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FOURTH GENERATION WARFARE

May 5, 2007

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.

[For a graphical depiction of how the "generations" evolve, please download [The Evolution of Conflict](#) (196KB PowerPoint - version 3, January 2007). Note that as with human generations, several may be alive and functioning simultaneously. The word "generations," though, is an analogy to help gain new insights, and it is wise not to push it too far. "Species" might be more descriptive, but "generations" seems to

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BOOKS



CERTAIN TO WIN: *The Strategy of John Boyd, Applied to Business*, by Chet Richards. Boyd's real OODA loop and ancient strategies working for business today. [More...](#) [Advance Reviews;](#) [Amazon](#) and [B&N](#)



RAISING THE BAR, by Donald Vandergriff (U.S. Army, ret.) Published by

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have stuck.]

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. To distinguish 4GW from insurgency, though, the nonstate actor must have a goal other than simply taking control of the state.

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 smaller 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,

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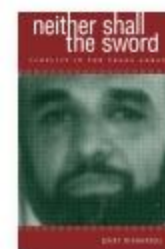
494 Why Declaring Victory in the Third Inning Can Set Us Up for Defeat in the Ninth Inning, September 16, 2003

492 The Werther Solution: A Modest Proposal September 11, 2003

the Center for Defense Information Press. Read the DNI review. Order from Amazon.



SCIENCE, STRATEGY AND WAR, by Col Frans Osinga, RAAF. Read the [DNI Review](#). Order from [Amazon](#) or [B&N](#). **New!** Now in [paperback](#) directly from [Routledge](#), \$35.95.



NEITHER SHALL THE SWORD, by Chet Richards. If you thought *A Swift, Elusive Sword* was too tame. Read the [Introduction](#) and view the [Briefing](#). [Podcast review](#). Available now on [Amazon](#)

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.

One of the most pressing questions about 4GW is whether it should be considered as "war." This may seem an odd question because the aim of its participants, as in all generations, is to impose change on its opponents. From the viewpoint of outside powers, however, use of military force in these "transnational insurgencies" (as the new FM 3-24 calls them) has not proven successful. Iraq, for example, has ground down the world's most powerful military - a defense establishment that spends more than the rest of the world, combined. This makes no sense if the United States is at "war," but might if we regarded such conflicts differently.

Is 4GW Just Another Term for "Terrorism"?

For a variety of reasons, as 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.)

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BOYD: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War by Robert Coram
Amazon & B&N.



BLUEPRINT FOR ACTION : A Future Worth Creating, by Thomas P. M. Barnett.
Read the [DNI review](#).
Buy at [Amazon](#) and [B&N](#)



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 peasant workers when it suits their fancy and convenience. - USMC *Small Wars Manual*, 1940

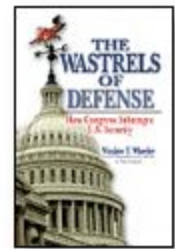
Similarly, because practitioners of 4GW will be transnational groups without territorially-based armies, much of their activity will probably resemble "guerilla warfare" or "low intensity conflict." These highly irregular practices have enabled groups that are weak, militarily, to defeat larger, stronger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

Until recently, however, such "special" operations more often harassed than decided—"sideshow" (as T. E.

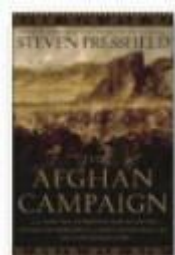
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NOT A GOOD DAY TO DIE: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda, by Sean Naylor. Read the [DNI Review](#); [Amazon](#) and [B&N](#)



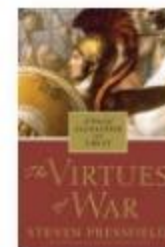
THE WASTRELS OF DEFENSE: How Congress Sabotages U. S. Security by Winslow Wheeler. You'll be disgusted, then just mad. Read [Comment #527](#). [Amazon](#) and [B&N](#)



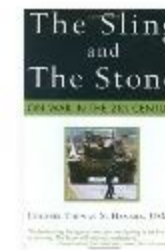
THE AFGHAN CAMPAIGN, by Steven Pressfield. Read the [DNI Review](#). [Amazon](#) and [B&N](#).

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, and the partisans during WWII. In the 20th Century, this situation began to change as insurgents and revolutionaries practiced guerrilla warfare in the early stages of most "national liberation" wars, including China and Vietnam. In these, it was an essential prelude to the large scale attacks to follow.

Fourth Generation Warfare (continued)



The Virtues of War by
Steven Pressfield
Read the [DNI Review](#).
[Amazon](#) and [B&N](#). **Now**
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The Sling and The Stone by Col T. X.
Hammes, USMC
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