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**Is There a Western Way
of Warfare?**

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About the author

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Is There a Western Way of Warfare?

The theme of this article begs as many questions as there are answers. Is there a “way of warfare” distinct to a culture as historians as distinguished as Victor Davis Hanson and John Keegan suggest? Is there still a distinctly western one, or is there now merely an “American”? And what, if anything, is “post modern” about it?

The practice of war is a feature of human behaviour and so it is within this cultural matrix that it can be understood. The relationship between the cultural structure and the human agents that exist within it should be conceived not as a dualism but a duality, an inter-subjective relationship in which culture not only constrains but enables. And what western culture enables, argues Hanson, is the ability to fight war with a ruthlessness not demonstrated by any other culture. Hence the title of his most recent book, *Culture and Carnage*.

What is the western way of warfare?

The book was on the top of President Bush’s reading list in 2003. Hanson was originally introduced to Bush by Dick Cheney and since September 11 he has become the Bush Administration’s court historian. What Cheney and Bush read we must take seriously. And what they will learn from reading Hanson’s book is that America’s military superiority can be explained largely in cultural terms.¹

Hanson has traced the western way of war to the Greeks, claiming there are military affinities across time and space in western war making that are uncanny,

enduring and too often ignored.

One is the “decisive battle”, the overwhelming use of force at a decisive stage in a campaign. The willingness to risk all in one encounter has distinguished so much of western military history from the Greek Phalanx meeting the Persians in hand to hand combat to the German Blitzkrieg of the Second World War and more recently, the “Shock and Awe” campaign in Iraq.

The West, Hanson also claims, has managed to field armies with a high degree of primary group cohesion. The idea of the army as a *collective hero* is a uniquely western one, and can be traced to the writings of Plato in the *Laches* when writing about the nature of courage. Here too, we may be able to trace a linear progression from the Republican armies of Rome which could often field citizens for seventeen years at a time (the highest rate of mobilisation of any society in history) to the US Army whose primary group cohesion was the subject of a recent study by the US Army War College. One of the aspects of the campaign which so impressed the journalists serving in American units was the degree of attachment they found the soldiers in the field had to their comrades, their units, and their country.²

And then there is the use of technology as a force multiplier, especially since 1870 when western technological superiority became pronounced. The essence of technology, Heidegger tells us, is not

technological. The essence is how we see it and use it, and the purposes it serves. Both are conditioned by cultural factors. For Hanson “scientific method, unfettered research and capitalist production” which all first developed in the West explains why western societies have had such a decisive technological lead.³

So much for the western way of war as Hanson describes it. And to be fair to him we should add that he does not claim that the West has always been superior to other cultures, for it has often suffered defeat. What he is arguing is that its cultural preferences in fighting war have given it a greater *margin of error*.

There are, nevertheless, three possible objections to his approach.

Is strategy culture-bound?

The first is that it is too strongly determined by opposing culture-bound approaches. Doesn't strategy, for example, transcend both the time in which it is formulated and the culture from within which it emerges? Isn't the writing of Sun Tzu timeless? For the problem of identifying a western way of war is that it leads us to identify an “Eastern” one and in no time at all we are told that the “Eastern” is to be found in the writings of Sun Tzu.

Take Des Ball's depiction of an Asian-Pacific strategic culture in which he makes great play of the “psychology of the enemy” and evokes in the process *The Art of War*.⁴ Paul Bracken, for his part, believes that the classical Chinese writings – foremost among them, Sun Tzu's own work, explains the eastern preference for indirect warfare.⁵ But who is the principal strategic thinker in the United States today? Clausewitz, whose writings were so influential in the closing years of the Cold

War, or Sun Tzu?

Months before the Iraq War the US Army distributed 100,000 books to its forces in the Gulf, prominent among them *The Art of War*. The Second Gulf War commander, General Tommy Franks, could quote much of Sun Tzu by heart. Harlan Ulman, the military strategist who first conceived the term “Shock and Awe” in 1996, specifically cites Sun Tzu in his writing. The notion of attacking the enemy psychologically without firing a shot was elaborated in modern military thought by Colonel John Boyd, an American tactician whom Donald Rumsfeld calls “the most influential military thinker since Sun Tzu”.

If the nature of war never changes, as Clausewitz tells us, the character of war frequently does. That is why certain strategic thinkers become more or less timely according to the change in the character of war. In our post modern era Sun Tzu happens to say more to the US military than Clausewitz himself – the great theorist of modern war, and one who was central to American strategic thinking in the last forty years.

To quote Michael Handel there is no truth to “the prevailing perception ... that [Clausewitz and Sun Tzu] epitomise opposing, *culture bound* approaches to the study and conduct of war”.⁶ It is probably true that strategic principles are not culture specific. “The essential unity of all strategic experience in all periods of history”, writes Colin Gray (one of our leading strategists) stems from the fact that nothing vital to the nature or function of strategy changes, in sharp contrast to the character of war.⁷

More broadly we should not be surprised at Sun Tzu's importance in the post modern mind. For what he is writing about, at bottom is the application of *intelligence* to

the conduct of human affairs which is why he is as popular in the board room as he is on the battlefield. Tony Soprano has even told his therapist of his reliance on the *The Art of War*. And why not? He would have been an excellent consultant to the Mafia. Deception, surprise, secrecy; finding the weakness in an enemy's strength: these are the secrets of all successful *competitive* activity whether in business or in crime.

