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Research Essay

**Asymmetrical Warfare and the Transnational Threat:
Relearning the Lessons from Vietnam**

Captain(N) D.W. Craig

AMSC 1 / Canadian Forces College

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The dangers we face are unprecedented in their complexity. Ethnic conflict and outlaw states threaten regional stability. Terrorism, drugs, organized crime, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction are global concerns that transcend national boundaries and undermine stability and political stability in many countries.

- President Bill Clinton¹

As the new millenium approaches, the United States faces a heightened prospect that regional aggressors, third-rate armies, terrorist cells and even religious cults will wield disproportionate power by using – or threatening to use – nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons against our own troops in the field and our people at home.

- Secretary of Defence, William S. Cohen²

Introduction

Without doubt, the United States is the primary superpower in the world today. The end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the coalition victory in Iraq have all demonstrated the military dominance of U.S. forces. Despite substantial forces reductions in recent years, the United States and the Western European Allies will likely remain the most powerful military powers in the world for the near future. As stated in the background to the recent U.S. defence review, no other nation today even approximates America's unique combination of technological prowess, economic vitality, military strength and political stability. The strength of both NATO and Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, long-time allies of the Americans reinforce this substantial security margin. Together, these nations account for more than 70 percent of the world's military spending, and account for three-quarters of the world economy.³ There are no emerging competitors for the United States and Western Allies at the present time and none are envisioned for the foreseeable future.

One of the main reasons for the military success of the United States has been the development of high-technology conventional arms that enable military commanders to have a substantial edge over opponents on the battlefield. The gap in military capabilities between the

U.S. and its adversaries has been ascribed to a “Revolution in Military Affairs” (RMA). The definition of RMA is widely credited to Andrew Marshall, the Pentagon’s Director of Net Assessment. His definition states that an RMA results when “the application of new technologies into a significant number of military systems combines with innovative operational concepts and organizational adaptation in such a way that it fundamentally alters the character and conduct of a conflict.”⁴

The current RMA is being primarily driven by a quantum leap in technology, the most important of which is the progress in information processing. The advent of microelectronics, advanced sensors, improved telecommunications and computer processing has brought on fundamental changes in conventional warfare. The most notable difference in the way war is conducted is the capability to convey real-time intelligence on the battlefield to enable the deployment of lethal, precision-guided munitions on a continuous 24-hour basis. The ability to conduct deep strikes into enemy territory and control the information flow has changed the way battles are fought. As was seen in the Gulf War, better situational awareness and the capacity to act immediately on that information more important than numbers of tanks, airplanes, ships or artillery. The leverage that the information revolution has provided, coupled with the end of the Cold War has also resulted in substantial reductions to U.S. Forces. The numbers of active U.S. military personnel have been reduced by around 25 percent over the last seven years. New, information technology-driven equipment has replaced older devices and new kinds of weaponry have entered U.S. inventory.⁵

This headlong rush into new equipment and tactics brought on by the RMA has caused concern by the Western Allies. This new arms race among allies has raised fears in the NATO Alliance that they will not have the budget or research and development capability to keep up

with the Americans.⁶ There are real concerns that this interoperability technology gap will result in serious operational difficulties in coalition operations.⁷ Potential competitors outside the Western Sphere of influence like the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China are unlikely to have the technological capability, resources or national will to keep pace with the rapid rate of technological improvements associated with the RMA. The rest of the world, especially the non-Western world, is even more limited in the ability to participate in the RMA. Most of the third-world countries are importers of weapons and do not have the financial resources or personnel to build up the advanced civilian high technology infrastructure that can produce the new information technologies.⁸

The frustration of seeing this tremendous improvement in the capabilities of conventional forces of the U.S. and the Western Allies has led third-world nations and disaffected groups to find other means to circumvent the advantage gained through the RMA. Typically, this has meant resorting to an "asymmetric" response rather than attempt to achieve parity in military capability. The word asymmetric is used here to denote unconventional tactics in combat rather than using forces of comparable size and employing similar tactics in battle. An asymmetric response includes resorting to means such as terrorism or Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) such as chemical, biological or nuclear weaponry. A classic example of resorting to an asymmetric response after being defeated in conventional warfare is the action taken by Iraq. By refusing permission for UN inspectors to enter his country, Saddam continues to force the U.S. and Western Allies to commit substantial forces to the Gulf for extended periods. The requirement to generate and maintain substantial forces in the Gulf at the whim of Saddam has proven to be very expensive to the Allied nations. Even U.S. Defence Secretary William Cohen has admitted that air strikes, fitted with the most sophisticated air strike technologies such as

deep penetrating bombs, incendiary warheads and smart fuses will not completely eliminate Iraq's suspected WMD capability.⁹

Aside from nations like Iraq and similar rogue states such as Libya and Syria, other adversaries such as groups with no claimed homeland are likely to use asymmetric responses like WMD to threaten the U.S. and Allied Western nations. This type of adversary is part of the phenomenon called the "transnational threat".¹⁰ The transnational threat is defined as any threat that transcends national borders and whose activity may be global. While diverse in nature, the transnational threat share common characteristics such as political and economic agendas, and the willingness and ability to use force and inflict mass casualties if necessary to achieve their goals.

