

## Insurgency: Modern Warfare Evolves into a Fourth Generation

by Thomas X. Hammes

### Key Points

**F**ourth-generation warfare, which is now playing out in Iraq and Afghanistan, is a modern form of insurgency. Its practitioners seek to convince enemy political leaders that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit. The fundamental precept is that superior political will, when properly employed, can defeat greater economic and military power. Because it is organized to ensure political rather than military success, this type of warfare is difficult to defeat.

Strategically, fourth-generation warfare remains focused on changing the minds of decisionmakers. Politically, it involves transnational, national, and subnational organizations and networks. Operationally, it uses different messages for different audiences, all of which focus on breaking an opponent's political will. Tactically, it utilizes materials present in the society under attack—to include industrial chemicals, liquefied natural gas, or fertilizers.

Although these modern insurgencies are the only type of war that the United States has lost (Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia), they can be overcome—witness Malaya (1950s), Oman (1970s), and El Salvador (1980s). Winning, however, requires coherent, patient action that encompasses the full range of political, economic, social, and military activities. The United States cannot force its opponents to fight the short, high-technology wars it easily dominates. Instead, the Nation must learn to fight fourth-generation wars anew.

On May 1, 2003, President George W. Bush declared the end of major combat in Iraq. While most Americans rejoiced at this announcement, students of history understood that it simply meant the easy part was over. In the following months, peace did not break out, and the troops did not come home. In fact, Iraqi insurgents have struck back hard. Instead of peace, each day Americans read about the death of another soldier, the detonation of deadly car bombs, the assassination of civilians, and Iraqi unrest.

Barely 3 months later, in August, a series of bombs hit a police academy graduation ceremony, the Jordanian Embassy, and United Nations (UN) headquarters in Baghdad. The Ayatollah Mohammed Bakr al-Hakim (leader of the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq) was killed, and an attempt was made to kill the Baghdad chief of police. These attacks marked the opening of the anti-coalition campaign that continued through the turnover of authority to the Interim Iraqi Government. As of this writing, the violence continues as Iraqi authorities struggle to provide security for their people and work to rebuild their country. Unfortunately, Iraq has become the scene of another fourth-generation war.

At the same time things were degenerating in Iraq, the situation in Afghanistan was moving into fourth-generation conflict. While al Qaeda and the Taliban were not attacking U.S. troops directly, they were moving aggressively to defeat the U.S.-supported Hamid Kharzai government. Decisively defeated in the conventional campaign by a combination of U.S. firepower and Northern Alliance troops, the anti-coalition forces have returned to the style of warfare that succeeded against the Soviets. The Taliban's

emphasis on derailing the recent presidential elections shows they understand that fourth-generation warfare is a political rather than military struggle. By trying to prevent Afghans from voting, they sought to undermine the legitimacy of whoever won the elections. Instead of defeating the government's security forces, they plan to destroy its legitimacy. While polling for the presidential election proceeded without major incident, it remains to be seen whether this positive step has set the Taliban back politically—and much more contentious legislative elections are just over the horizon.

In Iraq, the attacks on and threats against oil pipelines are economic and political in nature. The insurgents are assessing a tax on the entire world's economy by raising the price of oil. They hope such attacks will weaken the Iraqi government while simultaneously bringing economic and political pressure to bear on the United States. Shi'ite cleric Moqtada al Sadr's shift from military action to the political arena most likely means no real change in goals, only methods. He can use his political and social networks in conjunction with his militias to advance his goals.

In Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Spain, al Qaeda and its affiliates managed a series of high-profile attacks and are promising a major attack on the United States. Despite the Bush administration's declaration of victory in Iraq and Afghanistan, the war on terror has not been an entirely one-sided fight.

As debilitating and regular as these attacks are, this kind of warfare is not new but rather has been evolving over the last seven decades. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have moved

from third-generation warfare, America's forte, to fourth-generation warfare. It is much too early to predict the outcome of either fight, but the anti-coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq are attempting to tie their fourth-generation tactics into integrated strategic campaigns. At the same time, al Qaeda is maintaining its own strategic campaign: to defeat the United States and its allies.

