



(Photo courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration)

A group of soldiers captured by German forces on the western front during World War I illustrates the great diversity within the Allied forces. This group represents eight nationalities serving within the Allied coalition: Anamite (Vietnamese), Tunisian, Senegalese, Sudanese, Russian, American, Portuguese, and English. Apart from the predominantly white European and North American forces, approximately four million non-European, nonwhite soldiers and auxiliaries were recruited from Allied colonies to fight in Europe and elsewhere. Approximately one million of these served with distinction in northern France and Belgium.

The Myth of the New Complexity

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The world has always been an uncertain, complicated place. The so-called “foreseeable future” is not foreseeable at all, nor has it ever been.

Yet, in recent years, collective voices in the U.S. political and military communities have claimed that we are now witnessing an era of unprecedented complexity with a future far more unpredictable than in the past. For example, in his confirmation hearing before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee on 24 January 2013, Secretary of State John Kerry claimed, “Today’s world is more complicated than anything we have experienced.”¹ Elsewhere, the military authors of a recent study, “Intellectual Capital: A Case for Cultural

Change,” agreed with Kerry, stating that “our future combined and joint operating environments will be more complex than ever before in history.”²

Both active and retired military leaders have also echoed this narrative, placing emphasis on the idea of a reputedly new, previously unseen level of intricacy in modern war. For instance, retired Marine Corps Gen. Tony Zinni surmised that “Over the years, the spectrum of conflict has greatly broadened, and the battlefield environment has become far more complex.” This “new battlefield,” he asserts, is significantly different than any seen before.³ The U.S. Army has incorporated this notion into its recent doctrine. Former Army



(Photo courtesy Wikimedia)

U.S. members of Office of Strategic Services (OSS) Deer Team pose with Viet Minh leaders Ho Chi Minh (third from left standing) and Vo Nguyen Giap (fifth from left standing) during training August 1945 at Tan Trao, Son Duong District, Tuyen Quang Province, Vietnam. Though the United States government recognized that Minh and Giap were ruthless and committed communists with extensive ties to the Soviet Union and a history of violence, it nevertheless saw in them leaders of organized forces that might effectively fight Japanese occupation of Indochina in an area where conventional Allied capabilities were very limited and decided to risk supporting them. OSS, the forerunner of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency as well as U.S. Special Operations Forces, inserted teams behind Axis lines in both Europe and Asia to organize, train, equip, and coordinate combat operations using indigenous forces.

Chief of Staff Gen. Raymond Odierno asserted in 2012 that the “strategic environment has grown increasingly complex.” As if to underscore this refrain, the Army titled its newest operating concept *Win in a Complex World*. Perhaps more ambiguously, Gen. Martin E. Dempsey (then commander of the U.S. Army’s Training and Doctrine Command) stated the year prior that “We live in a much more competitive security environment.”⁴ Such an assertion invites the challenge: More competitive than what, exactly?

Past Complexity

The mantra of a new, unprecedented complexity in the nature of military affairs is not terribly surprising, but it is misleading. At its best, the assertion that the operational environment is more complex than in previous eras is a near-sighted justification for a number of organizational and intellectual changes. And, at its worst, it is a veiled excuse for strategic and operational failures over the past decade. Most likely, however, the vast amount of self-study and introspection that the U.S. military, and in particular the Army, has

endured during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan has resulted in a sort of unintended myopia that ignores history and views the challenges of today as unprecedented in their complexity and unmanageability. However, there are indeed precedents to factors that are today erroneously characterized as more complex than previously.

World War I. Over the scope of the past one hundred years, complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty in military affairs has been a constant. In many cases, the level of such complexity matched or exceeded that seen today. As the Western world launched the cataclysm that would become remembered as World War I, few at the time could articulate how or why the war came about. Even today, a century of reflection since has not produced consensus agreement on a single definitive explanation for the conflict. Instead, we find a plethora of diverse explanations that attribute the cause to some combination of a precarious tangle of political alliances, security agreements, war plans, industrialization, ethnic divides, and festering resentments from the nineteenth century that produced an unstable and explosive

security situation throughout Europe by 1914. That environment, according to military historian John Keegan, “progressively overwhelmed the capacity of statesmen and diplomats” to control it.⁵ As a result, Europe abruptly went to war with itself.

