

THE FUTURE OF WAR AND THE AMERICAN MILITARY



Demography, technology, and the politics
of modern empire

BY STEPHEN PETER ROSEN

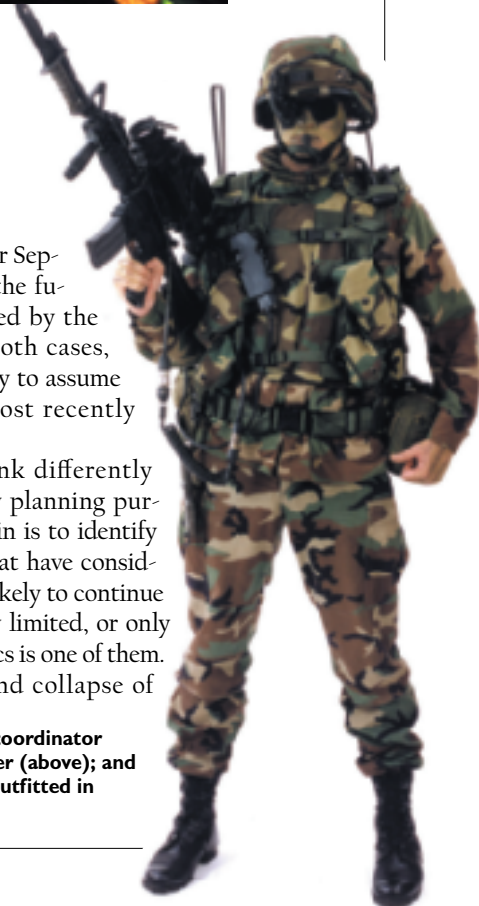
THE PEOPLE WHO RUN the American military have to be futurists, whether they want to be or not. The process of developing and building new weapons takes decades, as does the process of recruiting and training new military officers. As a result, when taking such steps, leaders are making statements, implicitly or explicitly, about what they think will be useful many years in the future.

It is not easy being a futurist. The first effort by the Bush administration to review defense policy, in 2001, did not change much. It was “conservative,” and assumed that the world would change slowly and incrementally. Sometimes it does, but often it has not, as events at the end of the Cold War and in September 2001 demonstrated. In 2002, the war in Afghanistan will encourage a harder look at that conservative approach. Yet it is not easy to think clearly about how to change. Often, when we think we are making bold leaps of imagination, we are only projecting the recent past out into the indefinite future. Before September 11, much of the thinking in the Pentagon about the future anticipated replays of the 1991 war against Iraq, along with limited

peacekeeping operations. After September 11, we now act as if the future of war will be dominated by the fight against terrorism. In both cases, there was a powerful tendency to assume that what had happened most recently would continue to happen.

How might we try to think differently about the future for military planning purposes? One useful way to begin is to identify trends—ongoing processes that have considerable momentum—that are likely to continue into the future with relatively limited, or only gradual, changes. Demographics is one of them. The demographic decline and collapse of

Technology triumphant: warfare coordinator in a destroyer-based combat center (above); and the soldier as “fighting system,” outfitted in “Land Warrior” gear (right).



Photographs: (top) Associated Press/Bob Grieser; (right) courtesy of United States Department of Defense

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public health in Russia are well underway, and it is hard to see how they could be reversed in one generation. This is a trend that makes a resurgence of Russian national power in the next 20 years unlikely. The aging and contraction of the population of Europe and Japan are also striking, and make them unlikely centers of power in the future. The position of Europe is particularly interesting, since the countries across the Mediterranean from Europe are growing in population, and there are already large Islamic populations in Europe with higher birth rates than the non-Islamic populations. The advances in information technology will continue, along with the diffusion of the ability to construct nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons. Politically, the dominance of democracies and international institutions in Europe seems likely to insure relative international peace, while the com-

Maximizing mobility: a prototype second-generation unmanned Predator B surveillance craft in test flight (right); coordinating battlefield information in real time during training exercises, in a Humvee-mounted operations center (below); a Canadian-model wheeled personnel carrier used to speed eight soldiers in combat (facing page).



parative rarity of stable democracies in Asia—from Turkey to Korea—together with the social dislocations associated with the process of industrialization and economic growth, suggest a more turbulent future for that populous continent.

These observations have some obvious implications for defense planners. The United States has begun to shift its military focus away from Europe to Asia. The diffusion of technologies relevant to the construction of weapons of mass destruction was the driving force behind efforts to develop defenses against ballistic missiles, and the attacks of September 11 and the anthrax attacks will increase the effort to thwart less conventional ways of delivering these weapons as well. Countering such weapons will mean not only shooting down missiles, but also finding and perhaps destroying them before they are launched. Even before September 11, a group of officers and defense intellectuals existed who advocated military transformation, a “Revolution in Military Affairs,” or RMA, a term coined by Andrew Marshall, director of the Office of Net Assessment in the Pentagon. That office, more than any other, tries to focus on long-term problems of analysis and planning. RMA advocates argued that rapid improvement in information technologies—sensors, communications, data processing—would make it possible to find most large military systems, such as air bases, aircraft carriers, and tanks, and to destroy quickly whatever you could find.