A recent report prepared for the U.S. Department of Defence (DoD) by the Defence Science Board (DSB) has found that the Pentagon is ill prepared to counter the transnational threat.¹¹ As was the case in Vietnam, the type of enemy that the U.S. is preparing to face on the battlefield is not the one that will pose the greatest danger. There are a number of similarities between the threat posed by the Viet Cong (VC) and the transnational threat that serve to illustrate the utility of some basic principles to deal with this type of threat. By examining the lessons learned during the Vietnam War, this paper attempts to show that the recent recommendations of the DSB report are likely violate these principles and repeat the same mistakes in dealing with this type of adversary. The structure of this paper will be to first review the VC as an adversary and then provide recent examples and activities of the transnational threat. An overview of the findings of the DSB report and recommendations on how to deal with this threat will then be outlined. This paper will compare both the threats (transnational and the VC) and the accompanying strategies (proposed by DSB report and employed in Vietnam). A

number of parallels can be drawn which will illustrate that the proposals of the DSB are making the same errors that were made in Vietnam and are not following basic principles for countering asymmetrical warfare.

Lessons from the Viet Cong

The war in Vietnam marked the first time that American Forces had been defeated by a foreign nation since the War of 1812. As such, the Vietnam War has been, and will continue to be extensively studied to determine the reasons why and how such an event could have occurred. The American forces were technologically superior in equipment and had the edge in number of combat troops, yet lost the war to a numerically inferior enemy consisting of lightly armed irregulars. There are many reasons, both political and military, why the American forces were not successful. A complete analysis of why the war was lost would be beyond the scope of this paper. A somewhat simplistic view can be taken for the purposes of comparison that the American Forces lost because they did not understand the basic principles of how to deal with their opponents. The American Army had been prepared to fight a conventional war in a familiar conflict environment. Andrew Krepinevich paraphrased General Omar Bradley when he stated that the American forces were forced to fight the wrong war, at the wrong time, with the wrong army. Equally as important, the Army did not recognize the need to change focus and tactics to deal with the guerrilla threat throughout the war.¹² This section will give an overview of the VC in the areas of leadership, tactics and social values.

The leadership of the Vietnamese during the Vietnam War was dominated politically by Ho Chi Minh and militarily by General Vo Nguyen Giap. Both of these leaders had been educated in the west and were ardent nationalists who embraced communism primarily as a means to achieve independence for Vietnam. The political leader Ho Chi Minh recruited General

Giap in China after the General's wife and sister-in-law had been executed by the French government. The belief enunciated by Ho Chi Minh was that smaller military forces could defeat larger ones if the proper strategy was employed. This strategy was described by Ho Chi Minh in terms of a tiger and an elephant. If the tiger ever stood still, the elephant would crush him with his mighty tusks. But, as Ho explained to General Giap, the tiger will not stand still. The tiger should leap on the back of the elephant, tearing huge chunks from the elephant's side, and then leap back into the dark jungle. Slowly the elephant will bleed to death. This, Ho advised, should be the kind of war to be fought in Indochina.¹³

To implement this strategy, Ho Chi Minh and General Giap adapted a three-phase methodology for insurgency used by Mao for the communist revolution in China. The first phase is purely political, and involves the creation of a close-knit political party and recruitment of numbers of fanatical members to the cause. Once sufficient local support is in place, the second phase involves expanding the base of support to more remote villages through guerrilla attacks on government leadership. By undermining government control and the people's confidence in the existing structure, the movement attracts attention and forges links with the local populace and influence extends outward into the countryside. The means of combat with government forces during this phase involves surprise hit-and-run attacks and control of the population. Unless the guerilla forces have a base of support and access among the people, they are reduced to roving banditry and are bound to be defeated. The second phase requires the guerrillas to hide among the people, so that they can survive in the face of superior firepower and be re-supplied from local sources rather than rely on external logistics. The third and last phase take place once sufficient support has been built up among the people that government support is completely eroded and victory appears inevitable. In this last phase, guerilla forces combine into a full-scale

offensive against the government. Conventional battalions, regiments and insurgent divisions conduct manoeuver warfare against the remaining government forces in open battle, leading to ultimate victory and assumption of power.¹⁴

The second phase of insurgency is usually the longest in duration and the key to success of the campaign. A primary support system must be built up that assures control over the population. Time is on the side of the insurgent forces, since time is what is needed to organize and consolidate guerilla strength. In addition, the longer the government takes to control the situation, the more frustration grows and the more likely it is that rash action and short-cut solutions will be tried. Seeking to destroy guerilla forces in conventional battle is bound to fail, since the aim of the guerrilla force is not to gain territory but to gain control of the people. To defeat the insurgency, it is essential that government forces be oriented towards winning the “hearts and minds” of the population and asserting control over the population and winning support away from the guerrillas. To survive, there must be unity of purpose within the government for both military and police forces in separating insurgents away from the general population and re-establishing a sense of security and confidence in the government.¹⁵

In hindsight, it is easy to see that the American forces in Vietnam adopted the wrong approach to defeat the VC guerrillas. The deployment of large numbers of American combat forces relied upon simple attrition of insurgent forces with superior firepower and strategic mobility. American commanders felt that efficient application of firepower at the enemy’s bases and logistical supply routes would be enough to win the war. Their objective was to keep the operation tempo high enough that VC would be unable to re-supply or regain strength. Such an approach presupposed that the enemy would cooperate by coming out to fight or be forced into doing so. The American forces adopted a “search and destroy” tactic that relied on heavy assault

strength, air support provided by tactical fighters and helicopters and armoured formations. Attrition warfare counted success by the body count achieved. The assumption was that the insurgent forces could be destroyed faster than the enemy could replace them, either by local recruitment or by infiltration from the north.

