



- Home
- Contents
- [Charts & Data](#)
- About the Comments
- Index of Comments
- Announcements
- Books
- Links
- [About Us](#)
- Contact Us
- Search

- **Military in Society**
- Constitutionality
- Defense Economics & Acquisition Reform
- Defense Power Games
- Budget & Fiscal Realities
- Fixing the Financial Systems
- The New QDR
- Supplemental Budgets

- **Strategy & Force Employment**
- Weapon System Effectiveness
- [Fourth Generation Warfare Part I](#)
- Fourth Generation Warfare Part II
- Global & Strategic Issues
- The Balkans
- Iraq & the Middle East
- Boyd & Military Strategy

- **People**

FOURTH GENERATION WARFARE

March 23, 2005

It has been said that "fourth generation warfare" (4GW) includes all forms of conflict where the other side refuses to stand up and fight fair. Smart commanders throughout history, however, have tried to deceive, trick, and confuse their opponents. Is anything really new?

The answer begins by examining how 4GW literature uses the term, "generation." Specifically, it refers to the world since the mid-17th Century, when firearms began to dominate the battlefield and when nation-states began to exercise a legal monopoly on the use of armed force.

4GW Case Studies:

- [al-Qa'ida / Afghanistan](#)
- [al-Aqsa Intifada](#)

That world is breaking down. We appear to be returning to the situation that characterizes most of human experience, where both states and non-states wage war. In 4GW, at least one side is something other than a military force organized and operating under the control of a national government, and one that also transcends national boundaries. For a graphical depiction of how the "generations" evolve, please download [The Evolution of Conflict](#) (169 KB PowerPoint slideshow.) Note that as with human generations, several may be alive and functioning simultaneously. The word "generations," though, is just an analogy to help gain new insights, and

COMMENTS

- 539 What are the Roots of Terrorism??? March 10, 2005
- 538 Werther Report: What do Reinhard Gehlen and Ahmed Chalabi Have in Common??? February 23, 2005
- 537 Who Won the Election in Iraq??? February 17, 2005
- 535 Werther Report - 4GW & Riddles of Culture, December 30, 2004
- 534 An OODA Loop Writ Large - 4GW and the Iraq War, December 23, 2004
- 529 Just War Theory & the Question of COMPETENT AUTHORITY in a Representative Democracy, November 10, 2004
- 528 4th Generation Warfare & the Changing Face of War, October 15, 2004
- 523 How Mole Hunting Has Changed in the Good Ole USA: The Vest-Rozen Report, September 12, 2004
- 520 How Bad Was U.S. Intelligence About Iraq??? August 20, 2004
- 519 Are Rising Oil Prices a Case of the Jitters ... or a Harbinger of Longer Term Problems??? August 20, 2004
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- 513 Loopy OODA Loops: The Triumph of Faith & Interests Over Facts & Reason, May 30, 2004
- 511 How to Dumb Down Your OODA Loops May 17, 2004
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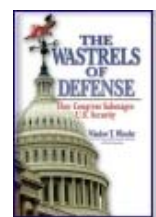
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- Leadership
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it is wise not to push it too far.

One way to tell that 4GW is truly new is that we don't even have a name for its participants—typically dismissing them as "terrorists," "extremists," or "thugs."

Name calling, though, is not often an effective substitute for strategy.

If we look at the development of warfare in the modern era, we see three distinct generations ... Third generation warfare was conceptually developed by the German offensive in the spring of 1918 ... Is it not about time for the fourth generation to appear? Lind, Nightengale, Wilson, et. al., Marine Corps Gazette, October 1989

The attacks on the Pentagon and World Trade Center dispelled the notion that 4GW is simple "terrorism." But one can sympathize with our political and military leaders, because 4GW is a strange form of warfare, one where military force plays a much smaller (though still critical) role than in earlier generations, supporting initiatives that are more political, diplomatic, and economic.

As important as finding and destroying the actual combatants, for example, is drying up the bases of popular support that allow them to recruit for, plan, and execute their attacks. Perhaps most odd of all, being seen as too successful militarily may create a backlash, making the opponent's other elements of 4GW more effective.

