

Fourth Generation Warfare: Reality or Myth?

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APPRECIATION

Although not identified as an author of this paper, Dr. William P. (Peter) Cherry is acknowledged as a major contributor to it and as the co-chair of the discussion group held at Cornwallis XII. Also, Victor Middleton, a colleague, provided critical review and suggestions for the paper.

INTRODUCTION

An innovation was introduced at Cornwallis VI. It was a post-dinner session, held to maximize the opportunities for topics not fitting directly into the Cornwallis program and symposium theme to be discussed. The innovation became a “tradition” when the approach was re-introduced at Cornwallis XI, with a post-dinner discussion of globalization and how it might impact on peace and stability. At Cornwallis XII, the post-dinner discussion event concerned the subject of this paper. Unfortunately, a transcription of the discussion is not available, so any outcome of the session beyond the most general can not be put forth. One can only say the topic elicited considerable interchanges among the Cornwallis participants and the overall conclusion that the subject remains open for further assessment and a verdict from history.

The following paper was designed as an “ice-breaker” to provide a background for a spirited discussion among the participants at Cornwallis XII, following the principles expressed in the Charter of the Cornwallis Group. In order to engage the participants at the symposium at the Pearson Peacekeeping Centre, it was desirable to provide an overview of arguments related to the major question provided by the title. Specifically, does the recent spate of publications introducing the notion of a new generation of warfare engaging the United States and its allies throughout the world represent a true reality or are the writings the product of poor scholarship and leaps of assumptions without veracity?

FOURTH GENERAL WARFARE: REALITY

How is Fourth Generation Warfare defined and who are its proponents? Probably its most ardent supporter is COL Thomas X. Hammes, United States Marine Corps. His cogent arguments are put forth in a well-composed book, *The Sling and The Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (Zenith Press, 2004). Colonel Hammes bases his propositions on more than “twenty-five years of study of the evolution of war.” (Introduction, p. xiv) Quoting Hammes directly, so as not to bias this presentation significantly, the generations of warfare are:

“The first generation of war grew not just from the invention of gunpowder but also from the political, economic, and social structures that developed as Europe transitioned from a feudal system to a system of nation-states ruled by monarchs. The transition from the ‘chivalry’ of feudal knights to the armies of Napoleon required centuries. This time was required not only to develop reliable firearms but, more important, to develop the political system, the wealth-generating national economies, the social structures, and the technologies capable of sustaining the mass armies of the Napoleonic era. During this time, the first generation of modern war evolved slowly, in consonance with the societies of western Europe. It peaked with the massive armies of the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century.” (pp. 16-17)

“...Clearly, evolution from medieval warfare to the first generation of modern war required significant change in the political, economic, social, and technological structures of the time.” (p. 18)

“Like the first generation of war, the second generation did not grow just from improvements in weaponry. It, too, required changes across the spectrum of human activity. Although the political structure of the nation-state was essentially in place at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the state’s power to tax and enforce taxes increased dramatically during the hundred years between Waterloo and the Miracle of the Marne. Even more important than an increase in the ability to levy and collect taxes was much vaster wealth to tax...The combination of increased GDP per person, major population increases, and significantly better government control massively increased the wealth available to the national governments of Europe. A great deal of this increase in wealth can be attributed to the rapid industrialization of western Europe and North America. Second-generation war required both the wealth generated by an industrial society and the sheer volume of output that only such a society can produce. Industry had to first design and then mass produce the weapons and the huge quantities of ammunition they consumed. Even these exceptional production capabilities alone would not allow nations to apply second-generation warfare...[T]he economies of all the participants had to expand enormously before the massive armies of World War I could be raised, transported, and supported. Further, the European nations had to develop logistically effective general staffs to combine these national assets, mobilize them, transport them, and then hurl them against the nation’s enemies. Finally, second-generation war was not possible without the patriotic enthusiasm that brought millions of men to the colors and held them there through four years of catastrophic losses.” (pp. 18-19)

On to Third-generation warfare.