Orientalism

Secondly, the problem of identifying a "Western" way of war is what the late Edward Said called "Orientalism". Said argued that a large mass of writers had accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories concerning the Orient, its people, customs and "mentality". Drawing on theoretical insights borrowed from Foucault and Gramsci, Said concluded that European culture had gained in strength and identity by setting itself against the Orient as a sort of surrogate self – the Orient had helped to define the West as its contrasting idea and experience. This has led us in turn to stereotype the non-western mind, and to caricature non-western cultures, and thus, in the process, underestimate our potential enemies.

Let us take two examples. The Oriental mind, remarked John Foster Dulles "is more devious than the occidental".⁸ Nearly fifty years later John Keegan, writing immediately after 9/11, concluded:

A harsh, instantaneous attack may be the response most likely to impress the Islamic mind. Surprise has traditionally been a favoured Islamic military method. The use of overwhelming force is, however, alien to the Islamic military method ... Westerners fight face to face, in stand-up battle, and go on until one side or the other gives in. They choose the crudest weapons available and use them with

appalling violence, but observe what, to non-westerners may well seem curious rules of honour. Orientals, by contrast, shrink from pitched battle, which they often deride as a sort of game, preferring ambush, surprise, treachery and deceit as the best way to overcome an enemy ... Relentlessness as opposed to surprise and sensation, is the Western way of warfare. It is deeply injurious to the Oriental style and rhetoric of warmaking. Oriental warmakers, today's terrorists, expect ambushes and raids to destabilise their opponents, allowing them to win further victories by horrifying outrages at a later stage. Westerners have learned, by harsh experience, that the proper response is not to take fright but to marshal their forces, to launch massive retaliation and to persist relentlessly until the raiders have either been eliminated or so appalled by the violence inflicted that they relapse into inactivity.⁹

At the end of this extraordinary passage Keegan insisted he was not caricaturing Afghans, Arabs or Chechens as devious or underhand but, in effect, this is exactly what he was doing. Indeed, he went on to add that the war against terrorism belonged to a much larger spectrum of a far older conflict between settled, creative productive Westerners and predatory, destructive Orientals, and concluded by arguing that if he thought Huntington's Clash of Civilisations thesis had a defect it was that he did not discuss "the crucial ingredient of any Western-Islamic conflict, their quite distinctively different ways of war".

Indeed, Keegan's article reveals how we tend to caricature everyone and anyone whenever we talk of a mentality being different from our own, which is why we should ask first whether cultures have mentalities, any more than people? Or does appealing to a distinct mentality simply redescribe the phenomenon we find puzzling. Does it, in fact, explain anything at all?

Should we not seek explanations for why cultures fight as they do not in mentalities

but in styles of enquiry or the questions they ask? And the question non-western societies have asked increasingly since 1870 is how to defeat the West given its decisive advantage in technology.

Thus Paul Bracken and Hanson both account for Vietnamese tactics in the Vietnam War in terms of a cultural preference for indirect warfare. But given that the two occasions on which the Vietnamese engaged the United States in open battle – the Tet Offensive in 1968, and more crucially still the Eastern Offensive in 1972, they lost decisively (in large part because they were hopelessly out-gunned) it is arguable they employed a guerrilla strategy because it was the only effective response. In other words, guerrilla warfare is not necessarily a cultural preference but a political necessity. We tend to call it these days asymmetrical warfare.

As William Turley writes in his history, *The Second Indo-China War*, the communists later said that America's superiority in the air had destroyed almost all their industrial, transportation and communications facilities, especially those built since 1954. American B52 bombing wrecked three major cities and twelve of North Vietnam's provincial capitals and set back any hope of economic prosperity for between 10–15 years.¹⁰ In short, the Vietnamese were faced with the same conundrum in the 1960s that they had faced in the 13th Century with a Mongol invasion. And their response was the same. They were forced to abandon their cities and take to the hills, fighting a guerrilla war, one that was ultimately successful in driving out the Mongol invaders. Indeed, this is one of the first successful examples of guerrilla warfare in the pre modern world.

Let me go back to the question of mentalities. For the very term suggests that we are born with different abilities. We are not. What we have are different capabilities and culture, of course, determines how we use our abilities, or whether we are allowed to cultivate our abilities or not.¹¹ Different cultures also channel them in different directions. In terms of the nation state, for example, the West created a political unit that was able to mobilise more of its citizens more effectively than practically any other society in history.

But once we start talking in terms of capabilities we find that certain western societies including the strongest, the United States, are often not allowed to give free rein to their cultural preferences in the way they would like to fight. In our post-modern times western societies are more risk averse than ever. In our post-modern age western armies don't always (à la Keegan) fight "face to face", in stand-up battle. Often they fight in a highly disengaged "manner" dropping bombs in Kosovo from 35000 feet, or showing a marked reluctance to deploy ground units in Afghanistan in the early months of the campaign with the result that 400 Taliban tanks were allowed to escape from Kandahar and Al Qaeda from the Tora-Bora complex of caves.

