



The Baby and the Bathwater: CHANGING TIMES OR CHANGING PRINCIPLES?

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FORMER SECRETARY of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's 2001 pronouncement that the United States is engaged in "a new kind of war" appeared to constitute a clear signal from the highest levels of government that times had changed and that, accordingly, the nation must approach the war-fighting enterprise differently than it had in recent memory—or perhaps ever.¹ That pronouncement, and the events that precipitated it, came in the wake of a military transformation—a transformation that had placed on the table for re-examination every aspect of military culture: from force development, to financing, to basing, to acquisition, to training, to executing, to what constitutes a "win" of either the war or the peace. It is a transformation which continues today.

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The Vortex of Change

In the face of this sweeping change, it is little wonder that some might question whether anything remains the same. The ancient philosopher Heraclitus might as well have been thinking of the U.S. defense establishment when he observed that no one ever steps into the same river. However, while Heraclitus may have been right, reflective observers of the changes now underway would do well to take some soundings as to how deep the current of change really runs—or *should* run. Is it possible for a burgeoning, bureaucratic institution like the military truly to transform itself unless it changes the principles of war, which govern its function? The answer to that question really hinges upon what one means by "principles." Properly understood, the most fundamental principles embody world-ordering, foundational ideas: intellectual bedrock. However, reaching that bedrock requires one to traverse several strata of progressively more fundamental supporting principles. Thus, one cannot meaningfully conduct an investigation into whether principles have changed or should change without specifying just how fundamentally the discourse is to be focused. The point is not a trivial one; for, if practitioners of the profession of arms get muddled in their thinking such that they cannot clearly identify the stratum of principles under consideration and why—if at all—those principles should change, they risk marching, or sailing, or flying from the wrong point of departure on their transformational journey to a most uncertain destination. At the most fundamental stratum, the ideas that constitute and undergird the principles of war have *not* changed, and it is important to understand why this is so.

PAINTING: Vercingétorix throws his weapons to the feet of Julius César, by Lionel Royer, 1899, Crozatier Museum at the Puy-en-Velay, France. The principles of war are as valid today as they were during Caesar's subjugation of Gaul in 52 B.C.E. Caesar had an instinctive genius for the principles of war, as did Alexander and Hannibal in centuries before him, and as did Genghis Khan, Napoleon, and others centuries later. As techniques have changed, principles have remained valid.

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What a Principle *Is*—and *Is Not*

In addition to the fact that not every principle is equally fundamental, it also is true that not every concept dignified by the honorific designation of “principle” really is a principle at all. Some dearly held beliefs simply are false, even if, given the information available, they seem to be true. For example, the idea of Thales of Melitus—the father of Western philosophy—that everything is water, seemed to make good scientific sense in its day: One could point to lakes, rivers, oceans, clouds, steamy vapor, snow and ice—all water, readily observe the change of that water from one state to another, and reason that everything might, in fact, be reducible to water. Thales and his disciples appear to have held this to be the ordering “principle” that governed their entire scientific world view. The eventual discovery that they had been in error did not mean that a principle had changed. Rather, it meant that an idea which they took to be a principle actually was not a principle at all!

Although ideas which actually turn out to be principles are always true within their sphere of application, new insights or changing circumstances that become evident with the passage of time force their “re-scoping.” That is to say, a principle may remain true within certain limits but prove not to be as broad in its application as once thought. The scientific revolution that marked the emergence of Einsteinian physics from its Newtonian predecessor

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serves as a case in point: Newton’s famous formula, $F=MA$, was long considered to be the universal law of mechanics. However, Einstein later argued persuasively that Newton’s formula does not fare well at speeds approaching the speed of light. Einstein’s formula, $E=MC^2$, sets forth a relationship, which compensates for the shortcomings of the earlier Newtonian statement. That does not mean that $F=MA$ is untrue or without practical value. On the contrary, within a very broad sphere of applicability, it continues to be of enormous value. It is, after all, the principle we use to build roads and skyscrapers, design automobiles, and do a billion other such things. Its application is, however, more limited in scope than once thought. Nevertheless, a change in scope of application for a particular principle does not necessarily mean that it is not a true principle or indicates a change in the principle itself.

