Elegant Irrelevance: Fourth Generation Warfare

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The Irish poet William Butler Yeats once created an entire system of history, based upon 2000-year cycles, which he termed "gyres." Much of his haunting, resonant poetry was based on this cosmology, which purported to link the burning of Troy, the birth of Christ, and the fast-approaching end of the 20th century together in a grand, unified worldview. His wife Georgie's "automatic writing," or mediumistic contacts, were the catalyst of this work. Later it became apparent she had faked the writing, thus destroying the basis for Yeats' historical theories. Only the beautiful poetry remained.

This tale has a powerful cautionary moral for the professional soldier. Today we face a disordered, multipolar world. Our old dependable enemy, the Soviet Union, is gone. Theories abound that attempt to explain what brought us to this pass, and what we must do in order to survive. Many of these prescriptive ideas deserve our closest scrutiny. Along with appreciating the elegance of their construction and their soaring rhetoric, we must examine the underpinnings of these theories that so eagerly define our collective future.[1] This article examines the theory of fourth generation warfare through the lens of its method, the supporting facts, and its relevance. When held under the bright light of analysis, this theory appears untenable. Its methods are unclear, its facts contentious and open to widely varying interpretations, and its relevance questionable. It is a remarkable attempt to explain our world, but it misses the mark.

Fourth Generation Warfare Theory

Fourth generation warfare theory models the development of warfare from 1648 to the present through the description of successive generations, or eras, of warfare.[2] Then, treating the past as prologue, it posits a prescriptive vision of the future. The central tenet of maturing fourth generation warfare theory is a non-trinitarian, or post-Clausewitzian, view of the world.[3] Fourth

generation theorists divide the lineage of warfare into distinct stages, or "dialectic qualitatives."[4] The first generation of modern warfare "reflects tactics of the smoothbore musket, the tactics of line and column."[5] The year of the Peace of Westphalia, 1648, was chosen as the beginning of this period.[6] That year marked the end of the Thirty Years War, a particularly bitter racial, social, and religious struggle that raged across the face of what is now Germany.[7] It also marked the beginning of the ascendancy of nation-states in European affairs, replacing feudal and communal organizations as war-making entities.

Second generation warfare emerged in the middle of the 19th century. The technologies of steam, metallurgy, and mass production drove the birth of this stage of war.[8] It was warfare based on fire and movement at the tactical level. Fire—particularly that of artillery—became dominant on the battlefield. While linear formations still constrained tactics, the development and institutionalization of the concept of operational art gave depth to the battlefield. This concept accommodated the deep penetrations, combinations, and "cauldron battles" of the Austro-Prussian and Franco-Prussian wars, and the two great European wars of the 20th century. But despite the attraction of movement and the concept of penetration, attrition—based on fire—remained the principal characteristic of the battlefield.[9]

The third generation was born of necessity; the Germans invented it in an attempt to restore operational freedom to the static western front in 1918. Later known as the blitzkrieg, the third generation of warfare emphasized qualitative maneuver over quantitative fire. It sought to achieve the annihilation of the enemy by short-circuiting his decisionmaking, inducing paralysis.[10] According to the fourth generationists, third generation warfare—the German model—has not been mastered by either the US Army or Marine Corps.[11] It is fourth generation creed that despite attempts to adopt third generation techniques, American forces remain anchored in a sea of turgid, linear tactics with its predilection for continuous fronts, overwhelming firepower, and mechanistic, lockstep execution.[12]

The common characteristic of the first three generations of warfare is their existence within the trinitarian universe of Clausewitz. This phrase,

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popularized by Professor Martin van Creveld in his *Transformation of War*, defines the "holy trinity" of Western war-making as the interaction of the state, the people, and the army. Fourth generationists argue that the trinitarian universe is ending. Nation-states are stars losing their warmth, and with it primacy as the entities that control the use of war. In their place, a broad variety of nongovernmental entities are fighting wars for their own purposes. Tribal, racial, and even familial organizations now dispense violence once reserved for nation-states. Sovereignty, expressed geographically, is no longer a useful index of war-making.[13] The fourth-generation world is a return to a pre-modern (i.e. pre-1648) politico-military environment.