In his own writings General Van Riper has drawn an important distinction between "distant punishment" and "physical domination" on the ground and the fundamental problem of the former, he adds, is that "it commits without resolving". In these circumstances the non-Western world has chosen to target the chief vulnerabilities of Western armies, not their instrumental but their existential underside. For as General Abizaid in a

briefing on the security situation in post war Iraq observed,

War is a struggle of wills. You look at the Arab press; they say, "We drove the Americans out of Beirut, we drove them out of Somalia ... we'll drive them out of Baghdad".¹²

Beirut and Mogadishu have become in the Arab world the symbols of a Great Power's defeat and withdrawal in the face of determined irregular force – whether using suicide bombings (Beirut 1983) or guerrilla warfare (Mogadishu 1993). What one US general calls "the terrorism Superbowl" in Iraq represents another chance to do to the Americans what the mujahadeen did a decade ago to the Soviet Union in Central Asia – to force out an occupying power after a long and bloody war. Whether they will succeed is not the point; the attempt is being made. A secret Department of Defense memo leaked to the press recognises that the war against terrorism is a clash of wills, and its author Donald Rumsfeld himself is not at all certain that the US will ultimately prevail.¹³

Thus in Iraq, it is all very well to say that attacks on American soldiers do not pose a *strategic threat* to the mission. It now seems likely that the attacks on electrical pylons, water mains, oil pipelines, on the United Nations headquarters and NGOs such as the Red Cross, not to mention the constant attacks on Coalition forces every day, constitute the first stage of an asymmetric strategy, a "war beyond war" that the Iraqis planned from the beginning.

And the US strategy of "going in light" has left American forces in particular vulnerable to this kind of strategy, which in itself is directed at America's will.

War, as Clausewitz constantly reminds us, is an interactive process and the very disparity of Western military power: its

ability to take apart a society in three weeks but not police it effectively afterwards, does not necessarily produce an end game, so much as a determination to play the game by different rules. Indeed, given that western peacekeeping enforcement capabilities are far less effective than its war fighting skills there is an attraction to continuing the war in a different form after a result has apparently been achieved on the conventional battlefield. Unfortunately, the US Army War College's decision to shut down its Peacekeeping Institute is not a good sign: it means that the Army still wants to avoid focusing on non combat missions.

Occidentalism

The third problem with defining a specific western way of war is more germane to my principal theme. It *essentialises* western culture. It's a perverse form not of orientalism, but Occidentalism. The truth is that there have been different political cultures within western society which have pursued different ways of war. We would expect nothing less given that the West was largely at war with itself for the last 500 years.

A recent example is Nazi Germany. Technologically, it was far more advanced than the United States. It was the first country, after all, to produce a jet aeroplane, a ballistic missile, the world's first cruise missile, and even a prototype intercontinental bomber which flew 26 miles east of New York in the last months of the War.

It is only because it was ultimately unsuccessful that allows Hanson and other essentialists to ignore it entirely. But its very defeat begs an important question, and encourages us to go back to our discussion of mentalities. Nazi Germany's

abilities were as great as those of its fellow western enemies, the United States and the United Kingdom. But its capabilities in the end were far less impressive because they were shaped by a peculiar political culture. It was an example of what historians call “reactionary modernism”, the belief that will power alone could transcend material conditions. The upshot was its first significant defeat, the Battle of Britain.

By that year the RAF was run by professionals who had spent years mastering their profession. The Luftwaffes’ High Command was run by a swash-buckling adventurer (Goering) and a Key Commander (Kesselring) who had been trained as an artillery man and who had spent only one third of the time in the air as his principal opponent (Dowding). By 1940, the British had also carefully prepared a system which applied modern technology, including radar, to air war. The Germans, by contrast, largely improvised their attack and did not fully exploit the technology at their disposal, including radar. In addition, the British worked as teams and played down individual effort whatever the public love affair with the idea of the lone Spitfire pilot. The Germans, by comparison, thought of themselves principally as individuals, as knights of the air.¹⁴

Cultures in conflict?

And what of today? Does Europe still do war or does it only subcontract to the United States? Even when it subcontracts (as the British did in Iraq) can we see an evolving cultural style which reflects a very different political culture? For Europe has become a transnational community whose political culture is very much centred on collective bargaining, consensus and compromise. War by committee was

the experience of the Kosovo War – and some expect that by the time its Rapid Deployment Force is up and running its mission will be largely determined by committee discussion.

In today’s Europe sovereignty is increasingly shared by the state with the private and voluntary sectors, hence the increasing reliance on NGOs. And NGO pressure has brought a change in military thinking. One example is the International Criminal Court to which European soldiers are now accountable for their actions in the field. Another is an increasing aversion to use weapon systems that NGOs find disenchanting. One example is Depleted Uranium (DU) shells (*vide* the moratorium on their use in Germany and Italy); another is the reluctance to use cluster bombs, now banned by every European country except Britain; a third is the use of landmines, now banned by all western countries except the United States. And in the near future NGO pressure is likely to force a change of thinking both with regard to present criteria for targeting and the present practice of targeting unarmed or unarmoured vehicles.