Because true principles do not change, to ask the question, “Have the principles of war changed?” is (to take an example from the contemporary debate on genetic engineering) akin to asking—not, “Are we now witnessing hitherto unseen developments that will cause us to rethink how we do things?” but rather—“Has the double-helix structure of the DNA molecule itself morphed into something hitherto unknown?” Thus, in order properly to dissect the question, one first must ask, “are the principles currently in use *true principles* and if so, are they still “scoped” properly for the war-fighting tasks at hand and for those one reasonably can expect the future to bring?”

Principium or Technē?

The English word “principle” debuted in the late 14th century and meant a “fundamental truth or proposition, on which many others depend; a primary truth comprehending, or forming the basis of, various truths.”² The word derives from the Latin *principium*, which, interestingly, in its plural form (*principia*) refers to the front of an army—the staff and general’s quarters.³ Thus, even in its historical meaning, a principle, or principium, is that which guides the military in the direction that it must go if it is to be successful. In the American military tradition, nine concepts (namely, objective, simplicity, unity of command, offensive, maneuver, mass, economy of force, surprise, and security) have been accorded the designation “principles of

war”—concepts that the military must observe in order to be successful. These principles are important, time tested, and relevant. They are principles precisely because their foundational role has been evident throughout the historical record of warfare and because there is no reason to believe—even in the most fanciful, mind-stretching scenarios of science fiction—that they ever will cease to apply to future conflicts.

However, that does not mean that the scope or relative value of one or another of these principles cannot or will not change as circumstances evolve. Indeed, even now, they are evolving. For example, a successful Warsaw Pact armor assault, of the kind anticipated to come through the Fulda Gap, may have been expected to rely heavily on objective, offensive, and mass. The theory was: Throw enough tanks at NATO forces and, all other things being equal, some Warsaw Pact tanks are bound to break through. However, that assault would have depended commensurately less on maneuver, economy of force, or surprise. On the other hand, an effective cyber attack of the future may rely heavily on surprise, security, and economy of force, but may not meaningfully depend on mass, maneuver, or unity of command. The principles may differ in scope or application, based on circumstances, but one senses no need to call into question the truth or validity of the principles themselves.

The need to “re-scope,” re-prioritize, or assign new relative values to true principles should not give occasion to equate *principia* with *technē*—the ancient Greek concept for the art, way, or means in which principles are applied practically, and which is the historical root for the English word “technique.” Much of what we witness at present on contemporary battlefields—those in Iraq, for example—focuses on changes to *technē*, or “tactics, techniques, and procedures,” as they frequently are called in the profession of arms. Thus, when the president enjoins the armed forces and the nation’s industrial support base to develop “new technologies . . . to redefine war on our terms,” he is issuing an explicit call for the armed forces to examine its *technē*—the tools at its disposal—to ensure that those tools, whether they be mechanical or procedural, are appropriate to the task.⁴ And indeed, as we are learning, a redefinition of our *technē* is in order. For example, the Fulda Gap scenario, or even the

Desert Storm scenario, had little need for armored HMMWVs—in contrast to Operation Iraqi Freedom, for which the need for armored HMMWVs is significant. Although the principle of “security” applies in all three of these scenarios, the *technē* required to implement the principle differs widely between the first two cases and the last case.

The nine principles of war continue to be as foundational and applicable as ever. Every time a revolution in military affairs occurs, the question arises as to whether principles actually have changed or whether the change is merely, or largely, a reordering of *technē*; and every time, the answer is the same: The evolution from stone and slingshot, to sword and shield, to pike and lance, to simple bow or longbow or crossbow, to musket or rifle or cannon or rocket, to atomic bomb or thermonuclear warhead, to satellites or lasers or cyber attacks—all of them—operate on the basis of the very same principles of war, albeit in reshuffled orders of relative importance.