The first three generations of warfare were each born primarily of the congruence of technological advancement and battlefield application, and secondarily of political necessity. The fourth generation reverses this relationship. Its adherents assert that this stage is born principally of political utility; technology may become virtually irrelevant. This analysis opines that military forces effective in the second and third generations will be largely useless in the fourth.[14] Rhetorical examples which seem persuasive, at least at first blush, are drawn from current hot spots.[15] How does an M1A1 tank contribute to operations against the Medellin cartel? How do F-14s booming overhead feed starving Somalis? For the fourth generationists, the picture fades to black in the long run. Eventually, the decay of the nation-state erodes the technological structure that supports the high-tech weaponry we use today, and the F-14s cease to fly.

Method

Fourth generation theorists lean on the "qualitative dialectic" in the creation of their system.[16] The use of this term is important, and unless its users want to be accused of jargonism and obfuscation, they must define its utility with some precision. They have not done this. The dialectic assumes that progress derives from the clash of opposites—the thesis and antithesis. The meld of their opposition yields the synthesis, a result embodying parts of both prior lines of argument. From this synthesis, a new tension is born, perpetuating yet another dialectic antagonism. Fundamental to the dialectic is the assumption of continual friction. Marx and Engels appropriated a variation of this method for communist theory, which sought to provide a comprehensive historical model integrating economic and political systems.

Is fourth generation theory a dialectic at all, or rather an attempt to over-analyze an essentially mercurial process which, to paraphrase Ardant du Picq, must always begin within the human heart? Do changes in warfare spring inevitably from a clash of opposites, yielding new techniques which themselves fall victim to yet more modern methods? Or is the reality of warfare more ambiguous—shades of gray instead of black and white? It may well be that irrationality, imitativeness, covetousness, secrecy, and stupidity play a far

greater role in the development of warfare than any distinguishable historical principle. Anyone who doubts this should consider why the Soviets built large-deck aircraft carriers throughout the decade of the 1980s, despite a ruinous economic situation. There was certainly no compelling naval logic to their work. It might be explained by older, simpler forces: the press of naval fashion.

Fourth generation theory offers totality—a rational, secular religion that explains all with certitude under its broad conceptual umbrella. Despite this, and despite the use of terms like "qualitative dialectic," there is no clear trace of the dialectic in the method of the fourth generationists. When examined against the facts, their reasoning appears more idiosyncratic than dialectic. Like historical Marxism, fourth generation theory has a strong lure. Like Marxism, it is too clumsy, too unsupple, to explain the rich diversity of our world, and must fall back on faith. Men of good will can examine history through their theories and reach greatly differing conclusions. For these reasons, fourth generation theory remains more mantra than method.

The Historical Facts

A review of the factual basis for the partition of modern warfare into distinct, successive generations causes as much argument as consensus. A broad sample of reasonable counterarguments within each historical period should be enough to make the point that there are many equally valid competing perspectives on the development of warfare, many of which tend to undercut fourth generation theories and support a more pragmatic, less fulsome interpretation of history.

The selection of 1648 as the dawn of modern warfare seems needlessly arbitrary. It can be argued that the Hundred Years War was the beginning of the modern, or Clausewitzian, era in European politico-military affairs. Stemming from dynastic differences between England and France, the episodic campaigning between 1337 and 1453 revolutionized both societies and their armies. The feudal principle was overcome by the nascent spark of military professionalism, and aristocratic dominance gave way to democratization, expressed organizationally and tactically. These changes were written in blood at Crécy (1346), Poitiers (1356), and Agincourt (1415). In these three battles the English bowman unseated the horsemen of France forever, and initiated the rise of mass modern armies.[17] This struggle and its epochal importance is ignored by fourth generationists.

Two hundred years later, the "Lion of the North," Gustavus Adolphus, perfected Maurice of Nassau's concepts of the linear formation, tight discipline, and rigid fire control at the tactical level, and completed the military revolution in Europe. He did this by applying tactical innovations that enabled him to win decisive battles against the Habsburgs, allowing a campaign at the operational level of war—the manipulation of battles, logis-

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tics, and time toward a concerted end.[18] The sophisticated campaigns of the Hundred Years War and subsequently those of Gustavus were fought not only for personal gain, but also to obtain security for Britain and Sweden, respectively. From these two wars, "the road lay open, broad and straight, to the abyss of the twentieth century."[19] The now familiar trinity of people, state, and army, which began to coalesce in the Hundred Years War, had been completed by the elements of modern warfare.

