

Making Twenty-First Century Strategy (Drew and Snow, 2006) Chapter 11

Worldviews and Doctrine

Of the nearly endless list of outside influences that impinge upon decision makers in the strategy process, it is quite likely that the disparate worldviews held by soldiers, sailors, and air- men (a subject briefly introduced in chap. 7) have the most powerful and pervasive influence. Codified in service doctrine, these worldviews have had a significant impact on decisions at the military strategy level in terms of force structure and at the operational level in terms of campaign planning and execution.

Unfortunately, these different worldviews have often been at odds with one another with dysfunctional results. Spurred by such problems in the Vietnam War, as well as subsequent operations in Lebanon and Grenada, the US Congress passed and Pres. Ronald Reagan signed into law in 1986 landmark military reform legislation, the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act. Among the many provisions of this far-reaching legislation was an attempt to force the individual services to think and act in a joint, mutually reinforcing manner. Further, the new law required the development of joint doctrine, which would be superimposed on the individual doctrines produced by the military services. It also required joint professional education and experience in joint billets before an officer could be promoted to the senior ranks.

Although there was much consternation among the services, the law has been implemented fully and has generally yielded very positive results and trends. However, the disparate worldviews of soldiers, sailors, and airmen remain. The reason for this is obvious—the vastly different natures of the environments in which the military services operate, which cannot be changed by congressional fiat. The Goldwater-Nichols initiatives to increase cooperation among the services will likely smooth the rough edges of competing worldviews, but they will remain and will certainly continue to have a major impact on strategists and the strategy process. It is important to understand that the authors are not passing judgment on the different worldviews.

They believe there are no right or wrong worldviews; rather there are simply different worldviews, the appropriateness of which must be determined for the situation at hand.

Worldviews and Military Doctrine

Worldviews are important because they are codified in the doctrines of the land, sea, and air military services. Military doctrine has a number of definitions—some official, some unofficial—that often differ significantly by country and military service. Official definitions tend to be written in the military equivalent of “legalese,” which often obscures doctrine’s significance. Perhaps the best working definition—one that is accurate, concise, and yet retains the vitality befitting doctrine’s potential importance—is also one of the simplest. *Military doctrine is what is believed about the best way to conduct military affairs.*

When properly formulated, doctrine is based on the best evidence available and tempered by mature, reasoned judgment. The principal source of doctrine is experience, and thus, in a sense, doctrine is a compilation and interpretation of concepts, actions, and such that have generally been successful in the past. Unfortunately, not all past experiences are relevant to the present (not to mention the future), and there is no guarantee that what is relevant today will remain relevant in the future. Hence, doctrine is a constantly maturing and evolving thing. Those “lessons” from the past that endure over an extensive period of time are not only generalized into doctrinal beliefs, but have also been raised to higher levels of abstraction to become the so-called principles of war—doctrinal beliefs that are axiomatic.

By far the most important use of doctrine is to teach succeeding generations in a particular military organization the “revealed truth” about their service and their theory of victory. Doctrine should also form a storehouse of analyzed experience and military wisdom that provides the knowledge base for entering strategy debates and making strategy decisions. T. E. Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) succinctly stated the importance of this function when he commented that with 2,000 years of examples, there was no excuse for not fighting a war well.

Unfortunately, the development and use of doctrine are problematic for several reasons. First, an objective analysis of experience is particularly difficult. The Vietnam War is a classic case in point because of the passions of service parochialism, political orientation, and the inability to delve into the records of the enemy. At this writing, 30 years after the fall of Saigon to the army of North Vietnam, there remains considerable debate about whether or not the United States succeeded in Vietnam (US forces were no longer in Vietnam when the final North Vietnamese offensive began) and the relative contributions of the various services to success or failure. Desert Storm has also been difficult to analyze, as both air and ground forces believe they have rightful claims to the lion’s share of credit for the coalition victory. In this case both groups have strong cases to argue. Doctrine may not be properly formulated because it is overly influenced by the questionable predilections of the “senior officer present,” a traditional problem that is all too common. Doctrine may not be properly formulated because there is a paucity of evidence available. This was always the case during the Cold War when dealing with the possibility of nuclear warfare. Thankfully, there had never been a nuclear war (at least not one in which both sides had nuclear weapons), and thus there was no empirical evidence about how a nuclear war could best be prosecuted.

