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In My View

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IN MY VIEW

COMMANDERS ON THE SPOT

Sir:

While I agree with Thomas Wildenberg's description of doctrine in his article “Midway: Sheer Luck or Better Doctrine?” [Winter 2005, pp. 121–35] as “comprising the fundamental principles by which military forces guide their actions,” I think it should be pointed out that doctrine does not micromanage military operations, nor does it completely dispel the “fog of war” which limits information about an enemy, nor does doctrine eliminate the significant role of chance in war. There is also considerable leeway in how individuals may interpret doctrine, in how much significance they may give to any aspect of doctrine, and in how they may apply doctrine. And many military decisions do not come within the purview of doctrine.

When considering the role of doctrine in influencing Japanese and American conduct in the Battle of Midway, it must not be forgotten how close the Japanese Navy came to inflicting severe damage on the U.S. Navy’s carrier force.

No doubt, as Wildenberg says, Japanese naval doctrine did not emphasize reconnaissance. And Admiral Nagumo’s operations officer, Commander Minoru Genda, was personally disinclined to allot resources to reconnaissance, believing that resources were better spent on attacking the enemy. Genda’s personal disinclination did reflect doctrine, but a commander in Genda’s position with greater appreciation of the use of reconnaissance would have been free to allot more resources to locating the Americans’ aircraft carriers.

Japanese doctrinal disparagement of reconnaissance did not prevent Captain Kameto Kuroshima, Admiral Yamamoto’s senior operations officer aboard the battleship Yamato, from arranging for two cordons of submarines to be placed between Hawaii and Midway to report on U.S. fleet movements.

On the day of battle, one Japanese recon aircraft was half an hour late in launching because of a catapult problem. Later, a sighting of the American force was inaccurately conveyed as having no aircraft carriers, an error which was not
corrected for some time, thereby delaying the decision to attack the American ship rather than hit Midway again. Therefore, even given the Japanese doctrinal downplaying of reconnaissance, the U.S. aircraft carriers could have been located in a timely manner except for a mechanical difficulty and a reporting error, which both could have happened regardless of doctrine. Without the two non-doctrine-caused delays, Admiral Nagumo could have launched the grand assault on the U.S. carriers he intended to.

Admiral Nagumo’s great error was not launching an immediate partial attack against the U.S. carriers with available aircraft followed by a later attack with remaining aircraft. The Second Carrier Division leader, Rear Admiral Tamon Yamaguchi, wanted to attack the U.S. carriers immediately with all available aircraft, whether they carried bombs better suited to hit Midway Island or not, and whether or not they had fighter support.

Striking the first blow was key to Japanese doctrine. But what sort of first blow does one conduct? Japanese doctrine didn’t provide an answer. The decision was up to the commanders on the spot. In contrast to Yamaguchi’s advocacy of an immediate first blow, Nagumo’s chief of staff, Rear Admiral Ryunosuke Kusaka, recommended a delayed, well-coordinated, all-out grand assault. He wanted all airborne aircraft recovered, refueled, and armed with torpedoes and armor-piercing bombs, and the planes already armed to attack Midway rearmed also with torpedoes and armor-piercing bombs.

Japanese doctrine did not provide a solution to the question of what should be done in that specific situation. Admiral Nagumo asked Commander Genda for his advice, and Genda sided with Kusaka. Nagumo agreed. The opportunity to disrupt the U.S. attack was lost. And the U.S. dive-bombers found the Japanese carriers with bombs, torpedoes, and gasoline covering their hangar decks. In six minutes, three Japanese carriers were lost.

Wildenberg faults U.S. Navy doctrine for failing to have devised a workable doctrine for coordinating air attacks by different types of carrier-based aircraft. However, this failure was fortuitous at Midway. First the American torpedo planes attacked. The Japanese fighter cover was dispersed at sea level, chasing the remaining torpedo planes when the U.S. dive-bombers attacked. Denuded of fighter cover, the Japanese carriers were easy targets. If the torpedo planes and dive-bombers had attacked together, both would have been the targets of the Japanese fighters. In practice the torpedo planes acted as an unintended feint to draw off the Japanese fighters. This happened by chance, but in no human endeavor does chance play such a significant role as it does in war.