“At 4:45 a.m. on September 1, 1939, The German army invaded Poland. By September 19, they forced the surrender of the last Polish army in the field. Eight days later, they completed mopping up the stubborn Polish resistance in Warsaw. The popular view is that Germany overwhelmed Poland with a massive mechanized attack that quickly overran the outdated Polish army.” [Here, Hammes points out that the German army was not heavily mechanized at the time and the commander did not use his armor particularly well.] “One of the most remarkable aspects of the birth and development of blitzkrieg is the action of the German army after its astonishingly rapid victory of Poland. Although most armies would have rested on their laurels, the German army conducted a detailed, even brutal critique of its own performance. It then began an intensive, demanding training program to overcome the deficiencies identified during its review of the Polish campaign....Due to the intensive retraining, the force the Germans unleashed on France on May 10, 1940, incorporated the lessons learned from the Polish campaign. The Germans succeeded in making these lessons part of their operational and tactical art. Although still primarily an infantry army, the Germans organized their armored forces into Panzer Corps and use them to shatter the cohesion of the Allied forces. The result was another astonishing victory. Britain was evacuating its forces from Dunkirk only sixteen days after the invasion. France lasted only another month. In contrast to four bloody years of stalemate in World War I, the German’s [sic] conquered France in weeks. The victory stunned the Western powers. They were certain the Germans had created an entirely new form of warfare. Third-generation of warfare had arrived. Yet, as with previous generations of war, it was not just the militaries’ response to specific tactical problems that drove the evolution of this generation of war. The evolution of 3GW required political, economic, social, and technological conditions to be right. The political and social atmospheres of the opposing sides were critical to the difference in development. While the politically unified state that permitted 3GW still existed throughout Europe, the social contract between governed and governors had been dramatically altered by the First World War. [It is unclear to these authors if Hammes meant 3GW in the previous sentence or 2GW.]..Although the political climate varied greatly between the future belligerents, the economic factors were similar. The Great Depression severely limited funds available during the early to mid-thirties. But the impact varied greatly, according to each government’s willingness to expend scarce resources on its military forces—and its officers’ willingness to test new concepts without the actual equipment they would use. Hitler willingly spent Germany to the brink of bankruptcy in building up his armed forces. In contrast, the French and British governments severely restricted military spending until just before the outbreak of war. Similarly, the German army worked extensively to develop combined arms tactics—even though it had to use motor cars for tanks, light planes as fighters and dive bombers, and small formations to simulate large ones. The French did little, and the British rejected the experiments they did conduct.” (pp. 23-26)

Hammes provides a summary of the first three generations.

“In these first chapters, we traced the evolution of the first three generations of war. A couple of facts leap out. First is that none of them consisted of a sudden transformation—each evolved over time. Each could be seen developing over the conflicts that preceded it.

“Second, each new generation required developments across the spectrum of society. Technological change alone has never been sufficient to produce a major change in how man wages war. It requires a complete societal change—political, economic, social, and technological—to create the conditions necessary for major changes in war.

“Finally, we can see the logical progression of the three generations. First-generation war focused on the direct destruction of the enemy’s close force. Second-generation war relied on firepower but still focused on the destruction of the enemy fighting forces. Both were restricted by the warfighting capabilities of the societies from which they sprang. As society progressed and was able to project power over much longer ranges, third-generation war took advantage of those changes to focus on destruction of the enemy’s command and control and logistics as the fastest way to destroy his will to fight.

“Each succeeding generation reached deeper into the enemy’s territory in an effort to defeat him. If 4GW is a logical progression, it must reach much deeper into the enemy’s forces in seeking victory. In subsequent chapters, we will see that 4GW has in fact evolved to focus deeply in the enemy’s rear. It focuses on the direct destruction of the enemy’s political will to fight.” (pp. 30-31)

To introduce fourth-generation war, Hammes spells out, in considerable detail the changes to society (Chapter 4) as the fundamental bases of the new generation.

“We have seen that 3GW or maneuver warfare really started in 1915 and came to maturity in 1940. The previous chapters have also shown that major changes in warfare were always preceded by changes in the political, economic, social, and technical segments of society. Given that changes in these areas are apparent precursors to changes in warfare, we have to ask if the changes in society since the evolution of the third generation are sufficient to indicate that it is time for the fourth generation.