It is precisely because the Americans and Europeans share the same value system, (it is precisely because they are western, and feel instinctively that their values have universal appeal) that they find themselves increasingly in conflict. For what divides them is how they *instrumentalise* those values or project them, and war as an instrument of policy is becoming more divisive than ever.¹⁵ In the past there was no particular contradiction between different cultural preferences, especially the marked differences between the United States and the UK in the Second World War when it came to attritional warfare. British generals in contrast to their

American counterparts often insisted on crippling conservative margins of strength before they would attack. Two of the principal commanders, Wavell and Alexander were themselves products of the First World War experience that proved so traumatic for the British in particular because it was the first time they had ever engaged the main body of enemy troops. Wavell confessed that he was not really interested in war; Alexander claimed to hate it.¹⁶

The US army was different. Some of its generals such as Mark Clark did not consider that victory in battle was worth much unless it had been purchased at a high price in casualties. Others such as Bradley are now considered (contrary to their reputation at the time) to be attritionists who had very little sympathy for those who might find themselves at the cutting edge of battle.

In the end, this did not prevent the British and Americans from working collectively as in Normandy. After all, the political cultures of the two nations were not as different as they are today. They were able to forge a single strategic culture. In future, however, the cultural fault lines that run within the Western Alliance may bring into question, not so much whether there is still a “western” way of war, but whether the West, as a political community, can prosecute war at all. Europe, argue some American commentators, has produced the first political class in history – a meritocratic class of Eurocrats sitting in Brussels who derive neither status from war, nor profit. Indeed, if anything they tend to look upon war with some distaste.¹⁷

So what of the United States? Traditionally the United States has shown a marked cultural preference for *instrumentalising* war. And at this point we

should remind ourselves that war has two dimensions. One is *instrumental*: it is what states do, and why. It is the reasons they go to war and justify it. The other is *existential*: it is what soldiers do, the reasons that sustain them in battle, and which produce “primary group” solidarity.

Some western political cultures, notably Nazi Germany, have played up the existential element. Indeed, the historian Omer Bartov writing of the German army in Russia after its defeat in Stalingrad, argues that it departed from its Blitzkrieg strategy, with its emphasis on heavy armour and the rapid, relentless thrust. It chose to change the terms of engagement completely.

After 1943 it reverted to the infantry tactics of the Great War, digging in, fighting for every foot of ground, refusing to admit defeat. In its tactics it showed the same grim determination as the men who had defended the Hindenburg Line, perhaps, even more. For frequently they fought in conditions of physical exhaustion much grimmer than those its forbears had sustained. And unlike the German army on the Western Front, the Ostwehr did not collapse. It fought all the way to Berlin. On the Eastern Front war became a condition of life, a Darwinian struggle that offered only one choice: that of killing or being killed: the survival of the fittest. The Germans replaced material strength and rational planning which had served them so well in the Western Campaign of 1940 with an amoral, ruthless, fanatical view of war, with a nihilistic element at its centre: the celebration of death. In an attempt to overcome the hopelessness of the situation battle became a condition to be glorified as the real, supreme essence of being. It is this emphasis on the existential element to the neglect of the instrumental that leads

Bartov to talk of the “de-modernisation” of the German army on the Eastern Front.¹⁸

And that is the chief asymmetric challenge that faces western countries today. Our enemies will not face us on the conventional battlefield so much as off it where the existential dimension is now to be found. De-modernising the battlefield is the main way by which enemies – warriors, terrorists or others can attempt to counter our attempt to modernise the battlespace, our attempt to bring war into the post-modern age. Their success, like Germany’s may be questionable but we should remember the cost that the Germans inflicted on the Allies after the war had been clearly lost. The statistics tell a grim story. Before the July plot in July 1944 2.8 million German soldiers were killed; an additional 4.8 million died after it.

By contrast, the Americans have traditionally preferred the instrumental dimension of war, so much so that they have gone further than anyone else in attempting to instrumentalise it. The first attempt which came in the late 19th and 20th centuries was a reflection of a modernity peculiarly their own. The second (the present attempt) is an expression of their post-modern condition. Indeed, what makes war “post modern” is its increasing instrumental nature and the extent to which the existential nature of the warrior is being increasingly phased out.

US and war in the late modern age

That this development should have been witnessed first in the United States is not coincidental for the Americans have had a quite different relationship with technology than the West Europeans.

In 1860, for example, the US had outstripped every other country in the

development of making machines to do jobs previously undertaken by skilled workers. John Ellis in his book *The Social History of the Machine Gun* advances several reasons to account for this engineering pre-eminence. We should remember, here, Heidegger and his insistence that the essence of technology is not technological:

The manufacture and utilisation of equipment, tools and machines, the manufactured and used things themselves and the needs and ends that they serve or belong to are what technology is.

