FOURTH GENERATION WARFARE

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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.

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
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.

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
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

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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—"sideshows" (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)