Digging Deeper

However, just as shifts in tectonic plates can force the re-shaping of bedrock in ways not always anticipated, a consideration of the stability of still deeper strata of principles pertinent to the profession of arms is appropriate before one can say with confidence that the principles which underwrite the profession are not undergoing change. Thus, in order to find a truly interesting and non-trivial answer to the question, “have the principles of war changed?” one has to dig deeper. Just as thousands of individual *technē* derive from the traditionally accepted principles of war, these principles, in turn, derive from even more fundamental ones, like Clausewitz’s often quoted (and often misunderstood) dictum that “War is . . . an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”⁵ Here, Clausewitz observes that the military instrument of national power is merely one means among many (i.e., diplomatic, informational, economic, etc.) that can be applied to the task of persuading another power to yield to “our will.” It is a very blunt instrument, just as the nine principles of war demonstrate it to be. However, the very fact that a blunt instrument is sometimes required stands as testament to the yet more fundamental principle that the freedom of human will is inviolable: no individual or nation actually can

force any other individual or nation to act contrary to will. The former only can reason with, invite, persuade, cajole or—failing methods based on the use of more delicate instruments—induce such a degree of physical pain through fighting that the latter concludes that resisting the will of the former is more trouble than it is worth. It is on the basis of this principle elucidated by Clausewitz that the traditional nine principles of war rest, and nothing whatsoever has changed about that, either. Wars always have been, and always will be, as a matter of principle, tools for the infliction of unbearable pain so that resistance to “our will” no longer presents itself to an adversary as a viable option.

And Deeper

However, Clausewitz’s point, as profound as it is, does not take us the full distance to the most foundational principles that lie at the bedrock. Thus, underlying the question, “Have the principles of war changed?” is a still more fundamental question: “Why would America ever feel itself justified to use the blunt instrument of military power in the first place?” And underlying this question, one encounters still another: “What are the fundamental principles that govern America’s world view—a world view that includes the possibility for the use of war as an instrument of national power?” If the principles of war truly have changed, it must be due to tectonic shifts in the answers to these most basic questions at the ocean floor, and not to tropical squalls on the surface, however disruptive those squalls may seem to be.

Since America’s inception, it has embraced, as a matter of principle, the belief that some values (such as individual and collective self-determination, justice, or equity) are worth fighting for. Accordingly, the nation has felt justified, from time to time, in using the military instrument of power to inflict pain upon its adversaries to such a degree that they would rather change their wills and yield, if not conform, to these values than continue to fight. That does not imply that America always has been perfect in its

judgment with respect to when, where, or how to fight. However, it does imply that, consistent with its fundamental values—its most deeply held principle, America at times has concluded that going to war was the best course to pursue as a matter of national policy.

Even then, America’s decision to go to war has never failed to be circumscribed by adherence to principles of the most fundamental character, to wit: It never has fought a war devoid of moral constraint. On the contrary, it always has invoked principles regarding the circumstances under which wars could be fought justly and, once begun, the way in which they could be prosecuted justly. These principles, embodied in the just war tradition, which America embraces, hold that wars must be fought only for just causes, with the right intention, as a last resort, for the restoration of a just and lasting peace, and only after concluding, in the nation’s best judgement, that the moral good expected to result from the war will outweigh the evils that its prosecution inevitably will entail. These most fundamental principles also enshrine the axioms that a war can be justly prosecuted if, and only if, it inflicts only proportional harm to adversaries, consistent with the principle of military necessity, and if, and only if, it discriminates between non-combatants and legitimate objects of military violence. The fact that America has, as a matter of *technē*, fallen short of moral perfection in the way it approaches or conducts wars does not imply that the principles which characterize the American way of war have changed or should be changed. (Witness the public outcry that erupts at the suggestion that an American soldier may have mistreated an Iraqi prisoner, or fired upon a non-combatant. No such outcry *ever* was heard from the Ba’athists of Saddam Hussein’s regime as the result of moral self-examination, for no such self-examination appears ever to have occurred!)