This notion upsets the dialectic applecart of the fourth generationists, who must frame pre-1648 warfare as largely groups of armed thugs and mercenary knights grappling blindly, without purpose or order beyond personal aggrandizement or their next meal. If pre-1648 warfare was not as completely disorganized and "pre-modern" as as fourth generation thinkers would have us accept, then the circular elegance of their argument has been damaged, if not destroyed. They say that we are now evolving from modernity (third generation warfare) to post-modernity (fourth generation warfare), which is in actuality—so they argue—pre-modern. A bit of dizzying ellipticism!

Any theory of warfare that does not address the influence of the French Revolution, Republican France, and the First Empire stands in grave danger of being accused of historical myopia.[20] A reasonable analysis might argue that in Napoleon, and particularly in his 1805 Ulm Campaign, the seeds of modern maneuver theory were sown,[21] just as the French Republic's *levée en masse* signaled the dawn of complete mobilizations of peoples and economies. Codification of these techniques would await the musings of Moltke the Elder and the institutional genius of the great German General Staff, itself the product of Napoleonic warfare. The relevance is that the dawn of blitzkrieg can be traced as easily to 1805 as to 1918. Merely because it may be due to the nonquantifiable genius of an individual and not the orderly and predictable flow of historical forces does not remove its singular importance. These developments are fundamental to warfare today, but they do not fit the descriptions and prescriptions of the fourth generationists.

Similarly, to assert that the US Army and Marine Corps of today are stuck in a French-model linear-front rut may spark controversy, but it will not stand scrutiny. While the Army's "active defense" of the 1970s may have borne a certain resemblance to French *colmater* tactics that proved so disastrous at

Sedan in 1940, the 1980s doctrine of AirLand Battle and, subsequently, AirLand Operations, is neither linear nor based principally on overwhelming firepower.[22]

Strangely, for a theory that deals so heavily in the importance of ideas, the importance of the early development of the operational art and maneuver are insufficiently addressed by fourth generation advocates.[23] Perhaps their theory does not accommodate operations because the development of operational techniques—arguably with Napoleon—unhinges the linear flow of their argument. For whatever reason, fourth generation theory is unrelentingly tactical in its focus. This hobbles the theory's ability to explain the complete experience of warfare.

An alternative reading of history might show that certain general trends in the development of warfare are affected more directly by society, personality, and locality than any theory—however complex—can assimilate. Gustavus Adolphus, Frederick the Great, Scharnhorst, and Napoleon resist modeling. Fourth generation theory is interesting historically, but it remains inadequate as a model, because the theory is insufficiently proven by the historical evidence.

The Relevance of Fourth Generation Theory

While there are many areas in the world today that could serve as the basis for an examination of these concepts, it is de rigueur for theoreticians to hold up the West Bank uprisings and the ongoing war in Bosnia as examples of the coming face of warfare.[24] Fourth generationists posit that these two struggles clearly indicate the decline of the nation-state and the rise of nongovernmental organizations as war-making bodies.[25] The immediate corollary is that existing second and third generation armies will be ineffectual in the face of these elements. But is this so?

Consider The West Bank

On the West Bank, a classic trinitarian army, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), has since December 1987 confronted Palestinian terrorists/freedom fighters who refuse to behave in a manner that will allow the IDF to come to grips with them. The Palestinians do not operate from geographic areas, and they present no "high pay-off targets" that can be illuminated and destroyed by traditional weapons of war.[26] The rebellion is manifested in economic and cultural terms more than military, or so the argument runs, and the fourth generation principle applies: third generation forces cannot act effectively in this new dimension.[27]

The *intifada*, the Palestinian uprising, may be non-trinitarian in the short term, since the rebels now lack all the elements of Clausewitzian warfare, but it is undoubtedly the rebels' goal to create their own trinitarian state, with an army and a state apparatus supported by the people.[28] They don't

use tanks, artillery, and aircraft principally because they can't get them. In the past—Gaza in 1967 and South Lebanon in 1982—Palestinian forces used them eagerly, if ineptly. There are certain obvious parallels with the American Revolution. The rebels in North America sprang from non-trinitarianism, but eventually developed the machinery of a trinitarian state.