Opponents in various parts of the world know that fourth-generation warfare is the only kind the United States has ever lost—and not just once, but three times: in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia. This form of warfare also defeated the French in Vietnam and Algeria and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. It continues to bleed Russia in Chechnya and the United States in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas where it is engaged in the war on terror. This record of defeat of major powers by much weaker fourth-generation opponents makes it essential to understand this new form of warfare and adapt accordingly.

Mao Tse Tung was the first to define modern insurgency as a *political* struggle and use it successfully. Each practitioner since has learned, usually through a painful process of trial and error, from his predecessors or co-combatants. Each then has adjusted the lessons to his own fight and added his own refinements. The cumulative result is a new approach to war. The anti-coalition forces in Iraq, the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Chechens, and the al Qaeda network are simply the latest to use an approach that has been developing for decades.

Since World War II, wars have been a mixed bag of conventional and unconventional conflicts. Conventional wars—the Korean War, the Israeli-Arab wars of 1956, 1967, and 1973, the Falklands (Malvinas) War, the Iran-Iraq war, and the first Gulf War—generally have ended with a return to the strategic status quo. While some territory changed hands and, in some cases, regimes changed, each state came out of the war with largely the same political, economic, and social structure with which it entered. In short, the strategic situation of the participants did not change significantly.

In contrast, unconventional wars—the Communist revolution in China, the first and second Indochina wars, the Algerian war of independence, the Sandinista struggle in

## Fourth-Generation Warfare in Perspective

The term *fourth-generation warfare* came into use among military strategists and planners in the late 1980s as a way to characterize the dynamics and future direction of warfare. This community postulated the evolution of warfare in several distinct phases. The first generation of modern (post-Westphalian) war was dominated by massed manpower and culminated in the Napoleonic Wars. Firepower characterized the second generation, which culminated in World War I. The third generation was dominated by maneuver as developed by the Germans in World War II. The fourth generation has evolved in ways that take advantage of the political, social, economic, and technical changes since World War II. It makes use of the advantages those changes offer an unconventional enemy. For background and a compilation of papers and articles on the subject, see the Defense and the National Interest Web site at <[http://www.d-n-i.net/second\\_level/fourth\\_generation\\_warfare.htm](http://www.d-n-i.net/second_level/fourth_generation_warfare.htm)>.

Nicaragua, the Iranian revolution, the Afghan-Soviet war of the 1980s, the first intifada, and the Hezbollah campaign in South Lebanon—display a markedly different pattern. Each ended with major changes in the political, economic, and social structure of the territories involved. While the changes may not have been better for the people, they were distinct. Even those unconventional wars where the insurgents lost (Malaya, Oman, El Salvador) led to

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significant changes. The message is clear for anyone wishing to shift the political balance of power: only unconventional war works against established powers.

## Strategic Aspects

Fourth-generation warfare attempts to change the minds of enemy policymakers directly. But this change is not to be achieved through the traditional first- through third-generation objective of destroying the enemy's armed forces and the capacity to regenerate them. Both the epic, decisive battles of the Napoleonic era and the wide-ranging, high-speed maneuver campaigns of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

are irrelevant to this new warfare. More relevant is the way in which specific *messages* are targeted toward policymakers and those who can influence them. Although tailored for various audiences, each message is designed to achieve the basic purpose of war: to change an opponent's political position on a matter of national interest.

The struggles in Iraq and Afghanistan show these characteristics. In each, the insurgents are sending one message to their supporters, another to the undecided population, and a third to the coalition decisionmakers. Supporters are told that they are defending the faith and their country against outside invaders. The message to uncommitted or pro-coalition countrymen is to stay out of the fight between the insurgents and the invaders, who will eventually leave. Finally, the coalition, particularly the Americans, is advised to withdraw or be engaged in an endless, costly fight.

Fourth-generation warfare is not bloodless. As shown in the chart on page 4, the casualties we have sustained in fighting insurgents in Iraq long ago passed those we sustained in the comparatively short, high-intensity phase that toppled Saddam. And even then, most casualties will tend to be civilian, a pattern borne out by fighting in Iraq, Chechnya, Palestinian areas, and elsewhere. Further, many of those casualties will be caused not by military weapons but rather by materials made available within society. Thus, the opponent does not have to build the warfighting infrastructure required by earlier generations of war.