The rapidity by which the continent went from “peaceful productivity” to being fully immersed in a war of unparalleled destruction was alarming, even by today’s standards.⁶ Equally remarkable was the scale of transformation in warfare that occurred between 1914 and 1918, a relatively short period. The war gave birth to airpower, armor, chemical weapons, and the primacy of the machine gun and indirect artillery fire. Nations that were accustomed to fighting wars strictly on the ground soon found themselves fighting in the air and under the oceans’ surface. It is hard to know if the soldiers fighting in World War I realized that these new tools of war would retain their central role on the battlefield more than a century later, or how that realization might have felt. Such a dramatic, sweeping transformation in weaponry has not occurred since or much less as quickly. Therefore, when the current narrative discusses the challenges of complexity combined with the need to keep up with new technologies on the modern “ever-changing” battlefield, it is instructive to remember that such challenges are nothing new.

The interwar years. Even more than during World War I, the interwar period was defined by military innovation, the scope and speed of which had never been seen before. It was a time defined by “intellectual and technological jockeying” that, like most other interwar stretches, resulted in “systemic and massive changes to the basic nature of warfare,” according to Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet.⁷ The United States and European nations, such as Great Britain, France, and Germany, along with the Soviet Union and Japan, raced to produce armaments and technologies that would provide an advantage in combat, although future opponents and battlefields were unknown. The capabilities of airpower and submarines combined with the rapidly increasing lethality of all weapon systems produced a charged strategic environment that was extremely competitive, dangerous, and unpredictable.

Such advances in warfare took place against the backdrop of dramatic changes in other domestic and political spheres. During this period, fascism and communism were taking root in Europe, while the Second

Sino-Japanese War was displaying Japan’s aggressiveness as well as its military capability. The rise of Nazism in the 1930s demonstrates that radical ideologies feeding into conflict is not a recent phenomenon at all. Also, the financial impact of World War I on nations followed by the Great Depression placed “tremendous strain on national economies” and produced an economic crisis in which “currencies crashed, unemployment figures rose, unrest flourished, and moral standards declined,” according to the authors of *Men in Arms*.⁸ This swirl of military, political, and economic turmoil during the period leading up to World War II produced a global situation that would undoubtedly be viewed today as dangerously chaotic, unstable (as it truly was), and extremely complex.

World War II. Historian Brian M. Linn recently characterized World War II as “the Army’s finest hour.”⁹ In many ways it was. It showed the U.S. military to be one of tenacious, organized professionals possessing extraordinary strategic vision, resilience, and guts. For the United States, the enemies were known and the mission was clear, or so it seemed. It is all fine and good for retired generals to wax nostalgic for “the good old days of the Good War! The old-fashioned and *simple* conventional war,” but such comments understate the real nature of the two world wars and the Cold War they spawned, just as stating that today’s wars are far more complicated than those of the twentieth century is a dubious claim.¹⁰ No event that involved the armies of over thirty nations, resulted in more than forty million military casualties and forty-five million dead civilians, and was fought in over thirty operational campaigns around the globe was simple.¹¹ Most Americans today (especially those in the military) would be awed, stunned, or overwhelmed by the enormous strategic, operational, and logistical complications and frustrations that came with fighting wars of such magnitude and dire consequences.¹² Unfortunately, the passing of seventy years has dulled our collective memory in this regard. And, unlike its predecessor, World War II also brought a new totality to war, defined most poignantly by the first use of atomic weapons—and with it, a frightening uncertainty about future conflicts.

The Cold War. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, it became popular to remember the Cold War in uncomplicated terms: democracy versus communism; good versus bad. The specter of mutually assured

destruction, once so fearsome, became almost quaint by 1990, and many recalled the Cold War as a bipolar contest involving only the United States and the former Soviet Union (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or USSR). But if Americans at the time chose to view the Cold War in those simplest of terms, then they were fooling themselves, just as we fool ourselves today by remembering it as such. The five decades that saw the perpetual clouds of World War III looming on the horizon were trying, complicated times, both politically and militarily. Robert Golan-Viella was correct when he noted that “the world itself between 1945 and 1991 wasn’t really that simple,” and yet “Americans often imposed a simplistic framework on it.”¹³

The combination of nuclear proliferation; fascist and totalitarian regimes throughout South America and Eastern Europe; genocide in central Africa; wars in Korea, the Middle East, and between India and Pakistan; and a myriad of civil wars and insurrections ensured that much of the world was, as historian Paul Kennedy noted, both exceedingly unsettled and “un-free.” Just because the United States was preoccupied with the Soviet Union did not mean that the rest of the world was not very much on fire. “Those were really scary times,” Kennedy argued in 2007, “and much more dangerous than our present circumstance.”¹⁴

Vietnam. The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan brought a renewed interest in the Vietnam War and have served as a potent reminder of the military, political, and cultural complexities surrounding that Southeast Asian conflict. As Stanley Karnow described, the war’s “origins were complex, its lessons disputed,” and we still struggle to grasp its true legacy.¹⁵ The reasons for American failure in Vietnam were legion: misunderstanding the enemy, strategic and operational constraints, a micromanaging commander in chief, confused generals, and loss of public support being among the most popular. The result was a wounded and demoralized U.S. Army that, in the words of Gen. Bruce Palmer, found itself “brooding over its frustrations and reevaluating its role in the world” a full decade after the fall of Saigon.¹⁶ Sound familiar?