There is no evidence that the Palestinians seek anything less than the establishment of a classical state of their own on the West Bank. This, surely, is a Clausewitzian goal. It is also not a new phenomenon; to argue that these activities represent the cusp of a new, emerging threat that will require a new generation of warfighting theory to tackle is to reject history. Peoples in rebellion seek either to seize control of state machinery or to create their own. Even the enigmatic Sendero Luminoso of Peru apparently dream of a Marxist state perched along the Andean Ridge.

It is true that the *intifada* drags on, and also that the IDF has been unable to crush the protesters in a classical sense. But it is also true that the Israelis are quietly applying innovative and far-reaching solutions from a trinitarian base that are having a significant effect on the rebels. These measures include the slow cultural counteroffensive of aggressive settlement of the West Bank by Jews, many of them fleeing from the former Soviet Union. Covert activities have targeted the most visible and vocal opponents within the Palestinian movement, silencing them.[29]

While success may yet elude the IDF, a rough equilibrium has emerged on the West Bank, and this always favors the status quo. Here, trinitarian confronts non-trinitarian, and it is presumptive to declare one side the victor before the rebellion has run its course.[30] One thing seems certain: non-trinitarian entities can be fought effectively by trinitarian states.[31] Success for a trinitarian society confronted with a "people's war" may require a redefinition of victory. The Israelis seem to define success as a certain rough stability with a minimum of public "scarring."[32]

Consider Bosnia

Between June 1991 and spring 1992, the patched-together federalism of Josip Broz Tito's Yugoslavia disintegrated. Several smaller states, among them Bosnia, Slovenia, and Serbia, emerged to fill the void. All three states were governed initially by popularly elected political leaders.[33] All were intent on the creation of classic states, or the expansion of an existing one (Serbia), in the truest sense of the word: areas of sovereignty expressed in geographic terms. The "ethnic cleansing" by the Serbs is nothing more than a horrific attempt to create and sustain geographic possession by genocidal measures. These are certainly mainstream nation-state premises, applied maximally.[34]

If so, the current struggles there are less representative of a new phenomenon than they are of Habsburg attacks on the rotting Ottoman Empire in the 19th century and the subsequent attempts of the Balkan League to reduce

Turkish suzerainty in 1912-13.[35] This is merely the continuation of an age-old struggle for Balkan hegemony, a struggle that was choked in World War I and further stifled for decades by the uneasy federalism of Tito and Yugoslavia.[36]

There are certainly factions fighting there without respect for territorial sovereignty, and for lesser, personal motives under the rubric of a broader political purpose. Their methods are those of not only the conventional soldier, but also those of the terrorist. These auxiliaries—not unlike the "special action" commandoes who followed German armies in Russia—can accomplish their attacks and genocidal measures only under the protection of conventional forces, which have been and remain the operational centers of gravity and the truly decisive factors in this conflict. The ultimate aim of all parties remains the establishment or enlargement of various states—states complete in the Clausewitzian sense. There may be more states than before, and some may be larger than they were, but this is of itself less an aberration than the long and suffocating stasis imposed by two world wars and Tito. It is possible that what remains from Yugoslavia merely reaffirms the potent power of nationalism, particularly when harnessed to the ancient and dependable engines of ethnicity.[37]

Trinitarian forces may be able to intervene effectively, if required. The problems of intervention are less "new age" than the constant factors of time, space, and logistics. The defeat or suppression of states such as Serbia does not require a symmetrical response; we do not have to adopt methods and organization similar to their own in order to combat them effectively. There are certain virtues inherent to asymmetry that should not be discarded without serious consideration. Our ability to even entertain the possibility of intervention is linked to our vast superiority in mobility (both strategic and tactical), command and control, and advanced weapons.[38] Applied intelligently, these factors have an awesome capability to influence fourth generation struggles or leaders, as Muammar Gaddafi can attest.