As displayed in the Beirut bombings, the Khobar Towers bombing, the Northern Ireland campaign, the American Embassy bombings in Africa, the 9/11 attacks, and the ongoing

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bombing campaign in Iraq, fourth-generation warfare practitioners are increasingly using materials made available by the society they are attacking. This allows them to take a very different strategic approach. It relieves the practitioners of the necessity of defending core production assets and frees them to focus on offense rather than defense. It also relieves them of the burden of moving supplies long distances. Instead, only money and ideas—both of which can be digitized and moved instantly—must be transported.

Furthermore, even at the strategic level, the importance of the media in shaping the policy of the participants will continue to increase. This was demonstrated when U.S. interest in Somalia, previously negligible, was stimulated by the repeated images of thousands of starving Somali children. Conversely, the images of U.S. soldiers being dragged through the streets ended that commitment. The media will remain a major factor from the strategic to the tactical level. In fact, worldwide media exposure can quickly give a tactical action strategic impact.

## Political Aspects

Fourth-generation warriors exploit international, transnational, national, and subnational networks politically for their own purposes. A growing variety of international conduits are available: the United Nations, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the World Bank, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, and dozens of others. Each organization has a different function in international affairs, but each has its own vulnerabilities and can be used to convey a political message to its leadership and then to target capital cities. While these international organizations may not be able to change the minds of national leaders directly, they can be used to slow or paralyze an international response.

The prime objective of the fourth-generation practitioner is to create political paralysis in both the international organizations (usually not a difficult task) and the target nation (difficulty varies with the nation being targeted). In addition to normal political attacks, planners can influence other aspects of the target society. For instance, they know that the security situation in a country has a direct effect on the ability of that nation to get loans. This gives the attacker a different venue to affect the position of a nation—the mere threat of action may be

enough to impact the financial status of the target nation and encourage it to negotiate. Thus, if the objective is to paralyze the political processes of a target nation, a number of methods can be used.

Attacks by the al Sadr militia on oil production infrastructure in southern Iraq have illustrated this fact. Nigerian rebels have also used the threat to oil production to force negotiation on the Nigerian government. The fact that oil prices were at a record high gave the rebels more leverage because each day's delay increased the costs to the Nigerian government. As the world becomes ever more interconnected, the potential for varied approaches increases, and the effects may reinforce each other.

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A coherent fourth-generation warfare plan always exploits transnational elements in various ways. The vehicles may include not only extremist belief-based organizations such as Islamic Jihad, but also nationalistic organizations such as the Palestinians and Kurds, mainline Christian churches, humanitarian organizations, economic structures such as the stock and bond markets, and even criminal organizations such as narco-traffickers and

arms merchants. The key traits of transnational organizations are that none are contained completely within a recognized nation-state's borders; none have official members that report back to nation-states; and they owe no loyalty to any nation—and sometimes little to their own organizations.

The use of such transnational elements will vary with the strategic situation, but they offer a number of possibilities. They can be a source of recruits. They can be used (at times unwittingly) as cover to move people and assets. They can be an effective source of funds; charitable organizations have supported terrorist organizations as diverse as the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and al Qaeda. During the 1970s, for example, Irish bars on the east coast of America often had jars where patrons could make donations, ostensibly to provide support to Irish families, but in fact much of the money went directly to support IRA insurgent operations.

At times, entire organizations can be used openly to support the position of the fourth-generation warfare operator. Usually this is done when the organization genuinely agrees with the position of one of the antagonists, but false flag operations are also viable. Such support can lend legitimacy to a movement and even reverse long-held international views of a specific situation.

