

Anticipating Contemporary War: How Well Did We Do?

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Few recognized it at the time, but in 1974 the eminent British historian Sir Michael Howard wrote what was to become one of the most important phrases for the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)-Transformation era of the 1990s and early 2000s:

I am tempted to declare that whatever doctrine the Armed Forces are working on, they have got it wrong. I am also tempted to declare that it does not matter that they have got it wrong. What does matter is their capacity to *get it right quickly* when the moment arrives. It is the task of military science in an age of peace to prevent the doctrine *being too badly wrong*.¹

Interestingly, what was taken from this advice was, first, that military doctrine ought to avoid “being too badly wrong.” An abundance of scholarly works, student papers, war games, and workshops employed this phrase throughout the RMA-era as a ready benchmark for developing future strategic and operational concepts. However, in doing so, the message these efforts were sending was simply that the proposed concepts were not perfect, but possibly pretty close. Unfortunately, the second and most important part of Howard's advice was overlooked — the “capacity to get it right quickly when the moment arrives.” This capacity clearly requires a certain conceptual open-mindedness and institutional flexibility.

Let's consider Howard's advice one part at a time. Whether we like it or not, today's armed conflicts are the future wars of 2 decades ago; hence, it is difficult to argue that the processes underpinning U.S. doctrine kept it from “being too badly wrong.” RMA processes consisted of a series of workshops and war games that, while iterative, allowed for little analytical rigor. These processes, in turn, produced concepts — such as Rapid Decisive Operations, Effects Based Operations, and sundry theories related to long-range precision engagement — that were either irrelevant to the situations Coalition forces confronted in Iraq and Afghanistan, or only of limited utility. On the whole, RMA concepts assumed that speed and precision could replace mass, that human resistance was quantifiable, that the supply of information could meet the demand, and that the need to hedge against uncertainty could be replaced, or greatly reduced by information dominance. While speed, precision, and information dominance are desirable qualities, RMA doctrine placed too much faith in them, and overrated their value. Also, RMA thinking focused almost exclusively on a narrow part of the spectrum of conflict, despite institutional calls for full-spectrum dominance. It took the military's natural inclination toward battle and raised it to a higher and largely unnecessary level. And it did so without apology to the larger conduct of war.

The U.S. military has, thus, been reaping the doctrinal fruits of conceptual seeds sown since the early 1990s. Equally regrettable, it has suffered opportunity costs from concepts that might have been developed for other parts of the spectrum of conflict had more RMA resources been directed toward them.

As for the second part of Howard's advice — the capacity to get it right quickly — here again, the RMA comes up short. The campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan clearly required mental and material adjustments by forces in the field, as well as professional education and training institutions at home. In many cases the adjustments were significant. That the U.S. military managed to make them, and in the process remain a versatile instrument of Coalition policy, is a tribute to the quality of its leaders. Yet, while the adjustments seem to have been effective, they clearly could have been done at far less cost in both lives and treasure had RMA thinking been more open-minded. That is not in the nature of revolutions, however. Readers will recall that a conceptual revolution formed the heart of the accepted definitions of the RMA. Indeed, much of the dogmatic push for new terminology in the late 1990s is best described as an attempt to realize a conceptual revolution.

There are essentially two competing narratives that speak directly to the U.S. military's "capacity to get it right." Each concerns the doctrinal reorientation toward counterinsurgency and stability operations, which both views describe as a "revolution." The first narrative, typified by David Ucko's *The New Counterinsurgency Era* (2009), sees this revolution as a "top-down" affair; the second, represented by James Russell's *Innovation, Transformation, and War*, (2011), casts the revolution as a "bottom-up" one. While both views offer intriguing arguments, neither is entirely compelling because the shift toward COIN took place within the context of a larger revolution, the RMA. COIN was a rediscovery of previously accepted principles and, not a set of new ideas. It is more accurately seen as part of the counterrevolution that was gathering momentum in opposition to RMA thinking. This distinction is an important one — because without it one can lose sense of what a movement is for and what it is against. Nor was this counterrevolution truly top-down or bottom-up: plenty of good COIN principles and practices (as well as healthy criticism) came from officers in the middle ranks, as well as from civilian experts outside the military. (Civilian participation in the development of military concepts has increased substantially since the late 19th century, and is now widespread. That is both good and bad; but this issue need not concern us here.)

Fortunately, the RMA was brought up short. It was blunted by the stubborn efforts of military professionals and civilian scholars who maintained that its credo and fundamental principles were out of variance with recent experience as well as the broader history of warfare. Two further pieces of evidence for the success of these counter-revolutionary efforts is to be found in General James N. Mattis' 2008 memorandum shelving the notion of Effects Based Operations (EBO), and Brigadier General H.R. McMaster's role in developing the 2010 U.S. Army Operating Concept (TRADOC Pam 525-3-1). Among other things, both documents reasserted the need to hedge against uncertainty in strategic and operational thinking, something RMA advocates eschewed. If, indeed, *Fortune* does favor the bold, then it seems she also

smiles occasionally on the obstinate.

In sum, the answer to the two-part question as to whether we avoided “being too badly wrong” and whether we got “it right quickly” when we needed to — must be no for the first, and needs improvement for the second. We clearly could have done far better in both categories.

However, the importance of the discussion here goes beyond assessing how well we anticipated the future, or adjusting some of the emerging narratives. The counterrevolution has gained momentum; but it has not yet won. RMA principles and concepts are being repackaged to serve a new strategic approach being discussed under the name of “Offshore Balancing.” This approach lies somewhere between neo-isolationism and traditional balance of power, depending on the resources one wants to commit. It can be closer to the former than the latter, according to the domestic climate and the international stakes. It is a retreat from global and perhaps some regional dominance, while also seeking to deny them to others. It is not unlike a poker player waiting for the right moment to go “all-in,” rather than betting high on every hand.

What is important for landpower advocates is that long-range precision strike is being aggressively advertised as the ideal military means for this type of grand strategy. Just as in the RMA-era when standoff warfare was portrayed as a way to whack opponents while also avoiding messy surface entanglements or long-term social reconstruction projects, so its newer incarnation is being offered as an appealing strategic economy of force for an era of pending fiscal austerity. Landpower advocates can thus expect to see RMA principles emerge once again as the debate over American grand strategy heats up. They would, therefore, do well to analyze the types of military interventions U.S. forces have been involved in over the last 300 years (Congressional Research Service Report RL 32170 is a place to start), extract the mission sets for those interventions, and ensure there is a compelling narrative that articulates how (real and projected) ground capabilities are essential to them.

Alternatively, landpower advocates can wait to see whether the principles and doctrine that emerge from the strategic debates are not “too badly wrong” — but it might not be wise to try *Lady Fortune's* good will again.

Endnotes

[1]. Michael Howard, "Military Science in the Age of Peace," *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 119, March 1974, pp. 3-9, especially p. 4; emphasis added.

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