There are identifiable, addressable pressure points in virtually any society—or sub-society—which we can reach and target.[39] If these entities are waging fourth generation warfare, it will not require a fourth generation response by the West to intervene. To use the terms of the fourth generationists, third generation responses will be more than adequate if targeted against the proper centers of gravity and employed as part of a larger application of all the elements of our power: military, economic, and diplomatic.

Summary

We must examine carefully these fast-emerging concepts of war and weigh them maturely. If we let them stand without serious dialogue, they may take us places we need not go. As a theory, fourth generation warfare is vulnerable to criticism in every area examined. The method of fourth generation thinkers remains cloaked in jargon, and their reasoning is not adequately

defined or illustrated. Analysis of their process yields little evidence of their self-described dialectic. What is found is interesting, but it is incomplete and unsubstantiated. The historical evidence presented is too selective. There is an abundance of additional evidence which flatly contradicts many of their assertions. Lastly, fourth generation theory seems to be failing some of its tests in the world today. The arguments of the fourth generationists ultimately are unconvincing. They become more polemic than paradigmatic, beckoning true believers but leaving non-enthusiasts cold.

Fourth generation theory assumes that societies and their armies have high degrees of monolithic homogeneity that in turn permit the comprehensible application of broad, sweeping models.[40] Unfortunately, Western societies are more splintered and diverse than monolithic. And this splintering is not a recent historical process, but rather the natural by-product of an energetic, multifaceted society which resists the application of arbitrary historical laws and generalizations.

While there is undeniable disorder associated with the shift from bipolarity to multipolarity, the Clausewitzian methods we have used to explain warfare remain adequate. If they are incomplete, it may be because there are limits to any paradigmatic process that operates in the realm of human conflict. An obsession for complete order at the cost of flexibility invites irrelevance. There is much that is useful in fourth generation theory, but it asks too much of history. Its arguments are elegant and stirring. So was the poetry of William Butler Yeats, based on a world that never was and never would be.

NOTES

1. And this is being done. Officers attending the 1991-92 resident Marine Corps Command and Staff College Course at the Marine Corps Combat Development Command attended a series of weekly lectures given by Dr. Martin van Creveld, and they read his book *The Transformation of War*. As a graduation test, they read Major Daniel P. Bolger's controversial "The Ghosts of Omdurman," *Parameters*, 21 (Fall 1991), and prepared essays on its relevance.

2. William S. Lind et al., "The Changing Face of War: Into the Fourth Generation," *Military Review*, 69 (October 1989), 2-11. Concurrently published in the *Marine Corps Gazette*. The other sources of this theory are contained in William S. Lind's "A Brief Overview of Fourth Generation Warfare," a paper presented to the Military Society of the Marine Corps University on 28 January 1993, and his article "Defending Western Culture," *Foreign Policy*, No. 84 (Fall 1991), 41-50. The most articulate defender of fourth generation warfare theory has been Mr. Lind. In his written work and speeches he has further refined the development of the idea, explicitly linking it to the theories of Professor Martin van Creveld. The theories of non-trinitarianism and fourth generation warfare are now so interlinked and mutually supporting that in dealing with one, it is necessary to address the other. I try to avoid misattribution when dealing with these ideas, but they are in close tandem.

3. The original fourth generation theorists did not explicitly advance this idea. It was introduced by Martin van Creveld, an Israeli historian and writer, whose thoughts on this subject are contained in his book *The Transformation of War* (New York: Free Press, 1991). I do not think that any fourth generationist would disagree with my observation of the congruence of their thought.

4. Lind et al., "The Changing Face of War," p. 3.

5. Ibid.

6. Lind, "A Brief Overview of Fourth Generation Warfare," p. 1. See also Van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, pp. 49, 139, 557.

7. But not tribal. Tribal loyalties tend to be lifelong, inalienable, and static. In this war individuals could and did shift group loyalties.

8. Lind et al., "The Changing Face of War," p. 4.

9. Lind, "A Brief Overview of Fourth Generation Warfare," p. 1.

10. OODA—Observing, Orienting, Deciding, Acting—a model of military situational decisionmaking advanced by Colonel John Boyd, USAF Ret.

11. Lind, "A Brief Overview of Fourth Generation Warfare," p. 1.

12. A criticism shared by a number of intelligent observers. See Bolger's "The Ghosts of Omdurman," and Richard D. Hooker "The Mythology Surrounding Maneuver Warfare," *Parameters*, 23 (Spring 1993), 27-38, both excellent critiques.

