

by Paula Jaegar, Research Associate, U K Defence Forum

In irregular warfare, superiority in the physical environment is of little value unless it can be translated into an advantage in the information environment

(Professor Laurence Freedman, The Transformation of Strategic Affairs, 2006)

The Revolution in Military Affairs has slipped somewhat from the public debate. Is the concept dead, or simply sleeping off six or seven years' worth of shocks to the body militant ? How does it apply to contemporary scenarios of irregular warfare?

It depends on your understanding of what the RMA was intended to revolutionise.

Lt-Gen Sir John Kiszely, Director of the UK Defence Academy, produced a paper in 2007, 'Post-Modern Challenges for Modern Warriors'. In it, he 'examines the challenges presented to modern warriors by changes in contemporary warfare... [some of which], particularly those associated with military education and culture... have yet to be fully recognised, let alone met'.

Kiszely gets RMA pretty much out of the way early on: 'Encouraged by the zeitgeist of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs...the development of modern warfare continued, and continues, in linear fashion, driven largely by a technological dynamic; the quest for greater firepower, greater lethality, greater speed, better stealth, better digitisation, more efficient logistics, network-centric warfare, and the ability to deliver hi-tech 'shock and awe'. Such warfare presents mind-boggling challenges to practitioners - notably those of the co-ordination and synchronisation of what amounts to a huge and perplexingly complex machine - albeit that their solution is, in character, Newtonian - more formulaic and mechanistic than conceptual'.

Contemporary conflicts are all peculiarly different, and there is a dangerous temptation to lump them together as irregular warfare, or counter-insurgencies, or fundamentalist franchises. All are characterised by participants as complex, ambiguous, uncertain and volatile; not characteristics with which a mind conventionally trained for conventional warfare feels comfortable.

These entanglements resist easy definitions of success and failure, moral simplifications. Rather, they are 'wicked problems', described by Kiszely as 'intractable and circular with complex inter-dependencies, and where solving one part of the problem can create further problems, or make the whole problem greater'.

Eschewing much discussion of weapons wizardry in relation to postmodern struggles, Kiszely's paper concentrates on how to kickstart necessary change in military culture and education. The warrior ethos, the ability to kill, and to see killing as the epitome of the warrior's mission, cannot

be discarded.(c.f. U S Marine Corps - "we blow things up and kill people") (One reason why new conceptual thinking meets resistance is a suspicion that the campaigns the West has undertaken since the end of the Cold War - partial, arguably altruistic, mostly elective - are some kind of chaff, a temporary distraction before the resumption of the 'real thing' - fullscale conventional military engagement.)

It is a drive sometimes at odds with the temper of postmodern engagements, which may run the gamut of 'three block fighting'. Kiszely argues for something broader, more conscious; not purely theoretical, but beyond experiential, where an informed preparedness and honed judgement meet in wisdom.

A great part of Kiszely's proposals centres on education, of a type beyond the usual syllabus. Military academies can be 'professional monasteries' (Samuel Huntingdon's phrase). To operate effectively in an environment that goes beyond the conventional, the ideal postmodern decisionmaker must also be stretched and refreshed by a liberal civilian milieu. The point is to learn, not what to think (the storage, or banking, theory of education; the accumulation of knowledge, like so many hoarded chunks of capital - which may overnight be devalued by market fluctuation); but how to think. Not mechanistic skill; but educated reasoning.

Writing in January 2004, the former CIA Deputy Assistant Director of Central Intelligence, William Nolte, writes in apparently rather different terms about RMA, seeing beyond the dazzling special effects through to implications for responsibilities and performance percolating down to quite junior command.

Citing an incident in Iraq, reported in the Washington Post, involving a radical battlefield measure taken by a commander which was far out of the normal sphere of his decisionmaking, and which was a direct result of radical new information technology:

The news analysis described how early information available to the air commander suggested two potentially intersecting observations: first, that attack aircraft were finding themselves in the proverbial target rich environment but were inhibited by limits on their loiter time; and, second, that Iraqi resistance, in the form of aircraft or ground-based anti-aircraft weapons, was relatively light, except at low altitudes. The air commander, Lt. Gen. T. Michael Moseley, integrated these bits of information and altered the pre-campaign rules governing how far forward to place tanker aircraft. The attack pilots would benefit from their presence, and the risk to the slower, unarmed tankers seemed acceptably low.

Nolte is no more impressed by the air commander's coolness and initiative than he is by the fact that many levels of the chain of command were instantaneously aware of the incident, and all forbore to intervene. (Information overload? Inability to make decisions? Not invented here? Unwillingness to take positive responsibility? All that data, of no practical value except to the front line commander with vision and the courage of his convictions. And being proved right. Of such things has military genius always been wrought.)

This incident strikes Nolte as axiomatic of the immediate change wrought by RMA, and prophetic of future transformation of the military mindset. He finds an elegant metaphor in the

craft of the jazz musician:

"His or her permission to improvise is not contingent on making the best of a situation in which something has gone wrong. His 'permission' is much broader, much more inherent in the intent of his performance. Improvisation in this context is neither intuitive nor fortuitous; it is developed technique".