With a robust Soviet military to confront, and the United States struggling through a cultural and economic funk, the post-Vietnam Era was steeped in uncertainty and filled with doubt. Those who argue that today’s United States somehow faces a more uncertain,

daunting future might need to seriously consider what the world looked like from the American prospective in the late 1970s.

The Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Fortunately for the United States and NATO, the USSR launched its ill-fated invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. At the time, the alarming move threatened to serve as the long-feared trigger to World War III, but its only real impact was to significantly deplete the Soviet military over the course of ten years and contribute in large part to the collapse of the USSR.

While the United States was rebuilding its own military and engaging in a series of smaller conflicts in Grenada and Panama, the Soviets were learning the hard, timeless lesson that combating an insurgency in the mountains of Afghanistan was exceedingly difficult, even for a superpower. One Russian veteran suggested, “The practice of massing a large number of regular forces against a small group of irregular forces to fight a guerrilla war on rugged terrain is bankrupt” and years after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan a Russian military professor concluded:¹⁷

It was an impetuous decision to send Soviet forces into this land ... the Afghans, whose history includes many centuries of warfare with various warring groups, could not see these armed strangers as anything but armed invaders.¹⁸

Of course, after nearly fourteen years of operations in Afghanistan, such observations should sound prophetic to Americans today and raise legitimate questions. Was the Soviet military experience in Afghanistan remarkably different than the American experience during Operation Enduring Freedom? Were the challenges facing the Soviets truly different? Did the Mujahideen employ tactics or strategy in the 1980s that varied drastically from the Taliban and other insurgent groups in recent years? Were the political and cultural dynamics at play inherently different? To say yes to those questions is to rely heavily on relatively small details.

A more feasible answer might note the differences in the Soviet and American military organization and doctrine, but would admit that the challenges they faced in Afghanistan—and the difficulty of those challenges—were more similar than they were different. This point is important for two reasons. First, it reminds us to look outside the American experience when making sweeping judgments about global military affairs and the operating



(Department of Defense photo by Sgt. Brendan Stephens)

A young girl appears amused to find U.S. Army soldiers lined up against the walls of her house 21 February 2000 in Mitrovica, Kosovo. The soldiers from Company B, 3rd Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, and United Nations police were conducting a house-to-house search for weapons. The 82nd Airborne Division unit from Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was deployed as part of Kosovo Force, a NATO-led, international military force conducting a peacekeeping mission known as Operation Joint Guardian.

environment. Second, it undercuts the notion that our recent campaign in Afghanistan witnessed something particularly new, something more complicated than previous campaigns. If anything, our operations there have produced efforts, results, and lessons that are strikingly similar to those from before.

More recent examples. Sixteen years ago, a retired U.S. Army general described a conflict in which there was “no clear international consensus to fight, no sure cause, ambivalent public support, no long deployment and build-up, an incredibly complex theater environment, and difficult climatic, demographic, and geographic conditions on the battlefield.”¹⁹ This was not a prediction about Iraq or Afghanistan, but rather, an assessment of the Kosovo conflict of 1999. Former NATO Supreme Allied Commander Wesley K. Clark’s description of the largely forgotten campaign serves as a reminder that complexity in unstable operating environments certainly existed prior to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Was Clark exaggerating or were we simply not paying attention?

Still, it is not hard to understand how the magnitude of 9/11 lead many Americans to view the world as a suddenly more dangerous, more complicated place. It was as if a multipolar world was born overnight. The campaigns

that would be fought as part of the Global War on Terrorism were filled with enough discovery, surprise, and frustration that the military looked for new ways (and terms) to define the task at hand. “Full spectrum operations” and “asymmetric warfare” became the focus, and a strategic shift to counterinsurgency operations brought sweeping changes in U.S. doctrine. In 2006, the Army produced the highly touted Field Manual 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, which provided guidelines for fighting the “exceedingly difficult and complex” problem of an insurgency.²⁰ By 2007, the United States was fully immersed in what former marine and Assistant Defense Secretary Bing West called “enlightened counterinsurgency,” which focused more on nation building and less on purely kinetic military operations.²¹ The results, both in Iraq and Afghanistan, were underwhelming, with very little in the way of measurable military or political success being achieved, to the point where Secretary of Defense Robert Gates referred to the wars as “an albatross around the nation’s neck.”²²

Learning from the Past

While we cannot yet speak or write about the United States’ involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq wholly in the past tense, any significant change in the

existing, almost-completed narrative of these wars would be a remarkable surprise. This fact, perhaps more than any other, has the U.S. military viewing the current operational environment as problematic: an intricate puzzle that is difficult to solve. Linn wrote that the Army has been traditionally shaped by the “echo of battle” that it chooses to hear.²³ It would seem that the echo being heard from the past fourteen years in Afghanistan and Iraq is noisy and filled with static: several sounds all at once, threatening to confuse us.

