



U.S. Navy F/A-18F Super Hornet receives fuel from aerial refueling drone of Air Force KC-10 Extender over Afghanistan

# What Is Wrong with the American Way of War?

BY ANTULIO J. ECHEVARRIA II

Our understanding of the American way of war begins in 1973 with the publication of historian Russell Weigley's classic work, *The American Way of War: A History of U.S. Military Strategy and Policy*.<sup>1</sup> Weigley maintained that after the Civil War, American military strategy essentially narrowed from the practice of two types, annihilation and attrition, to one, annihilation. As the United States experienced a "rapid rise from poverty of resources to plenty," he argued, so too the American way of war tended to opt for strategies of annihilation, largely because it could.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, however, the further evolution of strategies of attrition was cut short, and American military strategy became unidimensional, or imbalanced. That, according to Weigley, was part of the problem with the Vietnam conflict. The other part of the problem, in his view, was that the era of using military force rationally to achieve the aims of policy was nearing its end.

Between 1973 and 1999, fewer than one dozen pieces were published on the American way of war, and many of them were simply reviews of Weigley's book. From 2000 to 2012, however, the number of articles and books concerning the American style of war tripled. One of the reasons for this increase is that the agenda associated with the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's related transformation program drew attention once again to Weigley's *American Way of War*. Between 2000 and 2003, both the old and new American ways of war became popular topics among defense policymakers and scholars.<sup>3</sup> Research into one way of war inevitably drew attention to the other.<sup>4</sup> Although much of the literature in this period mischaracterized Weigley's thesis, the idea that there had been a traditional way of war became the foil against which the "new" style was defined.<sup>5</sup>

After 2004, as the war in Iraq transformed from rapid and decisive to prolonged and ambiguous, the literature on the American way of war became preoccupied with identifying what had gone wrong. Many experts were convinced that something, or several things, had indeed

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failed, but it was not clear whether the failure belonged to the new American way of war or was deeply rooted in the U.S. approach to war more generally.

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### **It Was the RMA**

There were two basic answers to this question. The first pointed to the U.S. military's transformation as the crux of the issue, but it was divided. Some scholars held that transformation had gone too far, while others felt it had not gone far enough. The first group argued that transformation had proceeded too quickly: it had involved only a limited set of capabilities, concentrated on only a narrow segment of the operational spectrum, and ignored war's nature, in particular the elements of chance and uncertainty.<sup>6</sup> The second view countered that the real problem was that transformation had not gone far enough because Service cultures had resisted it, preferring to shape new technology according to their own traditions and preferences rather than maximizing the revolutionary potential such technologies afforded.<sup>7</sup> To be sure, the story of the transformation of the U.S. military took place over three decades, not three years. Still, Secretary Rumsfeld's idea of transformation was, at root, about developing fundamentally "new ways of thinking" that would permit employing evolutionary capabilities in revolutionary ways.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the push in the late 1990s and early 2000s was to realize the RMA in the form of new concepts.

One thing this debate clearly tells us, albeit inadvertently, is that an RMA was precisely the wrong approach to take in transforming the U.S. military after the Cold War. Revolutions are not open-minded affairs in search of optimal solutions. For revolutionaries, the best solutions are already known: no testing is necessary. As with the French or Russian examples, revolutions rely on faith and conviction, not logic and skepticism. Revolutions succeed by putting people with the "right" ideas into positions of power and influence. That inevitably means marginalizing opposing ideas and suppressing contrary evidence. In that sense the RMA was a capital success.

Ironically, that very success also undermined the revolution from the start. The degree of certainty that revolutionaries must possess was quite unsuitable for the unfolding security environment, which most scholars and U.S. defense documents described as likely to be more "uncertain, ambiguous, volatile, and complex" than ever before.<sup>9</sup> What one ought to have in such an era, logic suggests, is an open-ended approach, one that entertains and tests a variety of ideas and develops hedging actions in the event that initial assumptions prove false. The elements of chance and uncertainty, in other words, are equally powerful in environments outside war.