Ellis provides three reasons for America’s fascination with mechanisation: getting machines to replace skilled labour. The first was an acute shortage of manpower, hence high wages. To keep prices down, productivity had to increase. Machines and rationalised, centralised production units were introduced to multiply the productivity of the individual worker. Second, the US lacked a well-organised class of hand workers who would look at mechanisation as a threat to their way of life. One of the pioneers of mass production Eli Whitney explained its purpose was “to substitute incorrect, inefficient operations of machinery for the skill of the artist which is acquired only by long practice and experience”. Lacking such skills, American industrialists pioneered what they called “a new way not of making things but of making machines that make things”. Thirdly, the need to think in terms of mechanical possibilities as opposed to the limits of human skill threw up a new set of experiences concerned solely with designing better machines. Thus the first significant machine tool industry grew up in the United States. It was the machines, not men, that became specialised.¹⁹ The upshot was that it was the US which also

pioneered the use of the machine gun in the person of its inventors: Browning, Maxim and Gatling. All pioneered the mechanisation of death.

But US history also affords a second example of instrumental thinking: the instrumentalisation of the labourer – including the soldier on the industrialised battlefields of the twentieth century. Here too the US pioneered the serialisation of death.

For the United States was the first society in which men were geared to machines, in which the labour force was synchronised for the machine's more efficient use. American workers were expected to work with machine-like precision. In the first years of the twentieth century Frederick Winslow Taylor even developed a form of behavioural engineering that treated the body as a machine. In doing so Taylor objectified the human subject. He regarded it, not as somebody who speaks to another subjectively but as a concrete and de-subjectivised manifestation of laws revealed by natural abstraction.²⁰

Taylor forged his ideas and methods in the factories of the North East United States in the 1870s. Taylorism was the ideal of efficiency applied to production as a scientific method. Its dream was of workers and machines working in synchronised fashion at maximum speed. It was often said that in his quest for efficiency Taylor did not distinguish between men and machine but, in fact, he saw the new man in terms of social Darwinism, as further evidence of human evolution. In his treatise "Shop Management" (1903) he talked of the "New Man" in almost evolutionary terms. Men would have to adjust to higher rates of speed or perish. The fastest would be the fittest.

In reaching the final high rate of speed which shall be steadily maintained the broad facts should be realised that men must pass through several distinct phases, rising from one pace of efficiency to another.²¹

This Darwinian theory traced humanity's evolution from natural selection to machine selection. Man was geared to be efficient.

As one contemporary writer noted, the separation of the worker from the means of production was one of the historical conditions of modern capitalism but Taylorism did more: it dissociated the worker from the control of the work process. Taylor's ideal worker was an unthinking one with no intellectual autonomy, capable only of mechanically accomplishing standardized operations – in his own words an "ox" or "an intelligent gorilla" (a "chimpanzee", as Celine put it in his novel *Voyage au bout de la Nuit*).²²

Thirdly, the US brought science to bear on industrial warfare more than any other nation. Industrial society was one in which knowledge played a part wholly different from that which it played in pre-industrial societies. Modern science is inconceivable outside industrial society but modern industrial societies are equally inconceivable without modern science. What the US witnessed from the 1870s was the growth of what the distinguished economist John Kenneth Galbraith calls a "techno-structure": the application of science to production. What emerged towards the end of the twentieth century was a symbiotic relationship between the techno-structure (or scientific management) and a military that was increasingly imbued with a new management or corporate ethos. A symbiotic relationship existed between science, capital and the agencies of government based on a belief in

technological progress. What emerged was a *technicist* ideology promising a technological fix to every military problem.²³

The key example is Systems Analysis which emerged from the military operations research combined with developments in the field of systems engineering. And it was a computer-based systems analysis approach at that which steadily gained in influence inside the military. It was not fortuitous that the military was the first organisation to use computers. The computer was not a prerequisite of post-war society. Its enthusiastic, indeed uncritical embrace by the most “progressive” elements of US government, business and industry made it an essential resource to society’s survival in forms that the computer itself was instrumental in shaping.

The computer, write George and Meredith Friedman in *The Future of War*, has become the definitive mark of the American system. And what makes it definitive is its pragmatic character. For the computer doesn’t contemplate aesthetic, moral or ethical issues. Its programming language focuses on solving immediate and practical questions. To that extent, it expresses the American spirit, and defines a style of warfare that even America’s allies find culturally alienating.²⁴

What has happened is that the US has pioneered a form of warfare unique to itself. This time men are not being subordinated to machines as in the past, still less replaced by them. They are becoming integrated into their weapons systems.

US and war in the post-modern age

Today the United States has pioneered a different strategy of fighting war in an attempt to transform it. Too often we think of this in instrumental terms – such as

harnessing the technological advances of the information age to gain a qualitative advantage over the enemy. We can find this in the work of Rumsfeld’s advisers such as Stephen Camborne and Dov Zakheim. But as Victor Davis Hanson is the first to remind us, as he did shortly after the end of major combat operations in Iraq, war has an existential side too:

The lethality of the military is not just organisation or a dividend of high technology. Moral and group cohesion explain more still. The general critique of the 1990s was that we had raised a generation with peroxide hair and tongue rings, general illiterates who lounged at malls, occasionally muttering “like” and “you know” in Sean Penn or Valley Girl cadences. But somehow the military has married the familiarity and dynamism of crass popular culture to nineteenth century notions of heroism, self-sacrifice, patriotism, and audacity.²⁵

The question is: is this true? For in three respects the existential dimension – the attachment to those “nineteenth century values” that Hanson so much admires is being increasingly instrumentalised away.