Most misguided, albeit common, is the thinking that the U.S. military is capable of fully preparing itself for the next war. This notion suggests that the Army must be completely ready before the first shots are fired, thereby preventing the kind of “bad start” that has characterized nearly every conflict in our history. Christopher A. Lawrence recently concluded in his study *America’s Modern Wars* that following the “flawed and improvised” war in Afghanistan, “U.S. citizens have a right to demand that the national command authorities (the civilians) and the U.S. armed forces be prepared for all types of wars and to be able to initiate them with considerable competence.” While acknowledging that the United States made substantial strides in adjusting to the challenges Iraq and Afghanistan provided, Lawrence quipped, “Even if the glass is half full, the American serviceman and the American tax payer have every right to demand that the glass be completely full.”²⁴

He is wrong. The glass will neither be “completely full” nor will the military be capable of being prepared for “all types” of potential conflicts at any given time. The idea of absolute preparedness, bolstered by a faith in data analysis, models, statistics, and planning checklists, naively ignores the simple reality that it is impossible to prepare for every contingency. As U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command commander Gen. David Perkins observed, “Not only is the future unknown, but it is unknowable.”²⁵ As such, we should embrace this uncertainty and acknowledge that our ability to plan, train, and prepare for the next war is

limited. Whatever the next conflict presents, we will be required to make strategic, organizational, and doctrinal adjustments as we fight. This is not a shortcoming; it is a simple, historical truth.

The U.S. Army’s recent call for adaptability in its ranks acknowledges this truth and is appropriate given the state of political and military affairs today. To say that we are entering “a period of great transition” is correct, but to suggest that this is unique is not.²⁶ The problem with viewing current military affairs as unprecedented and somehow more complex than those previous is the tendency to ignore or discount the past. Thinking that the questions of today can only be solved with new ideas, new solutions, and new systems is both wrong and counterproductive.

Conclusion

Nearly thirty years ago, the authors of *America’s First Battles, 1776-1965*, warned against the “widespread current belief that things were never as tough as they are now.”²⁷ That warning still applies. Complexity, uncertainty, and confusion are nothing new. They are the historical norm. Today’s cyberwarfare is yesterday’s nuclear threat. Today’s nonstate actors are yesterday’s communist revolutionaries. Today’s Arab Spring is yesterday’s collapse of the Soviet Union. We know just as much or just as little about the next war as we did when we emerged from the two world wars, Korea, Vietnam, or the Persian Gulf.

It is useful to remind ourselves that—while the world around us may not exactly match the world ten, twenty, or a hundred years ago—we should keep the present (and the future) in the proper historical context. We need to maintain the long view. Doing so allows us to assess current challenges and requirements without thinking that we are somehow adrift in uncharted waters, driven by currents the likes of which we have never seen before. Because we have been here before, many times. We have never enjoyed a certain future. We are not writing a new book, we are only adding the next chapter. ■

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The Complexity Trap

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When you meet someone blather politics on the complexities of the current world situation, you're going to get yourself into trouble.
—President Barack Obama

The Cult of Complexity

We live in a world of unprecedented complexity, or so we are told. President Obama's words above echo an increasingly common narrative in the American foreign policy and national security establishments: the forces of globalization, rising nonstate actors, irregular conflicts, and proliferating destructive technologies have made studying national security strategy more obscure than ever before. If "strategy is the art of creating power" by specifying the relationship among ends, ways, and means, then the existence of unprecedented complexity would seem to make this art not only immensely difficult today but also downright dangerous, inasmuch as choosing any particular course of action would preclude infinitely adaptive responses in the future. As a Secretary of Defense Robert Gates memorably described the post-9/11 challenges to American national security were "unlike any might compared to the world today." And as former State Department Director of Policy

If you found the article above intriguing, you may also enjoy reading "The Complexity Trap," by Michael J. Gallagher, Joshua A. Geltzer, and Sebastian L.V. Gorka. Their article also critiques the concept of complexity. Find it in the Spring 2012 edition of *Parameters*, Vol. 42 Issue 1,

http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/Articles/2012spring/Gallagher_Geltzer_Gorka.pdf.