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Planning for Tomorrow's Conflicts

A Recipe for Success

General Richard I. Neal, U.S. Marine Corps

A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS—CIRCA 1597: Lou Holtz tells a story that may have applicability to our current process of determining what's best for the nation and its armed forces, and could give us some insight into this complex process. There was once a very successful king in his declining years who wanted to record his "recipe for success" to ensure that his subjects could carry on his legacy without having to suffer through the same "learning curve." He felt the best way to accomplish this was to gather together the kingdom's elders and have them convene a council which would document their lessons learned and provide guidance for future generations. After much deliberation, and about one year later, the elders met with the king and presented him with three large volumes of manuscript. After reading the manuscript, the king praised the elders for their efforts, declaring that it truly captured the essence of his reign. However, it was simply too long and involved to be considered a working document. "People just won't take the time to read it!"

General Neal was commissioned in the Marine Corps in 1965 upon graduation from Northeastern University. He served twice in Vietnam, returning to earn a master's degree from Tulane University. Before promotion to brigadier general in 1989 he commanded a howitzer battery and 5th Battalion, 10th Marines; served on air-ground exchange duty with Marine Aircraft Group 36 on Okinawa; attended Marine Corps Command and Staff College and the National War College; and was on the U.S. Central Command staff. During DESERT SHIELD/STORM he was Deputy for Operations at Central Command, and in 1992 commanded the Haitian humanitarian relief effort at Guantanamo. He was Commanding General, 2nd Marine Division, from 1992 to 1994, becoming Deputy Commander in Chief/Chief of Staff of U.S. Central Command in August 1994. Promoted to his present grade on 19 September 1996, he assumed the duties of Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps on 27 September of that year.

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The king then selected a special group of senior elders and gave them the task of condensing the work, making it "more user friendly." Six months later, the inner circle returned and handed over a one-volume manuscript. Again the king congratulated the wise men on their dedication and efforts, but he felt it was still too long. Once again, they were sent away to streamline the guidance. Finally, three months later, the elders proudly presented the king with a single piece of parchment. The ruler beamed as he read the page. With great bravado he pronounced that the elders had indeed accomplished their daunting mission. This "one-pager" truly captured the essence of his rule and prescribed a blueprint for many generations to follow so that they might enjoy the same success. On it, in large print, were the words: "There ain't no free lunch!"

The Continuing National Security Debates

As you are aware, the Department of Defense has recently completed the latest iteration in the continuing debate on the security of our great nation. The Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR), mandated by the Fiscal Year 1997 Defense Authorization Act, was based on a recommendation of the Commission on Roles and Missions. The review will occur at the beginning of each presidential term as a comprehensive examination of the nation's military requirements, to include functional areas such as strategy, force structure, human resources, infrastructure, readiness, intelligence, and modernization.

Following on the heels of the QDR is the National Defense Panel (NDP), tasked with an independent assessment of the QDR process and final recommendations. In addition, the NDP has been chartered to develop an optimal force structure that permits both forward deployment and credible crisis response, and includes considerations such as conventional threats across a spectrum of conflict, non-traditional (asymmetric) warfare, terrorism, information warfare, and weapons of mass destruction. The fundamental purpose of these deliberations is to help the executive branch, legislative branch, and American people decide what our armed forces should be capable of achieving, how they should be structured, and what funding is required. Both groups were tasked with the very difficult and mammoth endeavor of crafting a "recipe for success" for our nation's security.

In the same vein as Lou Holtz's story, one can imagine the president and leaders of Congress examining the QDR's long hours of staff work, voluminous studies, comprehensive computer models, and exhaustive final report, and saying: "This is all magnificent; just wonderful; we appreciate everything you've done; but you know, this is quite a bit for busy people to comprehend. We had hoped your principal recommendations would have been made more concisely." Of course, the NDP would learn from this reaction by our nation's leaders, so their report,

undoubtedly, would be equally thoughtful yet considerably shorter. We can picture our nation's leaders, after viewing this much-abbreviated NDP report, telling them: "What a tremendous accomplishment this is; thoroughly researched and carefully presented; however, we were hoping your bottom-line conclusion could have been put in a way everyone could immediately understand and afford."