Agency

In terms of agency: the individual responsibility a soldier feels for his actions in the field, agency is being instrumentalised by technology: in part, to make the soldier act in a more linear fashion. I refer to a much acclaimed book on the First Gulf War, an account by Thomas Swofford, a lance corporal in the US Marine Corps. *Jarhead* is a highly flawed book, nonetheless it makes some telling points. Swofford was a member of a scout/sniper platoon and therefore more likely than most to have a sense of agency: to actually see the enemy he targeted. But his alienated attitude from his profession is caught in his description of what it now means to be a sniper and a front line

soldier. "Systems management: we might just as well call marksmanship by this name – anyone can be taught a system".²⁶

Unfortunately, Swofford misses the point. Systems management is precisely what has been happening in war since the early 1940s when Norbert Wiener – the father of cybernetics – could be found arguing that the bomber pilots and anti-aircraft units trying to bring them down were symbiotically linked into one "servo-mechanism".

Today soldiers are part of the network centric warfare computerised battlespace of the 21st Century. And in an attempt to make linearity the determining factor in that battlespace soldiers are being *programmed* as never before.

Agency is becoming dependent on the simulation of missions in which soldiers (and pilots) now engage before battle. The problem arises when the simulation programs don't cover every eventuality. This is what the US army discovered in 1993 in a famous fire fight in Mogadishu described so vividly by Mark Bowden in his book *Black Hawk Down*, depicted more vividly still in Ridley Scott's film of the same name. Bowden interviewed all the survivors of the firefight and found it remarkable that almost without exception they used the same terms. The first was "it was just like a movie": a comment to be expected from a generation of soldiers brought up on simulation, except this time the soldiers were at risk of their lives. Secondly, they claimed they had been "betrayed", they had not been trained for the situation in which they found themselves. And thirdly, they all commented that the situation itself seemed "unreal".²⁷ The episode raises a disturbing question: what happens when the reality on the ground no longer conforms to the

reality of the screen.

Of course, this is where education comes in: the adaptability and flexibility which were a hallmark of the American war effort in both Gulf Wars. The United States now fields the most educated army in history. But the increased computerisation and speed of war will increasingly decrease the soldier's sense of agency in the future. And programming will become increasingly attractive to the higher command.

Clausewitz warned of this nearly two centuries ago when he predicted that one day military judgment would be replaced with theory. One day "war plans would be stamped from a kind of truth machine". Today's truth machine is the computer, which the Friedmans call the quintessential symbol of the American way of warfare largely because of its pragmatic character. Unfortunately, agency requires the very moral and metaphysical aspects of war that have always determined a soldier's attitude both to war and his own profession.

Subjectivity

The dilemma of the post-modern warrior in subjective terms is also graphically highlighted in *Jarhead*. Swofford's book has pretensions to serious writing. As a portrait of one man's war *Jarhead* is hard to fault and will be hard to better. As an insight into post-modern war it has its limits. The author seems determined to nail down what war has become, and he may do so yet, perhaps in the novel he is writing. But if he doesn't do so in this book it is because he seems once again unaware of how long the US has been in the business of instrumentalising war – the very phenomenon he finds most alienating.

Swofford attended the Iowa Writers

Workshop when he left the 7th Marines and it shows from the opening epigram from Ezra Pound: "But if you want to go on fighting / go take some young chap, flaccid and a half-wit / to give him a bit of courage and some brains" (Canto LXXII). The Cantos are not, one imagines, mainstream reading in the Marine Corps but they certainly repay a visit. For they were themselves included in the history they described. Locked in a cage in Pisa for three weeks for collaborating with the fascists, Pound had his first encounter with the American army when he found himself spending his days gazing through the legs of the soldier who was guarding him: "A sinistra La Torre / Seen through a pair of breeches" (Canto LXXIV). Like Pound, Swofford found himself in a defining moment in his life – his first combat experience, the Persian Gulf War of 1991. Like Pound he found himself inescapably involved in the events of his own lifetime.

What we find in this book is an honest portrayal of the brutalities of life in boot camp and the field which have not changed much even in an age of network centric war: the incredible boredom which most soldiers confront, the greatest enemy of all; the casual sexual encounters, nearly all of them undermining of self-esteem. But the worst moment of all, he tells us, was "the moment of madness" in which he joined the Marines. Like his friends, he writes, he too was "ruined early by the Marine Corps" and it is to the Corps that we can attribute what he reports as the "loneliness and poverty of spirit" they encountered.²⁸ Like most of the accounts of the Vietnam War there are no real villains in this book, only villainous circumstances, but if there's an enemy it is the Corps, one of the Special Forces whose members can still expect to encounter the enemy face to face in battle.