“We know it took about a hundred years to move from the height of 1GW conflict, as represented by the Napoleonic Wars, to 2GW conflict, as represented by World War I. It required that long for society to develop the industrial, societal, and technical base to support the huge armies during a four-year struggle. We also know that although all the tactical elements of 3GW were present in World War I, it required the twenty-one years between World War I and World War II for society to develop the base required to generate full-fledged maneuver war (3GW). Therefore, to explore the possibility that 4GW is evolving, the logical period to examine for political, economic, social, and technical changes is the time between the start of World War II and today.” (p. 32)

Hammes goes on to point to the major changes in the world:

“Politically, there have been extensive changes since the end of World War II. The most obvious is the exponential increase in the number of players on the international stage. Prior to the war, the nation-state was the only significant player on the international scene. Immediately after the war, both the political and economic spheres began changing rapidly, and each added numerous and varied players to the political stage...” (p. 33)

The growth of international organizations is cited.

“The second major change in the political structure was the huge increase in the number and diversity of nations. The postwar breakup of the European colonial empires gave birth to dozens of new nations—all theoretically equal partners in the United Nations. As a rough measure of the increase in players, the United Nations had fifty-one members when the Charter was originally signed in 1945. It now has 189 member states.” (p. 34)

“...The third significant change is the number of stateless actors that influence the international scene. These include both transnational and sub-national elements.” (p. 35) A listing of representative transnational organizations are presented along with descriptions of the sub-national elements, with particular reference to nations that lack states [?]

Hammes then introduces a discussion of the economic changes. “Perhaps the most powerful and least controlled players are the international financial markets. Although there were markets prior to World War II, their impact was small compared to today’s markets. Then, market transactions took time, and the various nations could control many of these markets’ assets. Today, billions of dollars, pounds, euros, or yen can be moved instantaneously to any of millions of locations. Further, the decision to move those assets is not made in any one place or by any identifiable group of people or organizations. These decisions are made by two networked entities that Thomas Friedman has labeled the ‘Electronic Herd’ and the ‘Supermarkets.’” (pp. 35-36) Friedman says that the Electronic Herd is made up of “short-horn cattle” (buyers and sellers of stocks, bonds and currencies around the world) and “long-horn cattle” (multi-national firms involved in foreign direct investments). Friedman defines the “Supermarkets” as the big stock exchanges in major cities.

Continuing with Hammes:

“...The cumulative effect of this proliferation of players on the international scene is a distinct reduction in the power and freedom of action of nations...As great as the political changes have been economically the shift has been even more distinct. Just prior to World War II, a nation’s wealth was frequently measured in terms of tons of coal produced, tons of steel rolled, number of automobiles manufactured—all measures of an industrial power with an emphasis on mechanical power...Today, the most rapidly growing sector of the international economy is information. Unlike industrial plants, these wealth-generating assets are easily moved—and are often part of geographically distributed networks in their day-to-day operations. Nations

can no longer compel compliance from companies by threatening their physical assets—simply because many of a company’s most important assets exist only in cyberspace and can be moved anywhere in the world virtually instantaneously.” (pp. 37-38)

“...[T]oday’s communications revolution has completely changed how people get information. In the same way governments, businesses, and trade associations are becoming networks rather than hierarchies, so are relations between people of different states. Citizens of today’s developed nations have virtually unlimited access to the people and ideas of other cultures. With the advent of cheap communications and transportation, international connections have multiplied exponentially. For the first time in history, it is easy for average residents of one state to develop strong interests and common bonds with those of other states. (p. 39)

After making the point that there have been the necessary (and perhaps sufficient) changes in the world along political, economic and social lines, Hammes devotes the balance of the book to histories of conflicts since World War II that he feels demonstrate the existence of Fourth-Generation Warfare. The cases are: “Mao and the Birth of Fourth-Generation War,” “The Vietnamese Modification,” “The Sandinista Refinedment,” The Intifada: Civilians versus an Army,” “The al-Aqsa Intifada,” Al-Qaeda: A Transnational Enemy,” “Afghanistan: A Tribal Network,” and “Iraq: High-Tech versus Fourth Generation.” Hammes work concludes with summary chapters reviewing the characteristics of Fourth-Generation Warfare (strategic, operational and tactical levels) and some thoughts on the future (threats, paths to follow, and a chapter on flexibility as an answer, perhaps, to Fourth-Generation Warfare).

