***Editor's Note:*** *In this article, first published in the Fall 2008 edition of Orbis, H.R. McMaster, now U.S. national security advisor, made a compelling case for a flexible land force possessing the capabilities necessary to deal with protracted wars.*

# Learning from Contemporary Conflicts to Prepare for Future War

By H.R. McMaster

Abstract: *Recent and ongoing wartime experience has discredited much of the thinking that underpinned the "Defense Transformation" effort in the 1990s. If we are to be prepared for future conflict, it is vital that we learn from experience and adjust our thinking about war. It is time to develop idealized visions of future war that are consistent with what post-9/11 conflicts have revealed as the enduring uncertainty and complexity of war. These concepts should be "fighting-centric" rather than "knowledge-centric." They should also be based on real and emerging threats, informed by recent combat experience, and connected to scenarios that direct military force toward the achievement of policy goals and objectives. We must then design and build balanced forces that are capable of conducting operations consistent with the concepts we develop.*

War is the final auditor of military institutions. Contemporary conflicts—such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq—provide opportunities for military innovation due to the urgent need for feedback based on actual experience.[1] Analysis of the present, combined with an understanding of history, should allow the defense official to meet what Sir Michael Howard called the challenge to "steer between the danger of repeating the errors of the past … and the danger of remaining bound by theories deduced from past history although changes in conditions have rendered these theories obsolete."[2] In order to do this, we should improve dramatically the quality of our thinking about war. Understanding the continuities as well as changes in the character of armed conflict will help us make wise decisions about force structure, develop relevant joint force capabilities, and refine officer education and the organization, training, and equipping of our forces.

Such an effort might begin with an explicit rejection of the unrealistic, abstract ideas concerning the nature of future conflict that gained wide acceptance in the 1990s but have been thoroughly discredited in recent and ongoing

[1] Stephen Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 109–110.
[2] Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," in Michael Howard, ed., *The Causes of War and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 195.





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experiences. Flush with the ease of the military victory over Saddam's forces in the 1991 Gulf War and aware of the rapid advance of communications, information, and precision munitions technologies, many observers argued that U.S. competitive advantages in these technologies had brought about a Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). Many argued that if these technologies were pursued aggressively, military forces could "skip a generation" of conflict and achieve "full-spectrum dominance" over potential adversaries well into the future. It was assumed that, based on the military technological advantages that the United States already enjoyed, there would be "no peer competitor" of U.S. military forces until at least 2020. In the near future, U.S. forces would achieve "dominant battlespace knowledge." Military concepts based on this assumption promised rapid, low-cost victory in future war. U.S. technological advances would "lock out" potential adversaries from the "market" of future conflict. Ultimately, these ideas and their corollary of reduced reliance on military manpower became subsumed under "defense transformation."[3]

One might think that experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq have administered a corrective to these overconfident predictions. Our track record in learning from even our most proximate experiences, however, is not encouraging. Even before these particular conflicts, faith in the orthodoxy of defense transformation grew despite experiences that revealed fundamental flaws and false assumptions, such as the U.S. experience in Somalia from 1992-1994 and the NATO experience in Kosovo in 1999. RMA advocates "validated" new operational concepts in joint experiments that used attrition-based computer simulations against mirror-imaged future adversaries. These concepts separated war from its political, cultural, and psychological context; military campaigns in these simulations were largely reduced to targeting exercises. Concept developers, doctrine writers, and the military's battle labs focused on how U.S. forces might prefer to fight and then assumed that preference was relevant to the problem of future war. It is past time to reject the flawed concepts of the 1990s.

Defense transformation advocates never considered conflicts such as those in Afghanistan and Iraq in which our troops are now engaged—protracted counterinsurgency and state-building efforts that require population security, security-sector reform, reconstruction and economic development, building governmental capacity, and establishing the rule of law. The disconnect between the true character of these conflicts and entrenched prewar visions of future war helps explain the lack of planning for the aftermath of both invasions. It also explains why it took so long to adapt to the shifting character of the conflicts after initial military operations removed the Taliban and Baathist regimes from power; why the overextension and strain on U.S. land forces was described as a temporary "spike"; why senior military and defense officials resisted reinforcing forces that were overtasked; and why leaders repeatedly denied the need to expand the size of the

[3] For a discussion of the underlying assumptions of defense transformation, see H.R. McMaster, "Crack in the Foundation: Defense Transformation and the Underlying Assumption of Dominant Knowledge in Future War," U.S. Army War College Center for Strategic Leadership, Nov. 2003.