If the Corps is the villain it is because even here the existential element of war has been squeezed out. "Are our soldiers warriors?" Donald Rumsfeld was asked on the first day of the war in Afghanistan. Clearly, Swofford sees himself as a warrior. Indeed, there are many references to the word in the book. "Before me my father had gone to war and also my grandfather and because of my unalterable genetic stain I was linked to the warrior line". Warriors, he reminds us, don't celebrate the death and destruction of war. The warrior celebrates, instead, the fact of having survived.

This has been true of every warrior since *The Iliad*, a book that Swofford tells us he read in the field. Achilles' frenzy to kill, Harold Bloom reminds us, is "a dialectical process against mortality itself".²⁹ What we find in Achilles is a zest for life, not a willingness to throw it away in battle. Even in Hades, when Odysseus visits him on his journey home to Ithaca, he finds Achilles still resentful of death, even the early death he chose for its fame instead of the obscure but long life he might have enjoyed had he never joined the expedition to Troy. But there is another kind of dialectics in war. "Deep under the areas where the dialectics of war are meaningful", wrote that veteran warrior of the last century Ernst Junger, "the German met with a superior force, he encountered himself".³⁰ Not all soldiers "find" themselves in war, fewer make sense of it in their writing. Swofford clearly does not find war a dialectical process and what he discovered about himself he doesn't much like. In that sense the First Gulf War can be said to have scarred him. But one suspects that what disenchanted himself most was how little the life of the contemporary soldier now conforms to the Homeric ideal.

In the end, this is not the war that he knows from *The Iliad*, nor from the tales of his grandfather who fought in the Second World War. And indeed, there is very little that is Homeric about the modern soldier issued with atropine and oxine injectors and PB pill packs, all intended to reduce the likelihood of dying from the nerve agents they might be attacked with in battle. But that's the point, war has changed. The warrior is now integrated into his weapon system as never before. The change came once war moved into the third dimension. The total air superiority which the US Air Force has achieved since the late 1970s has made war into a routine. For the pilot war itself is largely cerebral, not visceral. In the Gulf War US bomber pilots flew missions with heavy-metal music pumping through their headsets with graphic-simulated displays to help guide their bombs to their targets.

In Afghanistan, Bowden tells us, the pilots were able to get home in time to catch the latest episodes of "Friends". In his report from the front Bowden recalls the following episode

Among the squadron's recorded collection of audio-video "greatest hits" was the artful destruction of the purported Taliban building in Kandahar. Last summer I reviewed the event with a group of crew members at their base in Idaho. On the monitor we even watched a negative black-and-white thermal image of a building at the centre of the city. Vehicles and people were moving on the street out front. Abruptly four black darts flashed into the picture from the upper-left handside, quickly as an eye blink, and the screen was filled with a black splash.

On the recording the gleeful voice of a wizzo named Buzzer shouted "Die like the dogs that you are" ... On the screen in the form of tiny black dots people could be seen emerging from the flaming building, fleeing down the street.³¹

Distance is in danger of being transformed into disassociation and the form

disassociation takes is technological (or instrumental) in two critical respects. The first is the mental disassociation between the cruise missile operator and his target: pilots or naval operators are increasingly cut off from the consequences of their acts. Secondly, reality is increasingly mediated by the computer which does the seeing for us. As a result today's pilots are increasingly cut off from responsibility for their actions.

The concept of a warrior culture, even for the Special Forces is most problematic of all. Observing a decline in the warrior ethic, the US Marine Corps decided to implement compulsory martial arts training some years ago with equal emphasis on the physical and mental aspects. And its solution? To borrow from the *non-western way of warfare*. In today's Corps – in between chokeholds – the instructors tell stories of Medal of Honor winners and of Zulu and Apache warriors. The Marines are continuously reminded of their "American Samurai heritage" by being required to wear their *obi* (martial arts belt) underneath their camouflage uniforms. Other Special Forces such as the Army Rangers and Navy SEALs are the only other US troops who currently receive martial arts training.

But what American society now demands are warriors suited to the network-centric warfare in which we now engage, those at home in the computerised battlespace of the twenty-first century. In Afghanistan the Special Forces were used as laser finders to help make bombing from the air more precise. Units like the Rangers are still needed but they are what are these days called "niche warriors" who serve the computer operators or digitalised troops who actually win our wars.

And then we can look forward to the

genetic profiling of soldiers in the future. In Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game* the government has taken to breeding military geniuses and then training them in the art of war. The book is now part of the syllabus on the Marine Corp's leadership course at Quantico. No wonder that a few years ago two Marines took the government to court under the Fourth Amendment right to privacy refusing to take part in an ambitious programme by the Pentagon to collect several million DNA samples from their military personnel. Their objection: the fear that genetic samples would be used for biomedical research to identify the best military genes or to weed out soldiers with the worst (i.e. those susceptible to stress). Is this the shape of things to come?

Clearly, this is not Swofford's idea of war but it is an insight into the future. In *Jarhead*, we say goodbye to the hope of a civilised intelligence that war might be different from what it is. Rather than the *Cantos*, Swofford might have chosen as an epigram for his book some lines from one of the Second World War poets Keith Douglas who lamented the end of the warrior ideal hero as early as 1943: "how then can I live among this gentle / obsolescent breed of heroes and not weep / Unicorns almost ...". Like Swofford he was lamenting a lost world – but it is his world, not ours.