The events of September 11 and thereafter would appear to strengthen their case. The use in Afghanistan of small, covert teams of soldiers, supported by high-tech sensors and long-range, highly accurate missiles, was very much like what RMA advocates within the U.S. Marine Corps had proposed in 1994 in a concept called “Sea Dragon.” The use of unmanned aerial vehicles armed with precision-guided munitions, another RMA concept, has actually been employed in Afghanistan. Combining

data collected from a number of sources and sending it in real time to bombers in flight toward Afghanistan to attack hidden or mobile targets was yet another RMA concept that was accelerated as a result of the war. The possible need to find Pakistani nuclear weapons, if the government of Pakistan turns against the United States, will also increase funding for information technologies that can obtain data about hidden weapons. The desire to identify and track individuals who may be embarked on terrorist missions will also push information technologies, probably combined with biotechnology, to the point where specific individuals can be pursued. The fact that the United States has such impressive military technology will lead adversaries who cannot match our technology to find an equalizer. Terrorism may be one, and nuclear weapons another.



BUT WAR IS NOT PRIMARILY ABOUT geography and technology. War is about politics, and the second way to begin thinking about the future of America's wars is to see our political goals as clearly as possible. It can be difficult for the United States to see itself accurately and to state its goals objectively. Let us start with some basics. The United States has no rival. We are militarily dominant around the world. Our military spending exceeds that of the next six or seven powers combined, and we have a monopoly on many advanced and not so advanced military technologies. We, and only we, form and lead military coalitions into war. We use our military dominance to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries, because the local inhabitants are killing each other, or harboring enemies of the United States, or developing nuclear and biological weapons.

A political unit that has overwhelming superiority in military power, and uses that power to influence the internal behavior of

other states, is called an empire. Because the United States does not seek to control territory or govern the overseas citizens of the empire, we are an indirect empire, to be sure, but an empire nonetheless. If this is correct, our goal is not combating a rival, but maintaining our imperial position, and maintaining imperial order.

Planning for imperial wars is different from planning for conventional international wars. In dealing with the Soviet Union, war had to be avoided: small wars could not be allowed to escalate, or to divert us from the core task of defending Europe and Japan. As a result, military power was applied incrementally. Im-

Chinese government ceases to be a dictatorship, it is likely that there will be a large-scale movement of power away from Beijing toward the provinces or regions that have their own ethnic or religious identities. The government of China will concentrate on improving the lives of its own people, and participating in the world order led by the United States.

If, on the other hand, China continues to grow in power, but remains governed by a repressive dictatorship that sees enemies at home and threats abroad, it may try to intimidate Taiwan or Japan or India or South Korea. The United States could, if this problem emerged, wish to do what it does now: reassure its friends in Asia that we will not allow Chinese military intimidation to succeed. But this will be increasingly difficult, militarily, in the future, if China grows stronger, since China is geographically close to these countries, while the United States is far away. To make our Asian allies feel secure, defensive capabilities—to neutralize offensive missiles, sea mines, and submarines, for example—are likely to be especially valuable, despite the fact that the United States is now primarily in the business of generating offensive military power. Our country will need a strategy that enables it to demonstrate, as visibly as is possible, that it has the capability to defend its friends. We may also want unconventional weapons with which to remind China that activities that menace other Asian countries might do it more harm than good. For example, more sophisticated forms of information warfare, already visible in the interactions between Taiwan and China, might become an important component of the American arsenal.



JOE BARRENTINE

IMPERIAL GARRISONS MUST BE LEFT IN PLACE FOR DECADES TO ENSURE ORDER AND STABILITY.

perial wars to restore order are not so constrained. The maximum amount of force can and should be used as quickly as possible for psychological impact—to demonstrate that the empire cannot be challenged with impunity. During the Cold War, we did not try very hard to bring down communist governments. Now we are in the business of bringing down hostile governments and creating governments favorable to us. Conventional international wars end and troops are brought back home. Imperial wars end, but imperial garrisons must be left in place for decades to ensure order and stability. This is, in fact, what we are beginning to see, first in the Balkans and now in Central Asia. In addition to advanced-technology weaponry, an imperial position requires a large but lightly armed ground force for garrison purposes and as reassurance for allies who want American forces on their soil as symbols of our commitment to their defense.

Finally, imperial strategy focuses on preventing the emergence of powerful, hostile challengers to the empire: by war if necessary, but by imperial assimilation if possible. China is not yet powerful enough to be a challenger to the American empire, and the goal of the United States is to prevent that challenge from emerging. China will be a major economic and military power in a generation, if it does not collapse into internal disorder as a consequence of economic, political, and religious grievances now clearly visible. If Chinese political reforms are successful, and the

THERE IS AN ALTERNATIVE TO EMPIRE. Instead of guaranteeing order around the world, the United States could help other countries defend themselves. The United States could, for example, decide that even though China should not be allowed to use its military capabilities to intimidate its Asian neighbors, we should not reassure those countries with American military power. But if we choose not to defend these countries, we cannot be sure *they* will continue to observe nuclear nonproliferation agreements. The United States now uneasily tolerates British, French, Israeli, Russian, North Korean, Indian, and Pakistani nuclear weapons. We may have to learn to tolerate nuclear weapons in the hands of one or more additional Asian democracies. In this world, the United States may choose to do less to safeguard the Asian balance of power, but will have less influence in Asia. Such a world may be riskier than the world we now live in.

But as Pericles pointed out to his fellow Athenians, they might think it a fine thing to give up their empire, but they would find that empires are like tyrannies: they may have been wrong to take, but they are dangerous to let go. ▢

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