On the contrary, military revolutions—whether that of Gustavus Adolphus or another (to be sure, those that qualify as genuine revolutions are few)—can rarely afford such an approach. They have to get ahead of the competition and take advantage of an edge, which is invariably only temporal in nature. They typically have only one overriding strategic rationale, and it is usually strategic expansion. Under an RMA, the military arm is revamped

to become an offensive weapon. Rarely is such an effort undertaken for purely defensive purposes. This was true for Gustavus as well as for the vaunted German blitzkrieg (which many might well argue was not a military revolution at all). The latter case was the model most frequently mentioned in RMA literature. Despite historical narratives about decisive battles of encirclement, the blitzkrieg was actually about avoiding static, or position warfare, a *Stellungskrieg*, by breaking through an opponent's lines and keeping relentless pressure on him to prevent a reestablishment of those lines. It had little to do with German navy or air force ability to conduct long-range strategic bombing. And it broke down in theaters where opponents could trade space for time. The point is that it was as narrowly focused and operationally aggressive as RMA advocates wanted the new American way of war to be, though they looked to the air arm more than to ground forces to be decisive. Ultimately, both ways of war were called upon to accomplish too much.

### It Was Systemic

The second basic answer as to what went wrong with the American way of war casts the net much wider and tries to identify systemic causes. The most frequent criticisms in this regard maintain that the American approach to war tends to be apolitical, astrategic, technocentric, and highly sensitive to casualties.<sup>10</sup> European styles of warfare, one would have to admit, also would reflect many of these traits. Western militaries have been known to disregard political aims and to substitute military strategy for other forms. They have also been techno-centric since at least the industrial revolution by employing warships, fortifications, armored vehicles, aircraft, electronic

communication devices, computer technologies, ballistic missiles, radar, optically guided anti-vehicle missiles, landmines, parachutes, artillery, robotics, and drones. Certainly the U.S. military today has thousands of ground robotics and aerial drones in its inventory, but the numbers owned by the rest of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries and various other federal organizations are not far behind. Drones are clearly a controversial form of standoff technology—but so are improvised explosive devices and vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices. Arguably, the chief difference between them lies only in their degrees of sophistication. What is more, all contemporary Western militaries seem to be highly sensitive to casualties, which incidentally does not square well with the first characteristic, that of being apolitical. Political control may not be absolute, but it can extend to individual patrols and combat actions—something Clausewitz could not have imagined.

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Indeed, the first and second characteristics deserve a closer look. The first goes hand-in-hand with another popular argument: that Americans have historically failed to appreciate the importance of Clausewitz's observation that "war is the mere continuation of policy by other means."<sup>11</sup> This observation has been taken to mean many things, but none of them should be that the continuation of policy by "other" means is necessarily easy. While policy may appear simple on paper, its extension by other means is bound to meet stiff resistance

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#### MQ-9 waits out sandstorm at Joint Base Balad, Iraq

or certainly considerable friction. It is worth noting that, while Clausewitz got much right in *On War*, there is at least one matter on which he was so egregiously simplistic as to be almost wrong—his reduction of policy to “the representative of all interests of the community.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, it is almost never that. Whereas Clausewitz saw policy as unifying and reconciling, it is just as often divisive and antagonizing. Even when policy is embodied in a single head of state, as it was in Clausewitz’s day, it is still frequently and fiercely contested by the interests of other classes and institutions.

#### **It Was the Expectations of Policy**

A review of the literature regarding the key political decisions concerning the war in Iraq

shows that it was largely because of politics that American policy initially tried too hard to keep the war it wanted rather than winning the war it had. History, in fact, suggests that the American way of war has never been apolitical. One may disagree with what American policy has been over the years, or what it was at the beginning of the millennium, but it clearly influenced the conduct of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan throughout every stage. What American policy wanted to achieve initially in Iraq and Afghanistan was simply too much to expect solely from any way of war, particularly one that was in many respects still evolving from a way of battle.