National political institutions are primary targets for fourth-generation messages. Insurgents fighting the United States—whether the North Vietnamese, the Sandinistas, or the Palestinians—know that if Congress cuts off funds, U.S. allies would lose their wars. Thus, Congressmen have been targeted with the message that the war was unwinnable and it

## Insurgencies throughout History

Insurgency, often referred to as guerrilla warfare, is not new. The very name *guerrilla* (“little war”) dates back to the Spanish resistance against Napoleon’s occupation of Spain (1809–1813). In fact, insurgency far predates that campaign. Darius the Great, King of Persia (558–486 BC), and Alexander the Great (356–323 BC) both fought insurgents during their reigns. Insurgency continued as a form of war through the ages. The Irish nationalist, Michael Collins, drove the British out of Ireland with an insurgent campaign during 1916–1921. In all cases, the weaker side used insurgent tactics to counter the superior military power of its enemies. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the political aspects of insurgency came to dominate these struggles. The goal became the destruction of the enemy’s political will rather than the exhaustion of his conventional military power. Advances in communications technology and the growth of formal and informal networks have greatly increased the ability of the insurgent to attack the will of enemy decisionmakers directly.

made no sense to keep fighting it. The Sandinistas even worked hard to make individual Congressmen part of their network by sponsoring trips for congressional aides and mainline church groups to insurgent-held areas in Nicaragua. If they could convince their guests that Anastasio Somoza's government was indeed corrupt, they would actively lobby other aides and the Congressmen themselves to cut off aid to Somoza. Nongovernmental national groups—churches, diaspora associations, business groups, and even lobbying firms—have been major players in shaping national policies. The United States must assume its opponents will continue these efforts.

Subnational organizations can represent both groups who are minorities in their traditional homelands, such as the Basque, and those who are self-selecting minorities, such as Sons of Liberty and Aryan Nation. These groups are in unusual positions; they can be either enemies or allies of the established powers. It simply depends upon who best serves their interests. Even more challenging is the fact that since they are not unified groups, one element of a subnational group may support the government while another supports the insurgents.

Political alliances, interests, and positions among and between insurgents will change according to various political, economic, social, and military aspects of the conflict. While this has been a factor in all wars (Italy

changed sides in the middle of World War II, the largest conventional war), it will be prevalent in fourth-generation war. It is much easier for nonstate entities (tribes, clans, businesses, criminal groups, racial groups, subnational groups, and transnational groups) to change

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sides than it is for nation-states or national groups. A government usually ties itself to a specific cause. It has to convince decisionmakers or its people to support it. Thus, it can be awkward for that government to change sides in midconflict without losing the confidence of its people. Often, the act of changing sides will lead to the fall of the government. In contrast, nonstate entities get involved only for their own needs, and, if these needs change, they can easily shift loyalties.

### Operational Techniques

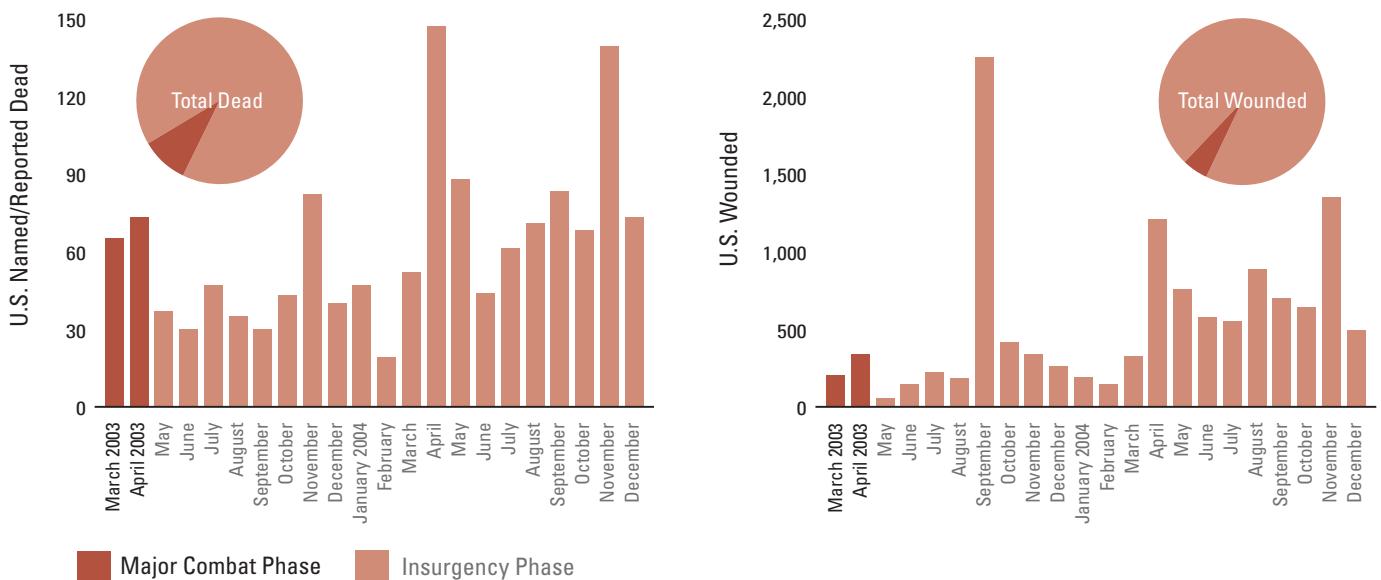
To influence this wide variety of networks effectively, the fourth-generation warfare