The fact is that, the deeper one digs beneath the *technē* of war fighting, the more obvious it becomes that America’s principles of war have not

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changed. The nine battlefield principles still apply; the Clausewitzian principle which describes the use of the military instrument of national power still applies; and the moral-philosophical principles which undergird and circumscribe the most soul-level aspects of a national decision to go to war and, once committed to the fight, to prosecute the war in a morally sound manner remain virtually unaffected by the sweeping and unremitting current of change that seems to typify the dawn of the third millennium C.E.

In Sum

To suppose that principles have changed just because the order of the day calls for house-to-house clearing on the streets rather than a Desert Storm-style tank battle with the Republican Guards is folly in the extreme, and the armchair pundits on Sunday morning talk shows who conclude otherwise would serve the public best by admitting that their analyses are intended only as superficial ones suited for sound-bite-size transmission. Indeed, it is absolutely *critical* that decision makers throughout the chain of command and up to the highest level of government clearly understand that *no principles have changed*. This is so because, while decisions based on the perceived need to change *technē* cause movements—even if large movements—in the rudder of the ship of state, decisions based on supposed changes in principles signal that we have come to believe that altogether new answers must be formulated to the most fundamental questions upon which our democracy and way of life is based. The military services need to transform. They need always to search for more efficient ways to use their resources by applying the right solutions to the challenges they face. They need always to search for ways to be more effective in the manner in which they fight wars so as to bring those wars, justly fought, to a speedy and peaceful conclusion. Some principles may have to be “re-scoped” in terms of their sphere of application, so that, for example, trainees destined to become street fighters in Iraq are made to understand that “unity of command” does not imply lack of opportunity for initiative. But these needs always have existed.

Nothing about them really is new, and nothing really has changed.

For instance, the military may solve the problems of inadequate quantity and quality of vehicular armor. We can be sure that the insurgent enemy will also burn the midnight oil to develop *technē* to negate any solution’s effectiveness. Then, tomorrow, the military may develop other *technē* to overcome the insurgents’ countermeasures, whatever they may be. And so on. However, nothing will have changed at the level of true principle.

The same holds true at more fundamental strata of discourse. War continues to be what it always has been: a pain-exacting tool for persuading adversaries to yield their will to “our will.” Of greatest importance, however, is the realization that nothing has changed at the most fundamental stratum of principles, namely, those principles which specify the circumstances under which Americans should go to war and how and within what moral limits it will prosecute that war. The task is for America to ensure that it is true to its time-tested principles; the task is *not* to change its principles or to proceed on the assumption that the principles have changed. Indeed, if America is to be true to the high calling that its founders conceived it to have—that of a “a city on a hill,” a beacon for others to follow—the temptation to change its most fundamental war fighting principles is something against which the nation must jealously and zealously guard.⁶ If the nation or its military decides to change principles when what really is needed is to tweak its *technē*, it truly will have succeeded in nothing more than throwing out the baby with the bathwater. **MR**

NOTES

1. Donald H. Rumsfeld, “A New Kind of War” (speech as published by *The New York Times*, Thursday, 27 September 2001); available from, <www.defenselink.mil/speeches/2001/s20010927-secdef.html> (4 June 2004).

2. *Oxford English Dictionary* 2d ed., s. v. Principle.

3. *Oxford English Dictionary* 2d ed., s. v. Principium.

4. President George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President to the Employees of United Defense Industries Ground Systems Division,” Santa Clara, California, 2 May 2003. U.S. Department of State International Information Programs; available from, <<http://usinfo.state.gov/cgi-bin/washfile/display.pl?p=/archives/products/washfile/latest/2003/May&f=03050204.tit&t=/products/washfile/architem.shtml>> (11 January 2005).

5. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* [Book 1 Chapter 1, ¶ 2], ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) 75.

6. Stephen Vincent Benét, “Pilgrims’ Passage.”