The contentious nature of U.S. politics eventually forced American policy to temper

its aims and bring them more in line with what could actually be achieved. This dialectical pattern is not so different from what some scholars have described as the American way of strategy.<sup>13</sup> In their view, this way has been historically balanced, albeit not without some failures, between the “legitimacy politics” of international liberalism and the “power politics” of realism.<sup>14</sup> Inconsistencies in American foreign policy and strategy are thus explained, perhaps too easily, by understanding the competing tensions created by upholding the values of self-determination and nonintervention on the one hand, and addressing the threats posed by imperial powers or anarchy on the other. It is thus more accurate to say that the American way of war is not so much astrategic as it is contradictory, reflecting the tensions inherent in American politics.<sup>15</sup> With regard to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the dialectical tensions resulted in a strategic correction. To be sure, Americans have not always been so fortunate, but the fact that the tensions are there at all suggests that a strategy, even a poor one, is there too.

In one important respect, however, the above criticisms are entirely correct. The new American way of war did show a marked tendency to focus on the act of fighting more than on its follow-through, what is now commonly referred to as war’s aftermath. There were clearly plans drawn up for Phase 4, but the plan that was chosen was one that fit the politics of the day rather than the practical situation. That type of failure is not uniquely American, nor is it historically unique. War’s aftermath is also far from being a military issue alone. Fortunately, there are some positive signs with recent talk of reforming the interagency process and of institutionalizing a “whole of government” approach. The rhetoric is encouraging since identifying

the problem is half the solution. However, optimism is not necessarily justified just yet. Half a solution is ultimately just as useful as none. Under today’s conditions of austerity, it is not clear that there will be enough resources to carry through to a full reform.

All told, systemic causes are seductively convenient. Yet, as far as what is wrong with the American way of war, none of the answers that point to deep-seated flaws seems persuasive. The alleged roots are too shallow and the counterexamples are too many. Instead, the more likely answer is that what was wrong with the American way of war was about the same as what was wrong with any other: policy aims and physical capabilities were initially misaligned, and it took time to

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expand the capabilities and revise the aims. Tactically, operationally, and even strategically the American way of war has fared rather better historically, and certainly no worse, than its British, French, and German counterparts. Even in its most recent and most challenging conflicts, it eventually proved itself capable and adaptive, although whether the adaptations were altogether timely enough is another matter.<sup>16</sup> Although there are critical issues still to be addressed and fixed, the real culprit seems to be that expectations were too many and too high. They rose all the more sharply with turn-of-the-millennium rhetoric about what the “new” American way of war was and what it could do, a rhetoric that, after 9/11, was matched with a political will that was impatient to act.