13. Lind, "A Brief Overview of Fourth Generation Warfare," pp. 2-3.

14. Lind et al., "The Changing Face of War," p. 11.

15. Lind, "A Brief Overview of Fourth Generation Warfare," p. 3.

16. The most popular form is known as the Hegelian dialectic. Hegel was a German philosopher of the 19th century who relied extensively upon this form of the dialectic method. The dialectic method was also used by Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz and a host of other philosophers who found it invaluable as a pedagogical method. The discussion in the text is based on the Hegelian dialectic.

17. These arguments are taken from Richard A. Preston and Sydney F. Wise, *Men in Arms: A History of Warfare and Its Interrelationships with Western Society* (4th ed.; New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979), pp. 88-92.

18. See Gunther E. Rothenberg, "Maurice of Nassau, Gustavus Adolphus, Raimondo Montecuccoli, and the 'Military Revolution of the Seventeenth Century,'" in *Makers of Modern Strategy: From Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret, Gordon Craig, Felix Gilbert (Princeton, N.J.:, Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), pp. 49-50; and Antulio J. Echevarria and John M. Shaw, "The New Military Revolution: Post-Industrial Change," *Parameters*, 22 (Winter 1992-93), 72-75.

19. Michael Roberts, *The Military Revolution 1560-1660* (Belfast, Ireland: M. Boyd, 1956), p. 32.

20. And the fourth generationists do not. Their "distinct" periods overlap the Revolutionary and Imperial eras, making their treatment of this era conspicuous by neglect.

21. Douglas A. MacGregor, "Future Battle: The Merging Levels of War," *Parameters*, 22 (Winter 1992-93), 34-35.

22. Colmater tactics meant "filling," or the lateral shifting of forces to mass fires against a penetration. It was a resolutely defensive, anti-offensive mindset. See R. A. Doughty, *The Breaking Point: Sedan and the Fall of France, 1940* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1990), p. 29. US Army FM 100-15, *Corps Operations*, in its September 1989 edition certainly does not display the architecture or philosophy of an organization that intends to employ essentially linear and firepower tactics against a foe. The same can be said for the Marine Corps' "little white books:" *Warfighting*, *Campaigning*, and *Tactics*.

23. Lind et al., "The Changing Face of Battle," p. 4.

24. Lind, "A Brief Overview of Fourth Generation Warfare," p. 3.

25. Ibid.

26. Efraim Inbar, "Israel's Small War: The Military Response to the Intifada," *Armed Forces and Society*, 1 (Fall 1991), 29.

27. See Lind, "A Brief Overview of Fourth Generation Warfare," pp. 1-3, for this argument, and Inbar, p. 29, for a description of the West Bank.

28. Inbar, p. 37.

29. Ibid, p. 36.

30. Ibid, pp. 30, 43-47.

31. Ibid, pp. 39-43.

32. Ibid, p. 47.

33. Lenard J. Cohen, "The Disintegration of Yugoslavia," *Current History*, 91 (November 1992), 371.

34. See Daniel N. Nelson, "A Balkan Perspective," *Strategic Review*, 21 (Winter 1993), 26-39.

35. Michael G. Roskin, "The Bosnian-Serb Problem: What We Should and Should Not Do," *Parameters*, 22 (Winter 1992-93), 21-23.

36. Cohen, pp. 369-70.

37. See As'ad AbuKhalil, "A New Arab Ideology? The Rejuvenation of Arab Nationalism," *The Middle East Journal*, 46 (Winter 1992), 22-36; and Charles Gati, "From Sarajevo to Sarajevo," *Foreign Affairs*, 71 (Fall 1992), 64-78, for two alternate readings.

38. Wayne K. Maynard, "Spears vs. Rifles: The New Equation of Military Power," *Parameters*, 23 (Spring 1993), 53-56.

39. See Sabrina Petra Ramet, "War in the Balkans," *Foreign Affairs*, 71 (Fall 1992), 91, for possible effects of greater stresses on Serbia.

40. See particularly Lind, "Defending Western Culture," pp. 41-50.