullivan and Lieutenant Colonel James M. Dubik, *Land Warfare in the 21st Century* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, February 1993).
3. Martin van Creveld, *Technology and War* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), p. 6.
4. Richard Simpkin, *Race to the Swift* (New York: Brassey's Defence Publishers, 1985). See especially Chapter 1, "The Fifty-Year Cycle," pp. 3–18.
5. Bellamy, *The Evolution of Modern Land Warfare*, pp. 9–10 and 30.
6. Fuller, *The Conduct of War*.
7. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Peter Paret, editors and translators (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 89.
8. My claim is *not* that these ten propositions fully describe the nature of war. The claim is much more minimal: These propositions are sufficiently descriptive to show that there does exist a "nature" of war that is much more stable and constant than the "conduct" of war.
9. See Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), p. vii. In the preface to the third edition, the author writes, "It is still my belief that the causes of war and even the nature of war have not yet been drastically altered by the advent of nuclear weapons."
10. von Clausewitz, p. 75.
11. von Clausewitz, pp. 80–81, 87, 88.
12. van Creveld, *Technology and War*, pp. 314–316. See also Edward Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1987), pp. 4 and 5. Luttwak spent the entire book reinforcing and explaining the claim that "the entire realm of strategy is pervaded by a paradoxical logic all its own. . . . Within the sphere of strategy . . . quite a different logic is at work. It often violates ordinate linear logic by inducing the coming together and even the reversal of opposites, and it therefore . . . tends to reward paradoxical conduct."
13. See Donald Kagan, *The Origins of War and the Preservation of Peace* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), p. 1; in the introduction, the author writes, "This is not the first time that new conditions and ideas have led many to believe that a unique prospect of lasting peace was at hand, and yet over the past two centuries the only thing more common than predictions about the end of wars has been war itself." Philippe Delmas, in *The Rosy Future of War* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p. 1, is even more stark: "Can peace be guaranteed?" he writes. "The question seems almost ridiculous, so much is human history the history of war. In the last twenty-five centuries of its history, China has known only two centuries of peace. In the twenty centuries of our history in the West, we have done no better. Civilization has been unable to overcome war."

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