The key to defeating the VC in the American view was forcing the guerillas to fight in open battle. To achieve this end, the Americans relied upon technologies such as superior communication, infrared photography and defoliants to find the enemy and superior firepower and mobility to destroy them. An analysis of statistics gathered during the war showed that this strategy was a failure. A December 1968 report from the U.S. Pentagon Office of Strategic Analysis found that the VC were predominantly the ones who forced the Americans to fight at a time and place of their choosing, not the other way around. The report noted that three-quarters of the battles were of the enemy's choice of time, place, type and duration. The CIA analysis showed that less than one percent of the nearly two million allied unit operations conducted from 1966 to 1968 resulted in contact with the enemy. When government South Vietnamese forces were considered, the percentage dropped to one tenth of one percent.¹⁶

To counter the American use of technology, the VC used a variety of asymmetric responses that proved very effective. Extensive use of tunnels, movement during rainy periods and underground caches rendered detection by infrared photography ineffective. Horse carts, porters and bicycles to move supplies were more effective than mechanized vehicles for moving supplies in a region where roads were primitive and impassible in the rainy season. In most cases, the VC used captured American radio equipment for both communication and intelligence gathering.¹⁷ The VC also employed a sophisticated human intelligence network in South

Vietnam that had infiltrated the army, police and other government services, and proved to be much more effective than CIA computer decoding of intercepted radio transmissions.¹⁸

In many cases, the strategies employed by the American forces were not just ineffective but detrimental to the war effort. Over-reliance on firepower and body counts resulted in many civilian casualties and helped to turn the populace against the government. Using defoliants caused heavy damage to farmlands and devastated the morale of the rural farming population. The heavy use of bombs resulted in unexploded ordnance being used by the VC for mines and booby traps. In the first six months of 1967 alone, nearly one-fifth of all U.S. casualties were caused by use of U.S. bombs being re-used in this manner.¹⁹

One of the key contributors to the over-reliance on technology and firepower by the American forces was the preoccupation with minimization of casualties. Media coverage had made commanders very sensitive to risk to personnel, and resulted in U.S. policy to expend money and firepower, not manpower to combat the enemy.²⁰ In contrast, General Giap was quite willing to expend manpower to accomplish his purpose and his forces suffered an estimated 2.5 million casualties in combat, over 10 times that of the American forces. General Giap remarked that the life or death of a hundred, a thousand or even tens of thousands of human beings represented very little in comparison to the cause they fought for.²¹

There is perhaps any number of general principles or lessons that could be illustrated by the Vietnam War. For the sake of conciseness, this paper will highlight three principles of countering asymmetric warfare that have enduring application. The first principle is that the application of technology ought not to be seen as a panacea or magic bullet that will be the solution to success. The second principle is that it is essential to be willing to change doctrine to adapt to new situations and be able to look to the future for possible battlegrounds, and not the

past. Lastly, the human element in any problem must be recognized as playing a major role in any solution to the problem of asymmetric warfare and must not be underestimated.

The American solution to the Vietnam War clearly violated each of these three principles. The reliance on mechanized warfare, helicopters, and firepower could not defeat an unsophisticated enemy using asymmetric means to counter the technological advantage. In some cases (as with stolen radios and converted ordnance) this technology was in turn used against the American forces. The second principle was violated by the refusal of the American commanders to adapt to guerilla warfare, even though it was plain that attrition warfare and body counts were not the means to victory. Preparing for wars like World War II and Korea left the Americans unprepared for an insurgency like Vietnam. Lastly, the failure of the Americans to understand both the VC and the South Vietnamese human element ultimately led to the American disillusionment and loss of will to win the war. Had more effort been expended in helping the South Vietnamese and winning their support instead of destroying villages, the guerillas would have lost the ability to move freely among the people. The ruthlessness and determination of the VC leadership was never truly appreciated, which resulted in an underestimation of the effort needed to defeat the enemy.

These same principles can be seen to be applicable not only in the Vietnam situation, but also in potential conflicts such as those that may arise in the next century. The next section will examine the transnational threat as well as the recommended response by the Defence Science Board to show the manner in which these principles may be relevant to the future.

The Transnational Threat

With the collapse of the geopolitical structure that characterized the Cold War, the new multi-faceted environment has given rise to radically new types of threats to the U.S. and Allied nations. The interests and organizations representing these threats have much more varied motivations and methods than the former Soviet Union. A legal definition of the term *transnational threat* includes any transnational activity that threatens the U.S. and her allies – comprising such actions as international terrorism, narcotics trafficking, the proliferation of WMD and the delivery systems for such weapons, and organized crime. The threat can include an individual or group that engages in any such activity.²²

Examples of violence by recent transnational threats are many and varied. The more familiar examples are groups like the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) that have used guerilla tactics in the past in their struggle to gain political recognition. Others, like the Hizbollah, Osama bin Laden and Hamas currently employ terrorism in the belief that acting in such a manner adds to the glory of their religious convictions. Fanatics such as Timothy McVeigh murder simply because they are motivated by hate, and want to punish their victims. Rogue nations like Libya, Iraq or Somali warlords employ transnational violence as an asymmetric response against unwanted intervention in their country. Still more may not have particular motivations of their own, but commit violence on behalf of a religious or state sponsor for the purposes of political or strategic advantage.²³

The advantage of transnational violence is that it is inexpensive compared to conventional warfare, and can be very effective in obtaining the ends desired. As well, responsibility for these actions are easily denied or acknowledged as convenient. The use of violence to create American casualties has been shown to be an effective means of undermining

public support, as was illustrated in Somalia and Lebanon. The loosening of control over formerly repressed ethnic or religious tensions has been shown to be explosive, as illustrated by the current situation in the Balkans. The reality is that increasingly, transnational groups are linked together so that cooperation among crime, narcotics and terrorist groups will provide the means to raise money and a marketplace for WMD and high-tech equipment. Access to biological, chemical or nuclear WMD means that a small number of people can now threaten the U.S. and Allied nations with casualties and consequences that were only previously achievable by nation states.²⁴