Every decade has its buzzwords. In the late 1980s Goldwater-Nichols gave us jointness. What one has been hearing since the humanitarian interventions of the 1990s through to the present ascendancy of combined combat/counter-insurgency in Iraq and, most pressingly, in Afghanistan, is a need for lighter, more manoeuvrable capabilities, for training heavy to fight light, condensed into one word: agility.

Kiszely's piece uses the word practically on every page.

It's been a sought-after quality in equipment from the warhorse to the fighter jet. It's a hallmark of sound tactical deployment and response. Now, increasingly, in the postmodern army, which must be all things to all people, it's a mental attribute which is becoming a key requirement of this and coming generations of armed forces personnel, up and down the chain.

At the same time, in the cauldrons of ongoing conflicts, we are uncovering greater levels of individual mental distress than ever before. Is the demand for agility of thinking - and the implication of added personal responsibility - one further stress too far, or is it a kind of key to better mental health management ?

Nolte is an unashamed and messianic advocate of RMA. Granted, he is capable, in the same piece, and with a straight face, of quoting Bush (W): "In Operation Iraqi Freedom, the United States was able to surgically destroy a regime while leaving social and economic infrastructure intact". As Laurence Freedman, Professor of War Studies at King's College, has recently noted, in post-2003 Iraq, insurgency was the reality that dare not speak its name. It didn't fit with the plan. We had the capability to target Clausewitz's centres of gravity - key infrastructure - and achieve a devastating military result, cleanly, with minimal military casualties and a civilian population, theoretically, all but untouched.

This was the theory, the new kind of warfare that, through RMA - through sheer technological advance - we could, and should, achieve.

As Nolte observes: "The performance of US forces in the major combat phase of the operation in Iraq demonstrated the ability of institutions functioning within standard bureaucratic, hierarchical structures to operate beyond those structures. To put it bluntly, US forces in Iraq leapt past jointness into networked operating models."

And the subsequent Iraqi insurgencies demonstrated the ability of a society to continue functioning, and rebelling, without the buildings-based infrastructure that RMA had so neatly excised.

We had tried it in Afghanistan in 2001, with a month of strategic bombing, before reluctantly accepting the futility of surgical airstrikes against a regime whose fairly rudimentary infrastructure had already been blasted by decades of attrition. Now, at last, an arena in which the reality fit the shiny sterile concept of ultimate RMA in action.

Alas: attractive theory; great hardware; easy initial outcome. The rest is nightmare, and a learning process of extreme brutality.

Nolte: "The revolution in military affairs may be not be about technology, but it will ride on technology - to a great degree on technical developments in information transmission, storage, and management. This is largely, and not coincidentally, the same technology on which any prospective revolution in intelligence affairs will depend. Technology, in scholastic terms, has been and will be the necessary basis for the RMA. But the real revolution will be in judgment, decisionmaking, and other forms of behaviour".

Kiszely and Nolte, so remote in style and measure, are not so far apart in their recognition that technological advance cannot simply be bolted on to a model army without fundamental alteration in its mentality. For Nolte, technological upshifting is the driver; for Kiszely, it's the totality of asymmetric challenges, a more holistic catalyst.

Kiszely foresees "a far greater diversity of roles - pointing in turn to far greater breadth depth and diversity of competencies", a role "considerably broader and more cerebral, requiring far greater contextual understanding." Nolte: " How do we get our schools to become seedbeds for irritating, unconventional, annoying people? How do we link more effectively with service schools and labs (and with organizations such as the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency and the Office of Net Assessments) with a history of innovative, even counterinstitutional, thinking?"

There is a tension between proponents of preparedness for regular, conventional warfare, which seeks to win by escalation, and for irregular conflict, which seeks to win by entanglement. Modern planners might choose to become truly fit for purpose in one sphere or the other, or to create a hybrid organisation which may have to work twice as hard to be half as good at both.

Similarly there is a tension emerging between two operational necessities; the rapidity of response required by the volatility and complexity of contemporary, wicked-problem scenarios, and the need for what Dannatt calls 'strategic patience'. The quick, clean kills envisioned around the birth of RMA are chimeras called victory, or preludes to the unavoidable bloody ground war. Kiszely: "The first essential step is spending time understanding the nature of the problem and its many facets". Instead of "don't sit there, get up and do something", the wisest course may be, "don't do anything, just sit there".

How to balance this paradox, between timeliness and forbearance ?

Technology will not be unlearned. Information technology is at the heart of the modern insurgency. Sophistication of communication is the most powerful form the revolution can assume. He (or she ) who can create, sustain, develop and transmit the most compelling

narrative will win the base of popular support without which no guerrilla force can achieve its ultimate aim - government - and without which no government will long withstand the guerrilla.

Perhaps RMA must now be reinterpreted as: Revolution in Mental Agility.