FOURTH-GENERATION WARFARE: MYTH

For purposes of this introduction and stimulus to an active interchange with the Cornwallis Group, we summarize a rather erudite attack on the concept of Fourth-Generation Warfare. The paper is from the US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute; the author is Dr. Antulio J. Echevarria II; the title is “Fourth-Generation War and Other Myths,.” November 2005. Dr. Echervarria is Director of Research, Director of National Security Affairs, and Acting Chairman of the Regional Strategy and Planning Department of the SSI. He is graduate of the US Military Academy and a retired Armor officer. In no way does he mince his words; you have no doubt of his position. Selected material is drawn from his SSI monograph.

FROM THE SUMMARY

“Fourth Generation War (4GW) emerged in the late 1980s, but has become popular due to recent twists in the war in Iraq and terrorist attacks worldwide. Despite reinventing itself several times, the theory has several fundamental flaws that need to be exposed before they can cause harm to U.S. operational and strategic thinking. A critique of 4GW is both fortuitous and

important because it also provides us an opportunity to attack other unfounded assumptions that could influence U.S. strategy and military doctrine.

“In brief, the theory holds that warfare has evolved through four generations: 1) the use of massed manpower, 2) firepower, 3) maneuver, and now 4) an evolved form of insurgency that employs all available networks—political, economic, social, military—to convince an opponent’s decisionmakers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly.

“The notion of 4GW first appeared in the late 1980s as a vague sort of ‘out of the box’ thinking, and it entertained every popular conjecture about future warfare. However, instead of examining the way terrorists belonging to Hamas or Hezbollah (or now Al Qaeda) actually behave, it misleadingly pushed the storm-trooper ideal as the terrorist of tomorrow. Instead of looking at the probability that such terrorists would improvise with respect to the weapons they used—box cutters, aircraft, and improvised explosive devices—it posited high-tech ‘wonder’ weapons.

“The theory went through a second incarnation when the notion of nontrinitarian war came into vogue, but it failed to examine that notion critically. The theory also is founded on myths about the so-called Westphalian system and the theory of blitzkrieg. The theory of 4GW reinvented itself once again after September 11, 2001 (9/11), when its proponents claimed that Al Qaeda was waging a 4GW against the United States. Rather than thinking critically about future warfare, the theory’s proponents became more concerned with demonstrating that they had predicted the future. While their recommendations are often rooted in common sense, they are undermined by being tethered to an empty theory.

“What we are really seeing in the war on terror, and the campaign in Iraq and elsewhere, is that increased ‘dispersion and democratization of technology, information, and finance’ brought about by globalization has given terrorist groups greater mobility and access worldwide. At this point, globalization seems to aid the nonstate actor more than the state, but states still play a central role in the support or defeat of terrorist groups or insurgencies. We would do well to abandon the theory of 4GW altogether, since it sheds very little, if any, light on this phenomenon.”

FROM THE BODY OF THE PAPER

“This monograph argues that we need to drop the theory of 4GW altogether; it is fundamentally and hopelessly flawed, and creates more confusion than it eliminates. To be sure, the concept rightly takes issue with the networkcentric vision of future warfare for being too focused on technology and for overlooking the countermeasures an intelligent, adaptive enemy might employ. However, the model of 4GW has serious problems of its own; it is based on poor history and only obscures what other historians, theorist, and analysts already have worked long and hard to clarify. Some 4GW proponents, such as Colonel

Thomas Hammes, author of *The Sling and the Stone*, sees the theory as little more than a vehicle, a tool, to generate a vital dialogue aimed at correcting deficiencies in U.S. military doctrine, training, and organization. For his part, Hammes is to be commended for his willingness to roll up his sleeves and do the hard work necessary to promote positive change. However, the tool that he employs undermines his credibility. In fact the theory of 4GW only undermines the credibility of anyone who employs it in the hope of inspiring positive change. Change is taking place despite, not because of, this theory. Put differently, if the old adage is true that correctly identifying the problem is half the solution, then the theorists of 4GW have made the problem twice as hard as it should be.