Evidence that the threat is real abounds in the press and other open literature. Last year, General Alexander Lebed, Russia's former national security advisor, claimed that more than 100 suitcase-sized nuclear weapons had disappeared. Another Russian security advisor, Alexei Yablokov, confirmed this report, which said that each of the missing bombs could produce a one-kiloton explosion, equivalent to 1,000 tons of TNT. If such an explosion were to occur in an urban area, it could easily kill upwards of 100,000 people and cause enormous damage. In late summer of 1998 a former colonel who defected from the Russian military intelligence service in 1992 claimed that these golf-bag size devices were to be smuggled into the U.S. in the event of war. It is possible that poor record keeping and not theft or diversion is the cause of the missing weapons. However, it is certainly possible that the Russian Mafia have managed to obtain the WMD and now have them for market for use by transnational terrorist groups.²⁵

The linking and cooperation of disparate crime and narcotics groups with terrorists is a relatively recent outcome of the globalization of world economies and technologies. Even the most notorious crime organizations with global reach (represented by Russian and Italian Mafias, Nigerian enterprises, the Japanese Yakaso and the Chinese Triads) are developing new working

relationships and networks with drug cartels and insurgent and terrorist organizations. With the interaction of the world economies, there is a concern among these groups that actions by one can affect the other, and that by cooperating they can take advantage of each other's strengths. This has provided the ways and means for transnational terrorists to purchase WMD, sophisticated weaponry and other high tech equipment. Recent examples of this cooperation is now seen in New York City and Eastern Europe with interlinked drug and financial crime networks among Russian and Italian Mafia.²⁶

The current threat assessment²⁷ has "classic" terrorist groups, represented by extreme leftist groups, as decreasing. The threat level of all twenty-two known leftist groups has been degraded from high to moderate, and three of these groups have denounced violence altogether.. The Intelligence Community has reduced the effort to monitor these groups to moderate to low levels.²⁸ State-sponsored terror from nations such as Iran, Syria and Libya is also in decline, as the benefit from such action is no longer perceived worthwhile. Iraq is currently rebuilding her WMD but is not ready yet to challenge the U.S. and risk bombing reprisals.

In contrast, while traditional state terrorism (to gain political or strategic advantages) is on the wane, a new type of terrorist has arisen that concerns many analysts. The new terrorist is driven by a different set of motives more oriented on immediate reward rather than strategic advantage. This motivation may include rage, ethnic hatred, mass murder, extortion or embarrassment or any combination of these. What is so dangerous about this new terrorist is that the previous paradigm of reluctance to use WMD does not apply. Traditional terrorism shied away from WMD as the consequences of the use of these weapons would have been counter-productive to their cause. Mass casualties would be seen to discredit the cause for which state terrorists were fighting for and would be certain to evoke strong governmental response.

The new breed of terrorist, focused on immediate reward, has no compunction against inflicting mass casualties. In fact, they may desire that many people are killed for revenge and there is no threshold for violence or destruction that they will not exceed. These terrorists have very loose affiliations both internationally and domestically, and likely no direct state sponsorship. When a terrorist act occurs, very often there is no credit taken as these new terrorists do not desire publicity to further their cause. Religious extremists, for example, focus on internal satisfaction (God recognizes their effort and will reward them) rather than public recognition. It is likely that religious extremism will grow as the millenium approaches, as this represents for them an important apocalyptic event. Religious extremism is by no means the only example of this new type of terrorist. Domestic militia-type extremists are growing, even after the devastation of the Oklahoma City bombing.²⁹ As a potential adversary, this type of transnational threat is likely the least predictable and most dangerous in terms of consequences for their actions.

It is easy to underestimate the threat this new type of terrorist poses, particularly as only good fortune, interdiction by authorities or poor terrorist planning has spared the U.S. from some potential horrific consequences. Religious extremists from an Islamic militant group wanting to punish the U.S. for foreign policy planted the World Trade Centre bomb in February 1993 that killed 6 and injured 5,000. Fortunately, the building was stronger than anticipated as the extremists really planned to collapse the entire structure and kill 250,000 people. Follow-on plans to destroy the George Washington bridge, the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels, the U.N. headquarters and the Federal Building in new York were all interdicted by federal agents. These follow-on actions were planned to kill or injure hundreds or thousands of people. The militant group, calling itself al Qaeda, is a widespread terrorist organization reputedly led by Saudi

multimillionaire Osama bin Laden. The latest action of this group on August 7, 1998 was to bomb the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.³⁰ The attack left 258 people dead, including 12 Americans, and more than 5,000 injured. The U.S. retaliation that led to the bombing of suspected terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Sudan is unlikely to stop the efforts of this group and it is simply a matter of time before the next attempt takes place.³¹

Another example of the new terrorist is the extremist group Aum Shinrikyo, who in March 1995 released the chemical nerve agent sarin into the Tokyo subway system. This release killed 12 and injured 5,500 people. If the attack had been carried out as planned, it is estimated that casualties would have been closer to 10,000 people with many more injured. Similar efforts to release nerve agents were in place against Disneyland in the U.S. and against petrochemical facilities in Los Angeles, but were discovered in time to prevent execution of the plan. At the time of the Tokyo attack, this group had 30,000 members (10,000 in Russia) and 1.2 billion dollars in assets. Of concern is that Aum Shinrikyo still exists today in Japan and perhaps elsewhere and is still recruiting members. As well, it is certain that the group has learned from past mistakes and can be expected to be much more efficient in dispersal of toxic chemical or bacteriological agents in the future.³²