So, having heard this, perhaps it's not very far-fetched to imagine a select group of post-NDP strategic planners saying to themselves: "Ah-ha! We now see what he have to do." After much careful study and reflection, taking into account the excellent work done by the services and Joint Staff, this group would combine all the detailed scenarios, the learned prognostications, and their best judgments into a one-page report. And do you know what the vital report about the future military requirements of our great nation would say? "There ain't no free lunch!"

Future Military Requirements: Three Themes

As we seek to continue valuable discussions on the nature of our future military, there is one guiding principle we must follow and one caution we must heed. Our central principle must be, in all we do, what's best for our country. That's an ideal that must be leavened with the caution that—as with the infamous lunch alluded to above—freedom isn't free. As we look through our foggy lens into the future, we need to be humble as well as thoughtful. If history teaches us anything, it is that we are going to be surprised: our vision will turn out to be distorted and myopic, our best guesses often will be wrong, and we will frequently be disappointed in our expectations. My speculative three themes should be considered in that light and, I hope, can be used to spark one's imagination and spur further discussion regarding future U.S. military requirements as well as those of other nations with similar values and concerns.

The first theme of my unpretentious forecast is that *we face a world of constant conflict*. Challenges to our national security, arms control, deterrence, and warfighting are as real during this period of transition—a time lacking its own identity and which we call "the post-Cold War" era—as they were in the past. The facts speak for themselves. Depending upon how you count them, anywhere from fifteen to twenty-five internal and international conflicts have been going on every day of every year since the end of World War II. The same number of crises and conflicts have been occurring since the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the demise of the Soviet Union as prior to those momentous events. Today, while the Cold War superpower contest is over, the world may be a more peaceful place, but it is not a world at peace. At the risk of being labeled a pessimist, I see nothing on the horizon that tells me anything will be different tomorrow.

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Among the world's regimes that presently have goals and objectives inimical to ours are Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, and each commands sizable military forces. However, those three nations are scarcely the only powers that can pose a serious threat to the regional peace and stability so important to our global interests. More than fifteen countries in what used to be called "the Third World" now have significant numbers of main battle tanks and modern aircraft, and virtually all of these states have been involved in some form of combat during the last decade. Of even greater concern is that twenty or more countries are developing or acquiring weapons of mass destruction and the long-range strike systems to deliver them. Though many states have ratified the Chemical Weapons Treaty and are making sincere efforts to rid the world of chemical and biological methods of warfare, I submit that others are not taking such steps, nor do they intend to do so. In today's very active international arms bazaar, virtually any nation or sub-national group can purchase almost every kind of weapon or military system and the training required for their employment. The disconcerting evidence is there for all to examine.

Related to this is my second theme, which suggests that *we face a world in which those who may wish us harm are as capable as they are ruthless*. Considerable discussion has taken place, and there are many who believe that the coalition victory in the Gulf War signaled the arrival of a "military-technical revolution" or a more pervasive "revolution in military affairs" that has fundamentally changed the nature of warfare. Advocates of this viewpoint speak of "precision engagement, full spectrum dominance, information superiority, and systems of systems." These individuals, who unquestionably embrace technology, envision future armed forces of the United States with flawless, instantaneous, and comprehensive knowledge of the battle space; great numbers of precision-guided munitions; and technology-assisted leadership at all levels of the chain of command. They see a future with capabilities that will allow the U.S. military and its allies to win rapid, overwhelming, and nearly bloodless victories, because this changed nature of warfare will decisively favor the side that fields the most advanced technology.

Before I present an alternative view, let me place my comments in perspective. It is obvious that technological advances will have an enormous impact on *how* future wars are fought. Indeed, we in the U.S. military not only recognize that fact—we are counting on it. For example, the mobility and firepower afforded us by equipment that is at the cutting edge of technology (e.g., air-cushioned landing craft, advanced amphibious assault vehicles, the Joint Strike Fighter, and the MV-22 tilt-rotor aircraft) are fundamental to the Marine Corps' concept of operations, "Operational Maneuver from the Sea." So make no mistake: the pursuit of a technological edge is essential. However, *why* future wars are fought will probably be no different than it has been in the past.