Another aspect of the battle, one which could have been disastrous for the United States, was the possibility of pursuing and engaging the retiring Japanese
forces, which Spruance refused to do and which no doubt Halsey would have
done if he had been in command.

Spruance, in his second most important decision of the engagement, decided
to pull away. If he had continued, the U.S. forces would have blundered into a
night battle with the follow-up Japanese cruisers and battleships, and our re-
mainning two aircraft carriers would probably have been sunk. There was no doc-
trinal guidance or imperative to turn to for deciding to continue or not to
continue after the retiring Japanese.

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THE GLOBAL WAR ON TERROR: QUO VADIS?

Sir:

11–33) makes a fundamental contribution to the study of the new (post-9/11)
conflicts of the world. The key to Cerny’s notion of “war on terror” is the pro-
gressing diffusion of nation-states into “crystallization of a globalizing world
order,” namely, “a durable disorder”—that is, “the basic security gap that results
from the multilayered, crosscutting, and asymmetric global and transnational
structures.” He posits: “A war on terror cannot be a simple war of armed forces
but must be a sociopolitical process.” That explains the ongoing dilemma among
concerned policy makers, military leaders, and members of the public who try to
understand, let alone do something about, terrorism.

In one of the few serious public policy debates on the defense posture of the
nation, the Naval War College’s 2005 Current Strategy Forum addressed the
theme of “Shaping the Global Maritime Security Environment.” The discussions
credibly included presentations by the Chief of Naval Operations and the Secretary
of the Navy (the latter stood in for by Admiral John B. Nathman, Commander,
U.S. Fleet Forces Command and Deputy CNO). It became clear immediately
that the Navy—or the military as a whole, under the “jointness” construct since
the Goldwater-Nichols Act (1986)—has “transformed” its doctrinal thinking
and concept of operations to respond to what it sees as the new global conflict situations. In the meantime, the George W. Bush administration has indiscreetly aggregated the “situations” into a simple and single term: the “global war on terror.” The military has shortened the term to an operative acronym, “GWOT,” but as an element of the military strategy for the new era. The “three-and-one construct” of shaping the Navy for the future strategic environment provides for readiness for the services’ intrinsic defense mission of major conflict operations (MCO) while engaging in the GWOT, stability (aka peacekeeping) operations, and homeland security. Sea basing—in legal international waters—for forward presence and strategic deterrence, and consequential speed and flexibility in responding to various and varying threats, is the key to this strategy of the now de facto single-superpower U.S. military.

The earnest discourses and ensuing questions, however, seemed inevitably to lead to the realization of the difficulty in shaping the future military posture to the administration’s undefined and reactive foreign policy, as exemplified in the Iraqi war muddle. Answers often echoed, “It is a ‘complex’ and admittedly ‘confusing’ environment,” or even outright admission of the issues being “above my pay grade.” Granted, the future is always a contingency and indeed unpredictable, especially in times of troubled waters. But, true to the Clausewitzian dictum of “war as [only] an instrument of policy,” the defense posture should be “shaped” to serve, enhance, and uphold the defense, foreign, geopolitical, or even (in the modern notion of “globalization”) global economic policies and design of the nation. I submit, then, that the policy of the nation must be projected intrinsically and must be comprehensively rigorous enough if it is to define, guide, and apply military power to advantage in the nation’s course.

The current sole “official” U.S. foreign policy of “global war on terror”—in its resolute simplicity—belyes the complex and dynamic reality of the new world conflicts. OEF (Operation ENDURING FREEDOM), the only direct and perhaps rational response to the 9/11 terror attack, is still in search of Osama bin Laden, the claiming perpetrator—but with an increasing doubt that “killing” Osama will end the “global terrorism.” The capture of Saddam Hussein in Iraq has not changed the strait in Iraq, for instance. OIF (Operation IRAQI FREEDOM) started with the U.S. invasion, ostensibly to check Saddam’s “proliferation of WMD”; later precipitated to enforcing a “regime change” among the multiethnic, historically internecine-warfare-poised, and understandably anti-American (read foreign)-occupation populace; and now is in an intractable struggle to “kill” the “insurgents.” As this writer noted in the Winter 2004 issue of this journal (pp. 125–26), the miry demise of the Bush administration’s unilateral Iraq invasion policy had been concernedly and accurately foreboded in Dr. Phebe Marr’s “Iraq ‘the Day After’” (Winter 2003, pp. 12–29). Items of advice ignored in the
unilateral war action included some significant ones of the military leaders, e.g., on the troop strength needed—another case of policy and warfare strategy disconnect.