The U.S. has recognized the danger that these groups pose to U.S. Forces at home and abroad and commissioned a task force from the Defence Science Board in 1997 to recommend what response DoD should take to counter the transnational threat. The task force concluded after a six-month study that the DoD should continue to be tasked with force protection, but emphasize it as a major mission. The justification for this decision was that the DoD had the capacity to mitigate these threats with its extensive capabilities, training and experience in force protection. Since DoD was involved heavily in force protection abroad already, it made sense to

the task force that this protection be extended to include a total end-to-end protection of the forces from the continental U.S to anywhere in the world they may deploy. It did not recommend any new organizations or agencies within DoD be created to deal with the problem. At the present time, the Joint Staff directorate J-34 is tasked as the directorate responsible for combating terrorist threats against U.S. forces and the task force recommended this arrangement be continued. The task force also recognized that the current arrangement leaves many vulnerabilities to terrorist activities, both at home and abroad. The task force made a number of specific recommendations to address the current deficiencies:³³

The DSB recommends expanding the concept of force protection to include capabilities for deterrence, detection and prevention of terrorism in addition to simply mitigation and response. The synergy between civil protection and force protection should be increased according to the report, and the profile of the force protection mission elevated within the Department. The DSB recognised that the transnational threat could easily target civil targets to attack U.S. forces. However, coordination and cooperation between civil and military agencies is limited by the U.S. constitution when it comes to domestic enforcement and protection.

The DSB report recommends increasing the scope of force protection beyond personnel and includes mission-related targets, essential infrastructure and lines of communication both domestically and abroad. Efforts to mitigate the effects of chemical, biological and radiological weapons should be added to the current vulnerability to high explosives. There should be elimination of the gaps and overlaps of responsibility in force protection by clarifying the missions of the myriad of agencies within DoD that are assigned this task.

As part of the technological solution, there should be increased investment in counterterrorism technologies that will reduce force vulnerabilities, using primarily off-the-shelf

equipment. Efforts should include detection systems, advanced sensors, electronic security test and integration as well as advanced entry control systems. Lastly, the DSB report recommends enhancing intelligence operations by reorienting toward the terrorist threat, and accelerating efforts at the tactical level to collect and analyze information. Coalition partners like Canada and the Western Allies are to be encouraged to share intelligence to facilitate fusion of data through the establishment of a distributed data base using the Global Information Infrastructure (GII) and the World Wide Web.³⁴

The above recommendations from the task force were forwarded to Secretary of Defence (SECDEF) William Cohen in October of 1997, with the stipulation that a plan needed to be developed by DoD for implementation. At this time, it is unknown how many of these recommendations were accepted, it is likely that direction has been given by SECDEF to begin coordination of this activity. Nevertheless, by comparison to the Vietnam experience, there are concerns that the DSB recommendations may be repeating the same mistakes made in that era by neglecting the principles for dealing with an asymmetric adversary. The next section will explore that concept in detail.

Asymmetric Warfare Principles

The type of adversary presented by the new terrorist in the transnational threat of the future and the VC in the past are in many ways quite similar. Both of these groups have employed asymmetrical combat strategies to counter superior technological and numerical forces. Both groups are fanatical to a cause and are willing to expend any price in human life to achieve their aim. The new terrorist is as determined in his cause for personal satisfaction as the Vietnamese were for personal liberation of their country. Both seek to engage the enemy at a time and place of their choosing using guerilla tactics, and hide among the populace. While there

are differences (the new terrorist seeks no direct political or strategic gain, for example), it is natural to see if any of the principles learned about asymmetric warfare from the Vietnam experience are applicable. The three principles of use of technology, flexibility in tactics and importance of the human element will be seen to be applicable to future warfare as well as the past.

The first principle is that the application of technology ought not to be seen as a panacea or magic bullet that will be the solution to success. Nevertheless, a high-technology approach to defeating terrorists has been proposed by the DSB as a means to share information and alleviate the risk to American Forces. Just as in the Vietnam War, the VC were adept at turning radio technology and other weaponry against the Americans, the DSB seems oblivious to the fact that terrorists may use selective stolen technology as a weapon. The recommendation that increased use of the World Wide Web and the Global information Infrastructure (GII) be used to keep track of terrorists seems to ignore the fact that cyber-warfare will be a principal tool of the new borderless enemy. The DSB report does recognize the information warfare threat, but may well be underestimating the terrorist ability to fight electronically and psychologically. The transnational threat is likely to use an information warfare network, or “cyber-state” in support of a confederation of terrorists, criminals or both. The cyber-warrior arsenal might consist of software weapons, phony intelligence postings or fake warnings of hazardous material spills to panic the public.³⁵ In any case, it seems likely that using the Web as an intelligence network against the threat is not a good idea as there appears to be a strong likelihood that the GII will be hacked or altered.

Other forms of technology will also likely be appropriated by terrorists as asymmetric weapons. The DSB report suggested that micro-robotics for perimeter surveillance of terrorist

activities be actively funded as a force protection measure. The lesson of the Vietnam War of how American ordinance was used for mines and booby traps seems to be repeated here. A recent commentator has raised the spectre of a transnational terrorist supplementing its terrorist or mercenary forces with thousands of microscopic robots used as scouts or infiltrators. These weapons could be devastating in an urban environment as silent hunter-killers, either independently or slaved to GPS locations.³⁶

The second principle is that it is essential to be willing to change doctrine to adapt to new situations and be able to look to the future for possible battlegrounds, and not the past. The DSB has proposed no new capability or training to combat terrorism, merely an enhancement of existing policies. In the Vietnam era, the U.S. Forces were prepared to fight another Korea or World War II style army that engaged in conventional warfare. It was unprepared to fight against an army that refused to be drawn into open battle and fought a guerrilla-type war. Similarly, the U.S. is currently engaged in preparing to fight another Gulf War with technically superior weaponry and reduced forces. It is unprepared to fight against a fanatical urban opponent where stand-off weaponry is of little use. Williamson Murray points out that commentators and defence analysts have “studiously ignored the limitations of technology or the asymmetric responses that the U.S. opponents will undoubtedly develop in the next century”³⁷ The next century, he argues, will be much messier and nastier. The challenges to security will come from an unhappy mix of religious fanaticism, demographic trends toward young men with little education and considerable hostility towards the west, and shortages of world resources such as water. The population explosion have created vast slums in Africa, much of South America and the Middle East that may be unsustainable in the long term for food or other resources. According to Marine Force projections, more than 500 megacities (urban environments with

over 8 million people) will exist by the year 2015, up from the present number of 270.³⁸ These cities will very likely become the breeding ground and potential battlegrounds for fanatical transnational terrorists who could target U.S. forces anywhere in the world or attack critical infrastructure within these cities.