Inter-subjectivity

As for the intersubjective element of war here too the Americans have taken war into a new dimension by increasingly criminalizing their opponents. Traditionally, soldiers have had their identity determined not only by the respect in which they are held by their own men but also by their enemies. Nietzsche

tellingly remarks in one of his books "you must have enemies whom you respect, not enemies whom you despise, since your enemies" success can be your success also".³² It is precisely because the warrior is an existential being that he does not always measure war instrumentally: by the state's purpose in sending him into battle. No *personal* shame is involved when defeated by an enemy one respects. To be defeated by an enemy one despises is quite another matter.

But do the Americans today have much respect for the ragbag of opponents they now face from Afghanistan to Somalia? Our enemies, writes Ralph Peters, an influential writer in the American military, are warriors "not soldiers, precisely because they do not conform to the standards and conventions that the western military are expected to adhere to".³³ Western soldiers, we are told, are instrumental. Today's warriors are probably the Mujahdeen in Afghanistan who in 1988 found themselves in a country without a cause and immediately looked for the next conflict, finding it (with CIA support) in Bosnia. They are warriors precisely because for them war is a condition of life. And are the members of Al Queda warriors or criminals? It's becoming very confusing. As the Commander of the Combined Joint Task Force 180 remarked before going into Afghanistan: "I don't have a particular name affixed to what I am going up against."³⁴

My point is not whether they are indeed criminals or not, or whether many (if not the great majority) of today's non-western soldiers are indeed, thugs, bandits or Mafiosi figures rather than the warriors the British fought in Afghanistan in the 1870s or in Somalia in the 1920s whom

they tended to extol for their martial virtues. Perhaps, the British recognised them as “warriors” and even sang their praises because culturally they were not all that far removed from them: in terms of the life expectancy of their own soldiers and even the basic technology they used. In the nineteenth century the average British soldier in the ranks had what we would consider today a Third World quality of life, even though he came from a First World country, one with the highest per capita income in the world.

My point is that the US seems determined to make war into a policing operation, quite literally so in Panama when American forces arrived in 1989 with a warrant issued by the US Justice Department for the arrest of General Noriega, or Mogadishu in 1993 when they tried to expedite a warrant for the arrest of General Aideed, issued by the UN Security Council.

The problems with instrumentalising war in this way are many. One is that criminals are meant to be apprehended and taken back for trial; enemies in war are usually eliminated or neutralised. Secondly, in policing collateral damage is to be avoided at all costs; indeed the families of innocent citizens killed in a police fight with criminals are able to prosecute the police in the courts. In war collateral damage is an inevitable aspect, against which there is little legal come-back even in international law. And in policing-operations the police are required to use the minimum amount of force with light weapons. In war, if one is to be true to one’s own western/ Clausewitzian tradition, maximum force should be used with what Keegan calls “the crudest weapons available”.

Conclusion

Of course, culture is not deterministic. It doesn’t cause anything. It is merely the context within which social and economic forces interact. It is the context in which society asks itself questions about its future. Culture, in short, influences the way we frame questions but it doesn’t always provide the answers. And cultures are not self-contained. They differ in a way which is much more like that of climactic regions or eco-systems than it is like the frontiers between nation states drawn with a pen on the map. Cultures are never coherent. They are never closed to the outside. They are never uncontested from within, or, from without. Think not only of the differences which divide political communities but of the incoherences and contests within them. Thus the transnational progressivist forces that we identify with Europe can be found within the United States. To identify a “Western” community is to be able to transcend one’s own narrow political culture.

Yet if there is a distinctive “western” way of war it is predominantly American because it is no longer what it was in the 1970s when the military historian Russell Weigley called it “a distillation of European strategic thought”.³⁵ The Europeans are intent on normalising war; the Americans in instrumentalising it. One sees war as the continuation of international law by other means; the other as the continuation of politics. One is pursuing a post Clausewitzian style of war; the other is seeking to keep faith with Clausewitz whose work the US Army rediscovered in the aftermath of Vietnam.

Of the two western styles of war the American is, of course, far more

significant. For in instrumentalising it more than ever the US seems to be intent on transforming not only its character but its nature. It is an attempt that its allies (western and non western alike) can only watch as bystanders, not participants. Its enemies will determine whether it will succeed or not.

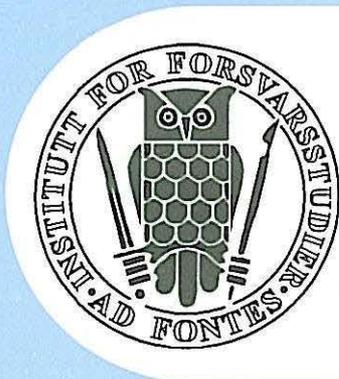
Notes

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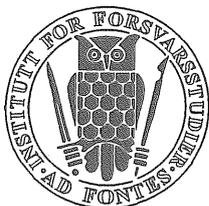
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