“...The kind of terrorists that 4GW theorists described, for instance, behaved more like German storm troopers of 1918, or Robert Heinlein’s starship troopers of the distant future. Highly intelligent and capable of fighting individually or in small groups, these future terrorists would first seek to infiltrate a society and then attempt to collapse it from within by means of an ill-defined psychocultural ‘judo throw’ of sorts.

“Instead of this fanciful approach, what terrorist groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and (to a lesser extent) Al Qaeda actually have done is integrated themselves into the social and political fabric of Muslim societies worldwide. Hamas and Hezbollah, especially, have established themselves as organizations capable of addressing the everyday problems of their constituencies: setting up day cares, kindergartens, schools, medical clinics, youth and women’s centers, sports clubs, social welfare, programs for free meals, and health care. Each has also become a powerful political party within their respective governments. In other words, rather than collapsing from within the societies of which they are a part, Hamas and Hezbollah have turned their constituencies into effective weapons by creating strong social, political, and religious ties with them; in short, they have become communal activists for their constituencies, which have, in turn, facilitated the construction and maintenance of substantial financial and logistical networks and safe houses. This support then aids in the regeneration of the terrorist groups. Hence, attacks by Hamas and Hezbollah are not designed to implode a society, but to change the political will of their opponents through selective—even precise—targeting of innocents. Al Qaeda is somewhat different in that its goal is to spark a global uprising, or intifada, among Muslims and its attacks have been designed to weaken the United States, other Western powers, and Muslim governments in order to prepare the way for that uprising. Pursuant to that goal, it and groups sympathetic to it have launched attacks that in 2004 alone killed about 1,500 and wounded about 4,000 people, not including the many victims of operations in Iraq; one-third of all attacks involved non-Western targets, but the bulk of the victims overall were Muslims. Still, even its tactics are not the psychological ‘judo throw’ envisioned by 4GW theorists, but an attempt to inflict as many casualties and as much destruction as possible in the hope of provoking a response massive enough to trigger a general uprising by the Islamic community. Moreover, the types of high-technology that 4GW’s proponents envisioned terrorists using includes such Wunderwaffe as directed energy weapons and robotics, rather than the cell phones and internet that terrorists actually use today. 4GW theorists also failed to account for the fact that many 21st century wars, such

as those that unfolded in Rwanda and the Sudan, would be characterized by wholesale butchery with 'old fashioned' weapons such as assault rifles and machetes wreaking a terrible toll in lives. Even in the so-called information age, the use of brute force remains an effective tactic in many parts of the world.

"The theory's proponents also speculated that the super-terrorists of the future might not have a 'traditional' national base or identity, but rather a 'non-national or transnational one, such as an ideology or religion.' However, from an historical standpoint, this condition has been the norm rather than the exception. Indeed, it characterizes many, if not most of the conventional conflicts of the past, such as World War II, which was fought along ideological lines and within a transnational framework of opposing global alliances, rather than a simple nation-state structure as is commonly supposed. While states were clearly advancing their own interests, they tended to do so by forming alliances along ideological lines. Nazism was, from its very outset, inimical to Western-style democracy and to Soviet-style socialism. So, even though democracy and socialism are ideologically incompatible, each saw Nazism as the greater threat, and formed a tentative alliance of sorts. To be sure, conventional means were clearly important as well. The Cold War is another example of a conflict fought along ideological lines; it followed in the wake of the defeat of Nazism, as the alliance between Western democracy and Soviet socialism ended and gave way to a subsequent realignment along ideological lines; this war was also fought within a transnational more than a national framework, though most of the violence occurred in peripheral wars or in covert operations. The Arab-Israeli wars and the Vietnam conflict, all of which took place within the larger context of the ideological struggle of the Cold War, offer still further examples; they were national struggles on one level, but on another level they served as the means in a larger ideological struggle.