We must seriously reconsider the tendency to rely exclusively on technology to provide us with solutions to all our problems, but more importantly, we must be unbiased in the answers to important questions we must ask ourselves. Are we misleading ourselves by overselling the capabilities technology provides in the crucible of combat, where Clausewitz's friction and fog-of-battle, Boyd's decision cycle, and Murphy's Law of Misfortune play so great a role? Could we be misunderstanding the circumstances and future methods of warfare? This latter possibility, sometimes labeled "the asymmetric threat," envisions a foe who operates quite differently from the enemy our technologies and force structures are being optimized to defeat. Instead of opposing our strengths, such a foe would attack our vulnerabilities. We have in the past underestimated our enemies and often paid dearly for our delusions. The character of our enemy should be a driving concern.

Numerous writers have sketched our most likely adversary as culturally and morally different from contemporary, Western-world-organized military forces. These opponents are envisioned as rising among "street-fighter" nations and non-state groups of the world, prepared to wage war in unconventional fashion using small groups whose "warrior values"—or lack thereof—make them less concerned about humanitarian limitations, innocent civilians, rules of warfare, or even their own casualties. These would be dangerous enemies, against whom technological superiority would be less decisive. There would be no large tank formations to destroy; no "power grids" to take down; and no discernible targets to acquire, track, and target on an everything-can-be-seen-and-hit battlefield. From Vietnam to Somalia to the Balkans, we have repeatedly seen how crafty, determined opponents can offset, negate, and even exploit our reliance on technology.

Moreover, there is another aspect of technology that should greatly concern us. Future enemies will themselves be able to employ, at least in limited numbers, advanced military systems appropriate to their own purposes. The proliferation of cellular telephones, laptop computers with built-in facsimile and e-mail capabilities, satellite communications and navigation systems, as well as fire-and-forget munitions, suggests that they will not be available solely to one side in future conflicts. Many advanced weapons have become so simple to operate that very little training or education is required. Ease of acquisition and a constantly diminishing cost of capabilities will enable an "inferior" force to remain a threat. Skillful employment of "off-the-shelf" and arms-market weapons and equipment to serve the requirements of a combat force could make "technological dominance" by the more lavishly outfitted side unlikely. Finally, it must be accepted that the technological playing field, which has for so many years been our own, can and will be leveled.

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My third theme is that *future warfare will bring new challenges*. For example, widely available, and at reasonable prices, will be near-real-time, high-resolution satellite imagery of any battlefield, accompanied by expert commentary and evaluation of force activities. Equally, the global nature of communications is making television a poor man's intelligence service. Saddam Hussein watched the Cable News Network to try to ascertain what the coalition was planning, and the media was ubiquitous throughout Somalia—including on the beach when we landed. The communications revolution almost guarantees that tomorrow's media will be virtually omnipresent—on both sides of a conflict—able to communicate with their main offices and transmit to the world without any support from, or interface with, military forces. One of our founding principles, freedom of the press, an ideal for which many have paid the ultimate price and for which we may have to continue to place our lives in jeopardy, will nonetheless present commanders with a conundrum.

Many new challenges posed by these developments are obvious and need not be elaborated upon, but one of them deserves explicit comment. Strategists have long emphasized the importance of popular support for a democratic government's goals and policies, as did Harry Summers in his book *On Strategy*. Today, one manifestation of this appears to be the growing belief that the American people will not endure casualties suffered in the application of foreign policy for protecting and fostering our national interests. One need simply recall what happened to our Lebanon policy after the Beirut bombing or to our Somalia effort after the failed Ranger mission. Consider the immediate and post-conflict influential effects that images of civilians killed in the camouflaged Baghdad bomb shelter and scenes from the "highway of death" out of Kuwait City had on the American people. While friendly and noncombatant casualties have always been a concern, today even enemy combatant casualties may affect the way Americans wage war. Contemplate the horror that many Americans professed when it was revealed that some enemy soldiers may have been buried alive in their bunkers during the Gulf War.

Our enemies know this, so we must anticipate that a ruthless opponent will strike to inflict—by whatever means at their disposal—casualties on American forces. They also may employ hostages, subject noncombatants to attack, or endanger their own civilian populace, so long as those deaths advance their cause by being visibly displayed to the American public. Such brutality and the exploitation of our aversion to all casualties may become graphic examples of how technology can be employed to our disadvantage.