Retired U.S. Army Colonel Ralph Peters shared the view that the battleground of the future may well be in the cities.³⁹ Conventional warfare has been waged on horizontal battlefields, whereas in a fully urbanized terrain the fighting becomes profoundly vertical. Ralph Peters argues that the likeliest battlefields are cityscapes, where warfare will reach up into towers and down into sewers and subway lines. The danger exists that transnational groups could operate more or less anonymously in U.S. or global urban environments where the distinction between war and crime is lost. Fighting in a city environment is a lost art, last practiced in World War II. In many ways, it is akin to having to relearn the art of riverine warfare during the Vietnam War. This capability had been lost, as it was never envisioned that rivers would again become a battlefield.⁴⁰ By not training in techniques for city combat, the same mistake is being repeated with urban warfare.

The last principle is that the human element must be recognized as playing a major role in any solution to the problem of asymmetric warfare and not be underestimated. One of the reasons that the Vietnam War was lost was the lack of effort in winning the hearts and minds of the population that enabled guerrillas to gain support and intelligence from a sympathetic audience. The non-Western world already feels alienated both economically and culturally from the U.S. and European nations. A similar schism is occurring with regard to the minority elements such as the Islamic population within the U.S. and Western countries and the rest of the population. A spate of Hollywood movies that portray Islamic terrorists as the villains (such as

The Siege, the new Twentieth Century Fox film) has caused many Americans to demonstrate hostility toward the Islamic population. Following the Oklahoma bombing of the federal building, an Oklahoma Muslim so traumatized by a hooligan throwing rocks at her home that she went into premature labor and lost her baby.⁴¹ Resentment towards the U.S. and ambivalence towards acts of terrorism within the Muslim community domestically and abroad is building and the U.S. is in danger of losing the hearts and minds campaign just as it did in Vietnam. Graham Fuller, former Vice-Chairman of the National intelligence Council at the CIA warns that dangers of getting drawn into an escalating war against terrorist groups who enjoy some public sympathy are very real. He suggests that the West had better ensure a more sympathetic environment for the hearts and minds campaign than currently exists.⁴²

There is no doubt that the DSB report is a start towards addressing what will undoubtedly be one of the more difficult security problems in the next century. Nevertheless, it seems clear that some of the measures proposed in the report seem to repeat the same sort of errors committed in the Vietnam War. The over-reliance on technological warfare, failure to prepare for combat in urban environments and the lack of focus on winning the support of affected population groups violate the three principles of asymmetric warfare learned earlier. To be effective, changes need to be made to the measures in the DSB report to provide a more focussed effort in these areas.

Conclusion

Considerable debate is ongoing within the military community as to what kind of military forces should be developed to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. Part of the debate is centered on rapid technological changes, coupled with new organizations and doctrine, which collectively have transformed the way war is conducted. The RMA and the end of the Cold War

has permitted the U.S. to downsize active forces by one-quarter, and yet still dominate the conventional battlefield. When the combined forces of the Western Allies are taken into account, there is no nation in the near future that will challenge the West for supremacy.

In spite of the technical and military supremacy, the future does not appear lacking for potential threats. The growing gap between the have and have-not nations, religious tensions and the lack of resources will fuel terrorists and extremists. As well, there is a danger that criminal elements, drug cartels and mercenaries or terrorists will combine to create a new sort of enemy (the transnational threat) which will shun the battlefield and fight by means that will nullify the military superiority of conventional forces. The main tactic of such forces will be to exploit “asymmetries” that use the weaknesses inherent in a technological force with standoff weaponry. The new type of terrorist that is motivated purely by hatred, revenge or religious fervor represents the greatest danger to western society. The use of WMD such as biological, chemical or nuclear bombs have been utilized by these groups in the past and it is only a matter of time before the next incident occurs.

This paper has explored the parallels between the current situation between the transnational threat and the Viet Cong. This comparison was motivated by the similarities in asymmetrical tactics, fanaticism and low regard for human life. By comparing the recommendations of the task force to the lessons learned from the Vietnam War, a number of weaknesses in the DSB recommendations have been identified. By studying the Vietnam War, it was possible to draw out three basic principles for conduct of asymmetrical warfare. The solutions proposed by the DSB appear to violate each of the three basic principles. The weaknesses stem principally from the over-reliance on technical solutions, not preparing for the

urban battleground of the future and a failure to fully appreciate the human dimension to the problem.

While not primarily addressed by the DSB report, the implications of the transnational threat are such that Canada cannot hope to avoid being drawn into the effort. The U.S. solution to transnational vulnerabilities, including the measures for protecting the shared financial and information systems, will require Canadian involvement whether it is desired or not. It is hoped that by active participation in the measures currently being enacted, including sharing alternate viewpoints such as this one, will make Canada more secure from this type of threat.

End Notes

¹ US, Defence Science Board, DoD Responses to Transnational Threats, Vol I Final Report, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, Oct 1997) p 1.

² *Ibid*, p 1.

³ Carl Conneta and Charles Knight, “U.S. Defence Posture in the Global Context: a Framework for Evaluating the Quadrennial Defence Review”, Background on the QDR (May 1997) p 2.

