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To Win Wars, Correct the Army's Political Blind Spot

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As part of the post-Iraq-post-Afghanistan reset, much has been written about how the US Army fights and whether its current doctrine is capable of producing victory. In response to these discussions, and the wars themselves, much has also been written about the need for the Army to become a learning organization, one capable of innovating in the face of increasingly complex operational environments. Most of these debates are insightful, yet miss the mark. They fail to identify the central cause that underlies the unsatisfying outcomes in Afghanistan and Iraq and that risks future failures—the Army's political blind spot.

The problem is not how the Army fights nor how it learns to fight. The problem is how the Army understands the fight. Often, it does not. Too often, the Army fails to consider and develop a tailored understanding of the political context, that is, specific political conditions, the range of desired ends sought by actual or potential belligerents or other strategic foreign audiences, associated with a given conflict. This failure makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the Army to effectively apply its doctrine in pursuit of victory. This blind spot springs from an apolitical approach to warfare. It leaves the Army unable to appreciate the political conditions in which conflicts occur.

Morton is correct in his assertion that knowledge of past events informs contemporary understandings of what is possible. More specifically, he is correct that during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq there was a failure to appreciate the limits of US power, a lesson easily drawn from history.[5] Morton notes that the Army's history offers a multitude of lessons to enrich our understanding of current or expected future events and hone the advice officers provide civilian leaders.[6] I agree. Yet, the challenge is knowing from which past events one ought to draw such lessons, and which lessons ought to be learnt. Determining which historic examples best inform current or future cases requires one to have the ability to compare the political conditions in question. An understanding of the similarity or dissimilarity of political conditions provides a criteria for determining which lessons of history ought to be learnt.

Similarly, Warren's contention the "lack of military success during a time of American technological and training advantages indicates shortcomings of US Army Culture" is correct. His contention that the centurion mindset produced an Army that wins firefights but loses wars, is also correct. Yet, his solution, to increase and broaden

educational opportunities for officers, is insufficient (though necessary).[7] Furthermore, funding to send every mid-grade officer to graduate school is unlikely, given current budget constraints.[8] Even if funding was available, graduate education itself would fail to bring about the desired outcome—an Army that excels tactically and wins strategically. Improved critical thinking skills are not enough.

What is needed is improvement in the Army's political skill sets.[9] The Army's operational and strategic failures resulted from the fact that its leadership lost sight of the central tenet of war: the aims are political, and the means are carried out within a specific political context.

Wars are political. Victory is ultimately defined in political terms. Clausewitz did not invent these tenets. He observed the world around him, then provided arguments about what was necessary to fight and win.[10] Two hundred years later, the political nature of war has not changed. The political conditions under which it occurs, however, are rapidly evolving. To set the conditions for victory in the twenty-first century, the Army must get better at observing the political conditions of a conflict, and question how well its doctrine fits those conditions, and when necessary innovate how it fights.

Herein lies the root of the Army's strategic problem. As adaptation reinforces existing assumptions and validates the perceived utility of established behaviors, it undermines innovation.[18] Innovative learning questions not just how something is done, but why it is done. Innovative learning does this by examining the utility of existing behaviors in reference to the stated objective(s) and specific conditions.[19]

Because the Army's educational systems and adaptive skills developed during a period in which military success preceded political victory, Jomini's central assumption came to be unquestioned. The destruction of enemy forces became the Army's *raison d'être*.

As the Army became accustomed to overlooking the political conditions of a conflict, it stopped evaluating such. Eventually the Army's ability to appreciate and respond to the political conditions within which a war occurs atrophied. The Army developed a political blind spot. As a result, military operations often came to be viewed myopically, untethered to the nation's political objectives.

Correcting this requires soldiers capable of considering the political conditions of a given conflict. They must also become aware of the potential disconnect between established military doctrine and the political conditions and political objectives of said conflict.

Innovative ability and an appreciation of political context ought to be honed via Army-wide reflective conversations and mentoring that explore how the political conditions of a given conflict and US national security objectives challenge the utility of existing doctrine. The Army's experiences in Vietnam and Iraq illustrate the importance of such.

Reflective Conversation: Vietnam, Iraq, and Innovation

When faced with the inability to secure the political objective(s) of a war, the military forces of great powers have three choices: quit, try harder, or try something else. Predominately, the second option is chosen. Perversely, it normally raises the costs of failure—without altering the outcome.

The reason for this is simple. For great power militaries, failure is rarely the result of the poor execution of well-fitted doctrine. Failure is more often a product of doctrine that is ill-fitted to the conflict's political conditions. Trying harder will not fix this problem.

Army-wide reflective conversations about the political conditions of past, current, and potential conflicts are critical. As a form of inquiry and learning, such conversations are part of evaluating the organization's performance in setting the military conditions for victory. The counter-insurgency debates of the last decade illustrate this process. Yet, what is needed is a process for reflective conversation that is more expansive and more routine—and less defensive on the part of the participants and the Army as an institution.

Skill and Ability Precede Outcome

The Army's experiences in Vietnam and Iraq demonstrate the critical importance of organization-wide reflective conversations about the political conditions of a war. Understanding political conditions can precondition the Army's ability not only to fight effectively, but to secure the political objectives of a war as well.

Fox Conner's mentorship of George Marshall and Dwight Eisenhower illustrates how an appreciation of the political conditions of a given conflict is critical to the development of strategic leaders. The ability to consider the political conditions of war is critical to the ability to question accepted assumptions and to think about the potential scenarios the Army might face.

In the twenty-first century, the Army will fight within a wider, more dynamic set of political conditions than was the historic norm of the second half of the twentieth century. Fighting well tactically will not be enough. Achieving victory will require an appreciation of the political conditions and an ability to innovate to meet them. In short, political awareness will be at the core of mission command. The ability to think critically, creatively, and seize the initiative will be predicated on a solid understanding of the fight. That cannot be achieved without an appreciation of the political conditions of modern conflicts.

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