operational planner must seek different pathways for various messages. Traditional diplomatic channels, both official and unofficial, are still important but are no longer the only route for communication and influence. Other networks rival the prominence of the official ones. The media have become a primary avenue, as seen in places such as Vietnam, the West Bank, and Iraq. However, the sheer diversity and fragmentation of the media make it much more challenging for either side to control the message. Professional lobbying groups also have proven effective.

An increasingly important avenue is the Internet and the power it provides grassroots campaigns. Whether it is the international campaign to ban landmines or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's terror campaign in Iraq, the Internet provides an alternate channel for high-impact messages unfiltered by editors or political influence. It can also be used to raise money.

A key factor in a fourth-generation warfare campaign is that the audience is not a unified target. It is increasingly fragmented into interest groups that may realign or even shift sides depending on how a particular campaign affects their issues. During the first intifada, the Palestinians tailored messages for different constituencies. The Israelis have used the same technique during the al Aqsa intifada, and the anti-coalition forces are doing so today in Iraq and Afghanistan.

## U.S. Military Casualties in Iraq: Higher Against the Insurgents Than Against Saddam's Armed Forces



Source: Based on U.S. Government data compiled on the Global Security Web site, available at [http://globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq\\_casualties.htm](http://globalsecurity.org/military/ops/iraq_casualties.htm).



The United States has been slow to understand the importance of these communications. As recently as last year, military spokesmen insisted that the insurgent attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq were “militarily insignificant.” This was at a time when each attack was on the front page of major daily newspapers in the United States and Europe. While the actual casualties may have been few, each story reached the decisionmakers in Congress and the public.

To succeed, the fourth-generation operational planner must determine the message he wants to send; the networks best suited to carry those messages; the actions that will cause the network to send the message; and the feedback system that will tell him if the message is being received. In Bosnia, the seizure of UN hostages by Serb forces during the NATO bombing campaign of 1995 was the first step of a cycle. The media were used to transmit images of the peacekeepers chained to buildings. Then the Serbs watched television to determine the response of the various governments. It allowed them to commit the act, transmit it via various channels, observe the response, and then decide what to do next. All this occurred much faster than the bureaucratic reporting processes of NATO could complete the same cycle.

During the first intifada, the Palestinians made an operational decision to limit the use of violence. They confronted the Israeli Army not with heavily armed guerrillas but with teenagers armed only with rocks. Thus, they neutralized U.S. support for Israeli action, froze Israeli defense forces, and influenced the Israeli national election, which led to the Oslo Accords.

Similarly, the series of bombings conducted by the Iraqi insurgents throughout the fall and winter of 2003–2004 carefully targeted the organizations most helpful to the Coalition Provisional Authority—police, the United Nations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), coalition partners, the Kurdish political parties, and Shia clerics. Each event was tactically separated by time and space, but each fit together operationally to attack America’s strategic position in the country.

In Iraq, the United States has found no evidence of central direction at this early date in the insurgency, yet the pattern of the attacks has represented a coherent approach to driving the coalition out of the country. The question is: With no coordination, how could the insurgents reinforce each others’ actions?

The insurgents could track each attack and, to a degree, measure its effectiveness by

monitoring the Iraqi, U.S., and international media. Those attacks that succeeded were quickly emulated; those that failed ceased to be used. The insurgents showed many of the characteristics of a self-organizing network. Each attack is designed to prevent a stable, democratic government from emerging. Not all attacks have succeeded, but they have kept UN presence to a minimum and have driven many NGOs out of the country. Further, the coalition is shrinking, and the insurgency has clearly affected the price of oil. And the threat of instability spreading to the rest of the Persian Gulf increases the upward pressure on oil prices.