⁴ Andrew Krepinevich, “Cavalry to Computer: The Pattern of Military Revolutions”, *The National Interest*, (Fall 1994) p.30.

⁵ James R. Blaker, “Understanding the Revolution in Military Affairs”, *The Officer*, (May 1997) p 23.

⁶ Ahmed S. Hashim, “The Revolution in Military Affairs Outside the West”, *Journal of international Affairs*, (Spring 1998), p 437.

⁷ Bryan Bender, “US Worried by coalition Technology Gap”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, (Jul 29, 1998), p 1.

⁸ Ahmed S. Hashim, “ The Revolution ... “, p 443.

⁹ Barbara Starr, “Saddam brings USA face-to-face with Asymmetric Warfare”, *Jane’s Defence Weekly*, (Feb 11, 1998), p 19.

¹⁰ US, Defence Science Board, DoD Responses to Transnational Threats, Vol I Final Report, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, Oct 1997) p viii.

¹¹ Bryan Bender, “Pentagon found ill-prepared for Asymmetric Warfare”, *Defence Daily*, (Oct 8,1997), Vol 197, p 1.

¹² Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins press), 1986 , p 4 .

¹³ James W. McCoy, *Secrets of the Viet Cong*, (Hippocrene Books: New York), 1972 , p 4

¹⁴ Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army ...*, p 9

¹⁵ James W. McCoy, *Secrets of...*, p 7.

¹⁶ James W. McCoy, *Secrets of...*, p 5.

¹⁷ John D. Bergen, *The U.S Army in Vietnam: Military Communications, a Test for Technology*, (US Gov’t Printing Office: Washington D.C.), 1985, p 202.

¹⁸ James W. McCoy, *Secrets of...*, p 101.

¹⁹ Andrew Krepinevich, *The Army ...*, p 201.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p 198.

²¹ Paul F. Wynnyk, “Vo Nguyen Giap: A Strategy for Protracted Revolutionary War”, in *The Changing Face of War*, ed by Allan D. English (McGill-Queens University Press: Montreal, 1998) p 142.

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- ²² US, Defence Science Board, DoD Responses to Transnational Threats, Vol I Final Report, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, Oct 1997) p ix.
- ²³ US, Defence Science Board, DoD Responses to Transnational Threats, Vol III Supporting Reports, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, Oct 1997) p 2.
- ²⁴ Bryan Bender, “Pentagon found ill-prepared...”, p 2.
- ²⁵ Eric Margolis, “Russia’s Lost Luggage could be Deadly”, *The Toronto Sun*, Editorial, (Nov 1, 1998)
- ²⁶ US, Defence Science Board, DoD Responses ... Vol III Supporting Documents, p 8 .
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, p 5.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, p 4.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, p 7 .
- ³⁰ Mohamed Sadeek Odeh , “Second bombing suspect blames bin Laden group”, *The Calgary Herald*, (August 29, 1998) p A-7.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, p A-7.
- ³² US, Defence Science Board, DoD Responses ... Vol I Final Report, p 18.
- ³³ US, Defence Science Board, DoD Responses to Transnational Threats, Vol II Force Protection Report, (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, Oct 1997) p vi.
- ³⁴ US, Defence Science Board, DoD Responses ... Vol I Final Report, p xii.
- ³⁵ Paul Mann, “Pentagon Called Unprepared for Post-modern Conflict”, *Aviation Week and Space Technology*, (April 27, 1998) p 54.
- ³⁶ Paul Mann, “Pentagon...”, p 55.
- ³⁷ Williamson Murray, “Preparing to Lose the next War?”, *Strategic Review*, (Spring,1998), p 51.
- ³⁸ Paul Mann, “Pentagon...”, p 56.
- ³⁹ Ralph Peters, “Urban Planning, the Army Way”, *Harper’s*, (August, 1998) p 12 .
- ⁴⁰ Harold J. Henderson, “Brown Water Navies and Counterinsurgency Operations”, in *The Changing Face of War*, ed by Allan D. English (McGill-Queen’s University Press: Montreal, 1998) p 149.
- ⁴¹ Teresa Watanabe, “Muslims Slowly Turning Around Perceptions”, *The Calgary Herald*, (August 29, 1998), P I-10.
- ⁴² Graham Fuller, “U.S. Middle East policy hypocritical to Muslims; Terrorist attacks don't take place in a vacuum”, *The Edmonton Journal* , (August 27, 1998), p A-17.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bender, Brian “Pentagon found ill-prepared for Asymmetric Warfare”, Defence Daily, Vol 197 (Oct 8,1997), pp 1-3.

This article outlines the conclusions of the three-volume Defence Science Board which concludes that the Pentagon is not prepared to meet the unconventional (Asymmetric) means of warfare likely to be used by terrorist groups. The preliminary findings are presented in this paper.

Bender, Brian “US Worried by coalition Technology Gap”, Jane’s Defence Weekly, (Jul 29, 1998), pp 1-2.

The gap between the U.S. and her Allies has been increasing over the past number of years due to new technology engendered by the RMA. The article documents the new arms race among Allies, and the race to keep up is currently being lost by the Allies. This fact will have implications for interoperability in future coalition operations.

Bergen, John D. United States Army in Vietnam: Military Technology, a Test for Technology, Washington D.C: U.S Government Printing Office, 1985.

This book is part of a series published by the Department of Defence documenting the Army’s various roles in Vietnam. In this volume, the advantages and drawbacks of the various communication systems used in the field are chronicled from the outset of the war to the end of the American involvement. John Bergen is extremely biased toward the American contribution and consistently downplays the competency of the Viet Cong. As such, it provides a balance to James McCoy’s book.