"It is more than a little puzzling, therefore, that the architects of 4GW should have asserted that U.S. military capabilities are 'designed to operate within a nation-state framework and have great difficulties outside of it.' As history shows, the U.S. military actually seems to have handled World War II and the Cold War, two relatively recent global conflicts, both of which required it to operate within transnational alliances, quite well. That is not to say that the American way of war or, more precisely, our way of battle, does not have room for improvement. Yet, important similarities too often go unnoticed by a facile dismissal of what are often portrayed as conventional conflicts. As with Germany and Japan after World War II, for instance, one-time failed states, such as Afghanistan, where terrorist strongholds have developed, still need political and economic reconstruction in order to eliminate, or at least reduce, the conditions that gave rise to inimical ideologies in the first place.

"To be sure, out-of-the-box thinking is to be applauded; militaries do not do enough of it, for a variety of reasons, some legitimate, some not. However, its value diminishes when that thinking hardens into a box of its own, and when its architects become enamored of it."

Dr. Echervarria continues in a similar vein, taking us through other incarnations of Fourth-Generation War. But, we have covered enough ground to provide our audience with starting points for debate. It is useful to point out other perhaps inconsistencies in the theory of Fourth-Generation War. For example, where does the US Civil War fit in the scheme of things; that war encompassed both the earlier movement and clashing of large infantry and cavalry forces, supported by the relatively new notion of close-support artillery, and the maneuver and mobility in part supported by a rail-net in both the north and the south battlefield. In addition, one sees efforts to bring the war to the people, beyond the battlefield, in the multiple invasions of the north by Confederate armies (Maryland and Pennsylvania, particularly) and in the destruction of civilian livelihood (farms and production) in Sherman's March to the Sea. Another set of historical events seemingly ignored by the proponents of Fourth-Generation War in developing the supporting arguments for the theory are the US Indian Campaigns and Wars of the latter half of the 19th century in the west.

In any event, we cut off the presentation of arguments, pro and con, at this point and present the questions to initiate and inspire a dialogue (or, rather, a multi-logue).

INITIAL QUESTIONS FOR THE ASSEMBLED CORNWALLISANS

- What are the unique characteristics of the present conflicts that the US and its allies are engaged in that distinguish those conflicts from previous wars? Do not necessarily exclude any conflicts that come to mind, including the War on Terror, if that pleases you.
- Do the changing features of war from medieval times to the present reflect principally technological changes (e.g., weapons, transport, communications) or are there more fundamental changes that tend to support the theory of multiple generations?
- Are the differences between present wars and the wars of the 1940s and 1950s (specifically, World War II and Korea) principally qualitative or quantitative? Try to be explicit in providing examples to support your positions.

While the debate as to the validity and efficacy of the Fourth Generation theory of war is interesting, there are specific ramifications we would like to explore. Certainly insurgents have used tactics of terror and destruction throughout history to gain advantage over an asymmetric opponent. What is different about today, and why is it important to us? First, and most importantly, Weapons of Mass Destruction (however defined) give the purportedly "weaker" side in asymmetric conflict power never before experienced.

An individual, or small group of individuals has a force multiplier equivalent to the advantages that previously were achieved first by massing men and fire (the combat as many two man duels view), next by focusing firepower through synergy among cooperating entities (the many on few duel approach), and then in maneuver warfare by precision fire (the "rigged" duel?).

The key to countering enemy capability could, however, in each of these cases be posited as the command structure with the ability to exercise the firepower advantage first and/or

with most intensity. For conflicts in which one side can use WMD without fear of the mutually assured destruction threat, this is no longer true. This is exacerbated by the second new capability of the asymmetric combatant, the ability to avoid being isolated and neutralized by overwhelming manpower.

The individual or small group can no longer be easily contained to a small locale of influence. Networked communication allows again disproportionate influence. If we take Boyd's view that the way to "win" is to disrupt the enemy's OODA loop, these two factors conspire to make our job very difficult, and probably impossible if we insist on maintaining a second or third generation command structure, and further if we view the only appropriate instrument of combat to be the judicious use of force.

From a situation awareness point of view we must anticipate the enemy's OODA rather than try to react to it, and we must be able to add the concept of intent to our picture of when, how, and what the enemy is doing. This is a very difficult challenge - how would the members of the Cornwallis group suggest we might structure our intelligence to achieve this, and how we might structure our command structure and application of, necessarily force, but of our forces, to thwart that intent.