To complicate matters, fourth-generation warfare will incorporate elements of earlier generations of war. Even as the Israelis struggled with the intifada, they had to remain aware that major conventional forces were on their border. In Vietnam, the United States and later South Vietnam had to deal with aggres-

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sive, effective fourth-generation guerrillas while always being prepared to deal with major North Vietnamese conventional forces. Clearly, the new generation of warfare seeks to place an enemy on the horns of this dilemma. Just as clearly, this is an intentional approach that reaches all the way back to Mao.

Action in one or all of the fields above will not be limited to the geographic location (if any) of the antagonists but will take place worldwide. From New York to Bali and Madrid, al Qaeda and its affiliates have forcefully illustrated this to their enemies. Though some elements will be more attractive as targets, no element of American society, no matter where it is in the world, is off limits to attack. The Bush administration actions in Afghanistan and elsewhere against the al Qaeda network show that effective counters must also be worldwide.

The range of possible fourth-generation opponents is broad. It is important to remember that such an opponent does not need a

large command and control system. At a time when U.S. forces are pouring more money and manpower into command and control, commercial technology makes worldwide, secure communications available to anyone with a laptop and a credit card. It also provides access to 1-meter-resolution satellite imagery, extensive information on U.S. troop movements, immediate updates on national debates, and international discussion forums. Finally, it provides a worldwide financial network that is fairly secure. In fact, with the proliferation of Internet cafes, one needs neither the credit card nor the laptop—only an understanding of how email and a browser work and some basic human intelligence tradecraft.

Ideas and funds can be moved through a variety of methods from email to surface mail to personal courier to messages embedded in classified advertisements. The opponent will try to submerge his communications in the noise of the everyday activity. He will use commercial sources and vehicles to disguise the movement of material and funds as commerce. His people will do their best to merge into whatever civil society they find themselves in. As a result, detecting the operational-level activities of a sophisticated opponent will be extraordinarily difficult.

## Tactical Considerations

Fourth-generation warfare takes place in the complex environment of low-intensity conflict. Every potential opponent has observed the Gulf War, Operation *Iraqi Freedom*, and operations in Afghanistan. They understand that if the United States is provided clear targets, no matter how well fortified, those targets will be destroyed. Just as certainly, they have seen the success of the Somalis and the Sandinistas. They have also seen and are absorbing the continuing lessons of Chechnya, Bosnia, Afghanistan, and Iraq. They will not fight with conventional means.

In attempting to change the minds of key decisionmakers, antagonists will use several tactical paths to get their message through to presidents, prime ministers, cabinet members, legislators, and even voters. Immediate, high-impact messages will probably come via visual media—and the more dramatic and bloody the image, the stronger the message. Longer term, less immediate but more thought-provoking messages will be passed through business, religious, economic, academic, artistic,

and even social networks. While the messages will be based on a strategic theme, the delivery will be by tactical action such as guided tours of refugee camps, exclusive interviews with insurgent leaders, targeted kidnapping, beheadings, car bombings, and assassinations.

This warfare will involve a mixture of international, transnational, national, and subnational actors. Since the operational planner of a fourth-generation campaign must use all the tools available, the United States probably will have to deal with actors from all these arenas at the tactical level as well. Even more challenging, some will be violent actors and others nonviolent. In fact, the term *noncombatant* applies much more readily to conventional conflicts between states than to fourth-generation war involving state and nonstate actors. Nonviolent actors, while being legally noncombatants, will be a critical part of tactical actions. By using crowds, protesters, media interviews, Internet Web sites, and other nonviolent methods, fourth-generation warriors can create tactical dilemmas for opponents. Tactical resources in police, intelligence, military, propaganda, and political spheres will be needed to deal with the distractions they create.