Blaker, James R. “Understanding the Revolution in Military Affairs”, The Officer, (May 1997) pp 23-28.

This article provides an excellent overview of both the definition and the impact of the Revolution in Military Affairs on the U.S. Military Affairs. The author reviews where the term arose from, and projects how RMA is incorporated into Joint Vision 2010.

Conneta, Carl and Knight, Charles “U.S. Defence Posture in the Global Context: a Framework for Evaluating the Quadrennial Defence Review”, Background on the QDR (May 1997) pp 2-14.

The U.S. Defence Posture is reviewed as a means to evaluate the Quadrennial Defence Review. The article concludes that the new global context presents new challenges for force generation.

Fuller, Graham “U.S. Middle East policy hypocritical to Muslims; Terrorist attacks don't take place in a vacuum”, The Edmonton Journal , (August 27, 1998), p A-17.

This news article details the perceived injustices and ill-treatment felt by the Islamic world. The conclusion of the writer is that the terrorist attacks are tolerated by the Muslim world because they feel dominated by the western world.

Hashim, Ahmed S. "The Revolution in Military Affairs Outside the West", Journal of International Affairs, Vol 51, No 2 (Spring 1998) pp 431-445.

As the military gap grows between the Western and Non-Western nations, the Revolution in Military Affairs makes it less likely that any potential competitor will arise that will challenge the military superiority of the West and its Allies. This paper presents the viewpoint of the non-Western nations, who see asymmetrical responses as their only option.

Henderson, Harold J. "Brown Water Navies and Counterinsurgency Operations", in The Changing Face of War, edited by Allan D. English (McGill-Queens University Press: Montreal, 1998) pp 149-164.

An historical overview of the Riverine warfare conducted during the Vietnam War, this article covers the reasons for the return to this lost art and how it contributed to the overall American effort. Of particular interest are the detailed maps of river patrol areas and how effective these operations were in hindering the North Vietnamese resupply effort.

Krepinevich, Andrew F. "Cavalry to Computer: The Pattern of Military Revolutions", The National Interest, (Fall 1994) pp 30-41.

An overview of how RMA has been implemented in different eras. The analyst concludes that different technological innovations have been adapted in various manners, but all are valid expressions of RMA's.

Krepinevich, Andrew F. The Army and Vietnam, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

This book by Andrew Krepinevich provides a thoughtful analysis of the American War in Vietnam, and chronicles the history of involvement from the inception of hostilities to the American withdrawal and ultimate Communist victory. Krepinevich provides important insights and rationale for the American defeat, which arose principally from the wrong approach the Americans took to the war and the steadfast refusal of the American generals to adapt to Guerrilla warfare

Mann, Paul "Pentagon Called Unprepared for Post-Modern Conflict", Aviation Week and Space Technology, (April 27, 1998) pp 54-55.

According to some military theorists and historians at a colloquium at the U.S. Army War College, , the future world strategic environment in the year 2020 will be much different that now. The experts foresee a new "virtual" enemy that will shun the battlefield in favour of electronic and psychological warfare in cyber-space. The new adversary is likely to be a confederation of terrorists and criminals and use information networks as a political structure.

McCoy, James W. Secrets of the Viet Cong, New York: Hippocrene Books, Inc. 1992.

As a former paratroop officer, James McCoy outlines the tactics and structure of the Viet Cong that enabled them to win the war against the American Forces. The book catalogs the operational art of manouever warfare as practiced by the North Vietnamese. The remarks in his book show that James McCoy is a virulent anti-Communist who portrays

the Viet Cong as a ruthless and merciless opponent. Some of the figures and examples may be biased to show the Viet Cong were a more potent and infallible adversary than was the case.

Margolis, Eric, "Russia's Lost Luggage could be Deadly", The Toronto Sun, Editorial, (Nov 1, 1998).

This article documents the danger presented to the world community by around 100 suitcase-sized nuclear weapons that have gone missing from the former Soviet Union. Each of these has the potential to devastate a city and cause hundreds of thousands of casualties. Of great concern is that these weapons could have been purchased by terrorists.

Odeh, Mohamed Sadeek, "Second bombing suspect blames bin Laden group", The Calgary Herald, (August 29, 1998) p A-7.

An interview with one of the two suspects in the Kenya and Tanzania bombings of the U.S. Embassies, which identifies Osama bin Laden as the mastermind behind the plot. Nevertheless, the suspect denies any responsibility for planning the operation, and claims he is innocent.

Peters, Ralph, "Urban Planning, the Army Way", *Harper's*, (August, 1996) pp 12-14.

Retired Lt-Col Ralph Peters argues that the U.S. Army should be trained in urban warfare, as his opinion is that this is likely to be the next battlefield. He proposes a revolution in training, involving practicing in abandoned cities to perfect urban combat training.

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The article provides an insight into the efforts of the Muslim community to reverse perceptions that characterizes all followers of Islam as terrorists. Their conclusion of the article is that progress is being made towards changing attitudes by diligent work of volunteers.

Williamson, Murray, "Preparing to Lose the Next War", Strategic Review, Spring 1998, pp 51-62.

The writer of this article challenges the assumptions being made about force development in the U.S. and is of the opinion that the systems and concepts being developed are disconnected from the current world reality. He advocates a force more capable of deployment and less dependent of technology.

Wynnyk, Paul F, "Vo Nguyen Giap: A Strategy for Protracted Revolutionary War", in The Changing Face of War, edited by Allan D. English (McGill-Queens University Press: Montreal, 1998) pp 135-148.

The story of General Vo Nguyen Giap, the revolutionary military leader of the North Vietnamese leader that lead his armed forces to victory over the French and American Forces. This biography gives important insights into the character and motivation of this dynamic leader.