The three themes suggested above are not all-inclusive, but they are among those we should consider as we continue the debate on what's best for the nation. We must contemplate the implications they portend.

Implications

As we attempt to look through our “foggy lens” into the future, the three themes suggested above should help us answer two of the most important questions we must ask ourselves. What kinds of threats, and what types of environments, do we foresee our forces confronting? How can we maintain not merely technological but operational superiority, so that we will successfully execute our missions and win? However, we should not worry much about getting the answers to these two questions “exactly” right. Instead, we must realize that prognostication is not an exact science and consider the implications for our future forces and defense posture. It seems to me, as I contemplate historical evidence and current trends, that a few implications are more probable than others. We will have to deal with what I call “the Tyranny of the Four ‘Ts.’”

Future crises are likely to arise swiftly, leaving little *time* for mobilization. They will be come-as-you-are conflicts, in which rapidly responsive combat power will be far more influential than large but slowly arriving elements. Military forces will have to be self-sustaining, capable of action across the spectrum of operations, dominant in their immediate environment, and discriminating in their application of force. They will need to accomplish their missions quickly, decisively, and with as few casualties as possible. The “tyranny of time” could be one of the greatest threats these forces may face, for the American center of gravity may well be—as Clausewitz professed—the will of the people.

Always important to how we fight will be *technology*. We must, as stated previously, harness technology in such a way as to make us more effective, efficient, and protected. We must seek, however, to focus on “equipping the man, not manning the equipment.” In addition, we should appreciate that our enemies also will be employing technology in ways appropriate to their objectives while looking for ways to exploit the vulnerabilities in, and especially our reliance on, instruments, methods, and “things.” We must not expect an opponent to oblige us by planning his fight to suit our weapons. We must not allow the unbiased “tyranny of technology” to become an end in and of itself.

Our leaders must be strategic pessimists, planning for ultimate flexibility in our *tactics*. When we are required to apply military force to a situation, it will seldom be when, where, and how we might prefer. Regardless of how we structure our force, train our people, and deploy our units, we must do so with an eye toward being able to adapt as the situation changes or when we meet a set of unexpected circumstances. One of our inherent strengths is that we have always placed a great deal of trust and confidence in the valor and ingenuity of the young men and women who serve this great nation—and rightfully so.

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Military commanders have always sought to develop a great sense of initiative in their subordinates lest they fall prey to the “tyranny of set-piece tactics.”

Finally, there will never be enough time, people, hardware, or money—the *treasury*—to be ready for every eventuality. Naturally, we would hope to find the most low-cost, high-payoff, widely versatile investments in equipment, training, and operations; but the nature of the world is that the only certainty is that things will continue to change. A wise investment today may require serious reevaluation tomorrow, and decision makers will have to make difficult yet sagacious choices in achieving the right balance among many competing requirements. While a budget-driven National Security Strategy would not be in the best interest of the nation, we must continue to shape our future military forces within the fiscal realities brought about by the “tyranny of the treasury.”

A Recipe for Success—Circa 1997

The idealist in us would like to think that we will accurately envision a future for which we can develop an exact recipe for success. The realist in us knows history has repeatedly proven that actual events are stubbornly resistant to unfolding along the path we set for them. We achieve a balance between the two when we plan for future requirements considering prevalent themes, with judicious consideration for the potential implications of our decisions. More importantly, we must accept that we will not get it exactly right. Our greatest strength will be the flexibility to adapt—over time—the ingredients in our recipe that may have to change.

No matter how prescient our decisions prove to be, there will be some areas in which we will have to assume greater risks. While some proposals on how to proceed would be plainly foolish and some ideas might be better than others, I am sure that neither the QDR nor the NDP, nor any other group's or person's report or recommendation, can possibly be immune from criticism. What does matter is that we continue to debate our evolving requirements without preconceived answers or detrimental parochialism.

Our recipe for success may be many pages long, but our legacy might still boil down to a “one-pager.” In making decisions about where to invest in the future of the nation's armed forces, the most important thing for all to keep in mind with regards to national security is: “There ain't no free lunch!”