Tactical military action (for example, terrorist, guerrilla, or, rarely, conventional) will be tied to the message and targeted at various groups. The August 19, 2003, bombing of the UN headquarters in Iraq convinced the organization that continuing to operate in Iraq would be too costly. The August 19, 2004, burning of southern Iraq oil buildings had an immediate effect on the per barrel price of oil. These were two tactical actions with different messages for different target audiences, yet they both support the strategic goal of increasing the cost to the United States of staying in Iraq.

## WMD Attacks

Only by looking at current conflicts as fourth-generation warfare events can America's true vulnerabilities to an attack with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) be seen. Even a limited biological attack with a contagious agent, such as plague, will result in a shutdown of major segments of air travel, shipping, and trade. Smallpox will require a total quarantine of the affected areas until the incubation period has passed. The potential for billions of dollars in losses to disrupted trade is

obvious, as well as years of continuing loss due to subsequent litigation.

WMD attacks may not focus on physical destruction but rather on area denial or disruption. The ability of a single person to shut down Senate office buildings and post offices with two anthrax letters is a vivid example of an area denial weapon. Disruption can easily be made even more widespread. The use of containerized freight to deliver either a WMD or a high-yield explosive will have more far-reaching and costly effects on the international trade network than the shutdown of international air routes. Security for airliners and air freight is easy compared

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to the problem of inspecting seaborne shipping containers. Yet containers are the basic component for the majority of international trade today, and the United States has no current system to secure or inspect them. By taking advantage of this vulnerability, terrorists can impose huge economic costs with little effort. They do not have to limit their actions to the containers but can also use the ships themselves. Ships flying flags of convenience do so to minimize the ability of government efforts to regulate or tax them. It is logical to assume the same characteristics will appeal to terrorists.

Finally, terrorists do not even have to provide the materials for simple chemical attacks. The 1984 chemical plant disaster in Bhopal, India, killed more people than 9/11 and left more with serious long-term injuries. While Bhopal was an accident, it presents a precedent for a devastating chemical attack.

The existence of chemical plants and the movement of toxic industrial chemicals needed to support the American lifestyle ensure the raw material for a chemical attack is always present. In addition to the widely recognized potential for chemical attack, it is fairly certain terrorists are today exploring how to use liquid natural gas tankers, fuel trucks, radioactive waste, and other available material for future attacks. These are just a few of the resources available to an intelligent, creative opponent.

## Long Timelines

Fourth-generation warfare timelines, organizations, and objectives are very different from those of conventional war. Of particular importance is the fact that timelines are much longer. Failure to understand that essential fact is why many observers do not fully appreciate the magnitude of the challenge presented by a fourth-generation enemy.

When the United States has to fight, it prefers to wage short, well-defined wars. For the United States, a long war is 5 years—which, in fact, was the duration of major U.S. involvement in Vietnam (1965–1970). The Nation entered when the war was already under way and left before it was over. Even then, the U.S. public thought the country had been at war too long.

But fourth-generation wars are long. The Chinese Communists fought for 28 years; the Vietnamese Communists for 30; the Sandinistas for 18. The Palestinians have been resisting Israeli occupation for 37 years so far—and some would argue they have been fighting since 1948. The Chechens have been fighting over 10 years—this time. Al Qaeda has been fighting for their vision of the world for 20 years since the founding of Maktab al-Khidamar in 1984. Numerous other insurgencies in the world have lasted decades. Accordingly, when getting involved in this type of fight, the United States must plan for a decades-long commitment. From an American point of view, duration may well be the single most important characteristic of fourth-generation warfare. Leadership must maintain the focus of effort through numerous elections and even changes of administration to prevail in such an effort.

The United States must understand that fourth-generation organizations are different. Since Mao, they have focused on the long-term political viability of the movement rather than on its short-term tactical effectiveness. They do not see themselves as military organizations but rather as webs that generate the political power central to this type of warfare. Thus, these organizations are unified by ideas. The leadership and the organizations are networked to provide for survivability and continuity when attacked. And the leadership recognizes that their most important function is to sustain the idea and the organizations, not simply to win on the battlefield.

These opponents focus on the political aspects of the conflict because they accept that war is ultimately a political act. Since the final

objective is changing the minds of the enemy's political leadership, the intermediate objectives are all milestones focused on shifting the opinion of the various target audiences. They know that time is on their side.