Paradoxically, we can know a way of war only historically—by what it has done. Unfortunately, historical knowledge tells us little about what that way of war will be in the years ahead. After more than 10 years of conflict, we now know better what the new American way of war was. Yet the force reductions under way in the United States are already changing that style of fighting in important ways, creating a different set of shortcomings than those we had to overcome just recently. By the next conflict there will be a newer American way of war, but the need to align, and realign, policy aims and real capabilities is the one continuity that will require constant attention. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of U.S. Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Ignatieff, "The New American Way of War," *New York Times Review of Books*, July 20, 2000, surveyed new contributions to the existing literature. See also Eliot A. Cohen, "Kosovo and the New American Way of War," in *War Over Kosovo: Politics and Strategy in a Global Age*, ed. Andrew J. Bacevich and Eliot A. Cohen, 38–62 (New York: Columbia University, 2001); Stephen Biddle, "The New Way of War? Debating the Kosovo Model," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 3 (May/June 2002), 138–144; Max Boot, "Everything You Think You Know about the American Way of War Is Wrong," *Foreign Policy Research Institute e-notes*, September 12, 2002; and Max Boot, *Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Compare John Grenier, *The First Way of War: American War Making on the Frontier, 1607–1814* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Wayne E. Lee, *Barbarians and Brothers: Anglo-American Warfare, 1500–1865* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2–3. Both make references to the contemporary American way of war.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur K. Cebrowski and Thomas P.M. Barnett, "The American Way of War," *Transformation Trends*, January 13, 2003; Victor Davis Hanson, "The American Way of War," *National Review* 55, no. 7 (April 21, 2003), 10; Dick Cheney, "A New American Way of War," speech to the Heritage Foundation, May 1, 2003; Richard B. Myers, "The New American Way of War," *Military Technology* 27, no. 6 (June 2003), 64–74, and "The New American Way of War: Keeping the Legacy Alive," speech at the Navy League Air Space Exposition, Washington, DC, April 16, 2003; William B. Scott, "New Way of War: Strategies Based on 'Annihilation and Attrition' Are Relegated to History," *Aviation Week & Space Technology* 158, no. 19 (May 12, 2003), 38–39; Arthur Cebrowski, speech to the Heritage Foundation, May 13, 2003, reprinted in *Transformation Trends*, May 27, 2003; "Champion of 'A New American Way of War,'" *Sea Power* 46, no. 6 (June 2003), 15–16; and Donald H. Rumsfeld and Tommy R. Franks, "Summary of Lessons Learned in OIF," prepared testimony for the Senate Armed Services Committee, July 9, 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Kagan, *Finding the Target: The Transformation of American Military Policy* (New York: Encounter, 2006); Grant T. Hammond, "The U.S. Air Force and the American Way of War," in *Rethinking the Principles of War*, ed. Anthony D. McIvor, 109–126 (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Max Boot, "The Struggle to Transform the Military," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 2 (March/April 2005), 103–118; Richard Lock-Pullen, "The U.S. Way of War and the 'War on Terror,'" *Politics & Policy* 34, no. 2 (2006), 374–399; Robert R. Tomes, *U.S. Defense Strategy from Vietnam to Operation Iraqi Freedom: Military Innovation and the New American Way of War, 1973–2003* (London: Routledge, 2007); Thomas Mahnken, *Technology and the American Way of War Since 1945* (New York: Columbia, 2008); John Arquilla, *Worst Enemy: The Reluctant Transformation of the American Military* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Donald H. Rumsfeld, "Transforming the Military," *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 3 (May/June 2002), 20–32, 21.

<sup>9</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Why We Will Soon Miss the Cold War," *The Atlantic Monthly* 266, no. 2 (August 1990), 35–50.

<sup>10</sup> Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006), 30–49; Anthony D. McIvor, ed. "The American Way of War: Critique and Implications," *Rethinking the Principles of War* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 13–40,

which listed 12 characteristics; Benjamin Buley, *The New American Way of War: Military Culture and the Political Utility of Force* (London: Routledge, 2008); Isaiah Wilson, *Thinking Beyond War: Civil-Military Relations and Why America Fails to Win the Peace* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Reuben E. Brigety II, *Ethics, Technology and the American Way of War: Cruise Missiles and U.S. Security Policy* (London: Routledge, 2007); and Martin Shaw, *The New Western Way of War: Risk-Transfer War and Its Crisis in Iraq* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Wilson, xiv.

<sup>12</sup> Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University, 1976), 607. For slightly different wording in the German edition, see Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, ed. Werner Hahlweg, 19<sup>th</sup> ed. (Bonn: Ferd. Dümmler, 1980), 993. To be fair, this was merely shorthand to avoid a lengthy discussion of policy that would surely have required another book.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Lind, *The American Way of Strategy: U.S. Foreign Policy and the American Way of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> A similar case is made in Dominic Tierney, *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War* (New York: Little, Brown, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> James A. Russell, *Innovation, Transformation, and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq 2005–2007* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); and Chad Serena, *A Revolution in Military Adaptation* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011).