The authors of the [first paper](#) on the subject captured some of this strangeness when they predicted:

[The distinction between war and peace will be blurred to the vanishing point. It will be nonlinear, possibly to](#)

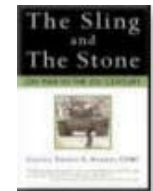
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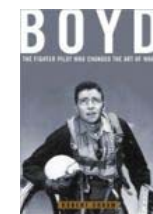
THE WASTRELS OF DEFENSE: How Congress Sabotages U. S. Security by Winslow Wheeler. You'll be disgusted, then just mad. Read [Comment #527](#). [Amazon](#) and [B&N](#)



The Virtues of War by Steven Pressfield
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BOYD: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War by Robert Coram
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the point of having no definable battlefields or fronts. The distinction between 'civilian' and 'military' may disappear.

However it develops, fourth generation warfare is real war. The aim of its participants, as in all generations, is to impose change on its opponents. For a variety of reasons, sketched below and covered in detail in the papers on this site, most of the techniques that will be used in 4GW played peripheral roles in earlier generations of warfare and undoubtedly predate history itself. Today, two of the most frequently mentioned of these techniques are terrorism, as we have seen, and guerrilla warfare / low intensity conflict (LIC.)

Is 4GW Just Another Term for "Terrorism"?

The more the terror, the greater our victories. – White Russian General Kornilov, 1917

We can't expect to get anywhere unless we resort to terrorism. – Lenin, 1918

"Terrorism" (defined as seemingly gratuitous violence against civilians or non-combatants) has been a part of all generations of war. Until recently, in fact, most wars killed many more civilians than military and not all of this was accidental - recall the Rape of Nanking, the London Blitz, and the firebombing of Dresden. As 4GW blurs any distinction between "military" and "civilian," we can expect more activities that the general population will regard as terrorism. In other words, there may be more terrorism in 4GW, but it is not unique to nor defined by these attacks.

Is 4GW Just Another Term for "LIC"?

... members of native forces will suddenly become innocent

- 486 Lies, Damned Lies, & Military Intelligence, June 12, 2003
- 485 The Men Who Would Not Be King June 3, 2003
- 484 Is America a Fly Occupying the Flypaper???? May 29, 2003
- 480 Will the Settlement Issue KO the Roadmap??? May 13, 2003
- 472 Al-Qa'ida & Iraq: Another Cartesian Misconception??? February 11, 2003
- 467 George Orwell on the Relation Between Freedom & the Rise of 4GW, January 1, 2003
- 456 Bury Cold War Mindset, August 14, 2002
- 454 Clash of Civilizations or the End of History? July 27, 2002
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- 436 How Pakistan's Triangular Tar Baby Lead to War Drums in South Asia, December 29, 2001
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- 431 4GW & the Question of Reform, November 16, 2001
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peasant workers when it suits their fancy and convenience. - USMC *Small Wars Manual*, 1940

Similarly, because practitioners of 4GW will be transnational groups without territorially-based armies, much of their activity will probably resemble "guerilla warfare" or "low intensity conflict." These highly irregular practices have enabled groups that are weak, militarily, to defeat larger, stronger forces, and they have deep roots in the history of war. The word "guerilla" itself, for example, dates back nearly 200 years to Napoleon's occupation of Spain.

Until recently, however, such "special" operations more often harassed than decided—"sideshow" (as T. E. Lawrence once termed them) in wars fought mainly along 1st, 2nd, or 3rd generation lines. Examples could include operations by colonial militias and guerillas during the Revolutionary War, Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry raids, partisans during WWII, and the tactics practiced in the early stages of most "national liberation" wars in the 20th Century, including Vietnam. In all of these, conventional forces delivered the culminating blows.

[Fourth Generation Warfare \(continued\)](#)

- 402 The MacKenzie Proposal: Peacekeeping Reform & Grand Strategy, January 18, 2001
- 392 The Palestinian Question - Is it a Colonialist War? October 21, 2000
- 278 The Real Revolution in Military Affairs ... or ... Can NATO Cope with 4th Generation War? May 29, 1999
- 255 German Antiguerrilla Operations in the Balkans (1941-1944), April 6, 1999
- 194 Ready for What? ... Loose Nucs, Scud Missiles, and the Changing Nature of Conflict, September 26, 1998
- 189 Ready for What? September 16, 1998
- 174 Food for Thought: Fourth Generation Warfare & the Relation of Strategy to Grand Strategy (III) August 31, 1998
- 171 Food for Thought: Fourth Generation Warfare & the Relation of Military Strategy to Grand Strategy (II) August 28, 1998
- 170 Fourth Generation Warfare & the Relation of Military Strategy to Grand Strategy August 26, 1998