Noted military strategist Harry Summers recounted how he once told a North Vietnamese colonel that the United States had never been beaten on the battlefield. The officer replied, "That may be so, but it is also irrelevant."<sup>1</sup> Because of the long timelines and its political nature, the objectives are different. Fourth-generation opponents do not seek the defeat of the enemy forces. They seek the erosion of the enemy's political will and can win even if the opposing military force is largely intact. They focus on winning wars, not battles.

## U.S. Response

Fourth-generation opponents are not invincible. They can be beaten, but only by coherent, patient actions that encompass all agencies of the government and elements of the private sector. Their warfare encompasses the fields of diplomacy, defense, intelligence, law enforcement, and economic and social development. American efforts must be organized as a network rather than in the traditional vertical bureaucracies of Federal departments. This interagency process will have to exert its influence for the duration of the war—from the initiation of planning to the final withdrawal of forces.

Besides dealing with the long timelines, developing genuine interagency networks will be the most difficult U.S. problem in fighting a fourth-generation opponent. This will require fundamental changes in how national security leadership trains, develops, promotes, deploys, and employs personnel across the Federal Government. The current system, which is based on 19<sup>th</sup>-century bureaucratic theory, cannot support 21<sup>st</sup>-century operations. In particular, the United States must be able to:

- train personnel in a genuine interagency environment. From the classroom to daily operations to interagency training exercises, personnel must think and act as part of a network rather than a hierarchy.

- develop personnel through the equivalent of military joint tours. As in the military, these tours must be an essential step for promotion.

- deploy interagency personnel from all segments of the U.S. Government overseas for much longer tours. The current 3- to 12-month overseas tours in a crisis cannot work in fights lasting decades.

- operate as interagency elements down to the tactical level. This means abandoning the agency-specific stovepipes that link operations overseas to their U.S. headquarters. The British War Committee system used in the Malaya emergency provides one model that eliminated the stovepipes and ensured unified effort at every level of government. Starting in peacetime, personnel must be trained to be effective linking into the interagency process, and those who do so should be rewarded. The current process of rewarding those who work entirely within a specific agency prevents effective networking.

- eliminate the detailed, bureaucratic processes that characterize peacetime government actions (particularly contracting and purchasing). People have to be trusted and held accountable. Longer tours of duty will be essential, both to ensure that personnel understand the specific situation well enough to make decisions and can legitimately be held accountable for their actions. The current short tours mean no one masters his or her job, the records are incomplete, and accountability cannot be maintained.

- develop procedures for fully integrating the range of international organizations, NGOs, allies, and specialists necessary to succeed against an adept, agile insurgent.

These are major challenges, but a model exists with which to work. Presidential Decision Directive 56 provides an excellent starting point.<sup>2</sup> Based on lessons learned from U.S. involvement in multiple crises and complex contingencies during the 1990s, it provides guidance for both training and operations in an interagency environment that can be adapted for the purpose of waging fourth-generation warfare.

Yet this is only a starting point. In the same way that the Armed Forces had to learn to fight jointly to master third-generation war, the entire government must learn to operate in a genuine interagency fashion to master fourth-generation conflict. There are no simple, one department, one-dimensional

solutions to these wars. Even with a fully functioning interagency process, the assumption must be made that fourth-generation wars will last a decade or more.

## Conclusion

As German military strategist Carl von Clausewitz once observed: "The first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature."<sup>3</sup> Fourth-generation war, like its predecessors, will continue to evolve in ways that mirror global society as a whole. As the United States moves away from a hierarchical, industrial-based society to a networked, information-based society, its political, socioeconomic, and technological bases will also evolve.

With this evolution come opportunity and hazard. The key to providing for security lies in recognizing these changes for what they are. In understanding the kind of war being fought, the United States must not attempt to shape it into something it is not. Opponents cannot be forced into a third-generation war that maximizes American strengths; they will fight the fourth-generation war that challenges U.S. weaknesses. Clausewitz's admonition to national leaders remains as valid as ever, and it must guide the planning for future wars.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Presidential Decision Directive 56 was developed by the Clinton administration to manage complex contingency operations. Although canceled by the Bush administration, it still provides a well-thought-out model for insurgency operations.

<sup>3</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Peter Paret and Michael Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 88.

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