Perhaps the most common doctrinal problem is the tendency to let doctrine stagnate. Changing circumstances (e.g., technological developments) must be evaluated because they can modify beliefs about important experiential lessons. The concept of unescorted, high-altitude, daylight precision bombing in World War II was largely driven by the idea that high-flying bombers would be very difficult to see from the ground and thus very difficult to intercept on the way to their targets. Further, US airmen also believed that even if intercepted, their heavily armed bombers flying in tight defensive formations could fight the way to their targets without suffering serious attrition. Such had been the American experience in exercises during the 1920s and early 1930s—before the invention and introduction of radar. Radar rendered those critical assumptions moot, and

after attempting to fight their way to targets in German-occupied Europe and enduring staggering losses, the RAF Bomber Command went to night bombing raids to elude German fighters. Undeterred by the British experience, the US bomber forces tried their luck with their defensive formations and bombers bristling with machine guns. They suffered the same sorts of staggering losses. Fortunately, by early 1944, newly developed long-range fighters made it possible to escort the bomber formations all the way to their targets in Germany, which solved much of the heavy attrition problem.

Finally, doctrine can become irrelevant if the assumptions that support it are no longer valid, and some of the assumptions may never be explicitly stated. The development of US airpower doctrine provides a pertinent example. Based on the ideas of many of the early airpower theorists, but particularly those of Gen William “Billy” Mitchell and faculty members at the Air Corps Tactical School, the Army Air Corps went into World War II with a doctrine based on the belief that strategic bombing would (and should) be decisive in war. The World War II experience and the availability of nuclear weapons and long-range aircraft in the postwar era further ingrained this notion. Military budgets, force structures, equipment procurement, and training were all based on the central doctrinal belief in the deterrent and war-fighting decisiveness of strategic bombardment. Even the tactical air forces became mini-strategic forces in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, crisis came in 1965 when the United States entered the Vietnam War and the bombing of North Vietnam began. American strategic airpower doctrine was found to be bankrupt in Vietnam because its underlying (yet unstated) assumptions were untrue in that situation. Strategic bombing doctrine assumed that all US wars would be unlimited wars fought to destroy the enemy and that America’s enemies would be modern, industrialized states fighting modern, mechanized wars. Both assumptions were crucial to the validity of strategic bombing doctrine. They were reasonable assumptions in the 1920s and 1930s but invalid during the 1960s when facing limited warfare in the Third World. The results were frustration, ineffective bombing, wasted blood, and ill-spent treasure.

As noted above, military worldviews differ widely and often lead to conflicts between soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines at both the military and operational levels of strategy. At the level of military strategy, conflicts revolve around what kind and what size forces will be developed and deployed; questions which all revolve around budget allocations, with each service touting the importance and relevance of its own worldview. At the operational level of strategy, issues revolve around how a conflict will actually be prosecuted, and in those tense situations, tempers can easily flare. For example, during the first Iraqi war (Desert Storm), while coalition airpower struck deep into Iraq at political, economic, command and control, and other such targets, ground force commanders fumed, believing that targets important to them were being ignored. At one point a US Army general and a US Air Force general nearly came to blows over the issue.

Conclusions

The ways that soldiers, sailors, and airmen (perhaps space-men) view war and their part in it varies because of a number of things, including the environments in which they operate and the consequent constraints and priorities those environments impose or create. In turn, those

preferences are reflected in very different doctrinal preferences that can come into conflict when devising strategies at all levels, as land, sea, air, and space assets are blended together in the face of a common foe.

The face of war, however, is undergoing change, as suggested in the last sections, and these changes will require further alterations of service and joint doctrines. For instance, in a world where the United States faces few potential enemies that mirror our forces, what is the role of a large capital ship or main battle tank or heavy bomber in combating cyberwar? Are air forces becoming dependent on special forces to locate and target elusive asymmetrical opponents who cannot be adequately surveilled by aircraft or satellites? Will space be weaponized in addition to being militarized? Will fully integrated computer systems and networks prove to be a boon to military forces or an Achilles' heel? These and many other questions will affect the evolution of doctrine and its translation into strategy.