With the MCO-level ground-force deployment and daily mounting war casualties, “Iraq” preoccupies the current U.S. foreign policy. Simultaneously, however, the United States, in its Cold War-defaulted superpower leadership role in the world’s balance of power (though Cerny argues this role is no longer a “reliable base” for “national or collective security”), faces bubbling potential rogue-nation threats to peace. Suspected Iranian nuclear weapon development looms alongside the problematic rise of Islamic hard-liners in the state’s “free” election. The North Korean despot toting the “rogue state special” nuclear threat in his inarticulate and precarious demand for “respect,” nonetheless would call for Washington’s skillful “psychological” diplomacy (or “sociopolitical process,” à la Cerny). The proverbial “big stick” and “soft power” (Joseph Nye, Jr., Harvard) should be delicately orchestrated together with the concerned nations in the region. In the meantime, global competition and confrontation for economic hegemony, as well as for assertion as “the” nation to be reckoned with, rage on, with China in the forefront and the fledgling European Union conglomerate, India, and even Russia in line, vis-à-vis the established U.S. and Japanese economies. Worldwide anti-American sentiment, heightened by the administration’s undiscerning America-centric hubris, undermines the U.S. opportunity for constructive alliance building needed in the progressing new global conflict environment. Cerny states: “The U.S. attempt to use its power to regulate and control that [traditional nation-state] system unilaterally is becoming increasingly dysfunctional.”

Where is America going in this “global war on terror”? In the “durable disorder” world, the Bush policy makers might indeed be adrift in their own words. In the first place, the “global” aspect had better not be their view of the altogether complex world, in a casual “all terrorism are the same” shrug, or worse, a political rhetoric rationalizing the war in Iraq as the all-in-one answer to the so-perceived universal, worldwide terrorism network. The Iraq war in the current “garrison” stage is a war against the precipitously engendered “insurgents” whose “global” ties extend only across the borders of Iraq proper to infiltrating Islamic-jihad neighbors. “Global,” on the other hand, should connote and promote America’s identifying with other nation-states over the globe facing their respective terrorist insurgents—in Europe, Russia, Asia, and Americas.

Secondly, “war” might suggest the most cathartic and seemingly effective means of combating terrorism. But in the new world of plurality, as Cerny asserts, “security itself” must be transformed to “pursuing a civilianization of politics and society, stressing social development, welfare, and good governance.”
Here, if for a questionable motive of regime change, the current U.S. attempt to establish a new Iraqi government, train security forces, and repair infrastructures may be on the right track. On the other hand, can the United States hand over an American war against Iraqis—albeit “insurgents”—to the Iraqis for an Iraqi war against Iraqis? Even the “foreign” insurgents are Iraqis’ Islamic (albeit jihadist) “brothers.” To note, the Iraqis so far have not come out to embrace the American “liberators” with open arms, either.

Terrorism is an act of unilateral violence on unsuspecting innocents—solely to intimidate the targeted nation’s psyche. Unlike the clashes of opposing nations’ broad geopolitical stands in major conflicts, terrorism operates but for a specific and dire insurgent cause—that is, “the incredible frustrations engendered by the revolution of rising expectations in a globalizing world” (Cerny). The cause could obviously be intense—although the “self-sacrificing notion” may not be so foreign. Did not a “Western” patriot ask for “liberty or death”? Cerny suggests: “What is needed is not so much a war on terror as political, economic, and social war on the causes of terror.”

That may be a tall order for this White House, with its demonstrated aversion to making intellectually rigorous and necessarily empathic foreign policies. At any rate, it will be some time before the stigma of the Iraq war—judged insolent (by the world), costly (by the American taxpayers), fraught with personal sacrifice (by American families), and ill conceived and prepared (by experts)—can be erased to restore U.S. credibility and prestige. The American military deserves better.

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