

Back to the Future?

A firestorm brewing

by Col Gary Anderson, USMC(Ret)

If you live long enough, what goes around comes around. I thought of that axiom when I read Capt Valerie Cramer's article, "A New Maneuver Warfare Handbook" in the November 2019 *Gazette*. I was waiting for the punch line, but her satire—and I assume it is satire—is much like Jonathan Swift's in that it is very subtle and biting. The Captain drolly proposes that the Marine Corps should adopt a philosophy of strict reliance on SOPs, checklists, and other doctrinal guidelines to ensure ultimate standardization of thought and action throughout the Corps. She further argues that the current approach of encouraging initiative among junior officers and NCOs be curtailed as it will lead to unintended consequences and possible misinterpretation of commander's intent. She informs the reader that these measures will assure future victory because it is possible to come up with a checklist for every possible situation in war and peace.

I found the article interesting because what the author is tongue-in-cheek arguing for is the Marine Corps approach that was operative when I entered nearly five decades ago. In 1971, the Marine Corps was in the final stages of withdrawing from Vietnam. Quite frankly, the Corps was a mess. Drugs, racial animosity, and general indiscipline were rampant. The Marine Corps was not alone in this. The Army was faring worse and the other Services were having similar problems, but they had not experienced Vietnam in the same way as the ground combat-oriented Services. Many senior officers believed—rightly so—that the Corps needed to get back to basics in the area of personal appearance, military discipline, physical fitness, and overall professionalism. For

>Col Anderson teaches a course in Red Teaming at the George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs and writes a column on National Security for the Washington Times.



Gradually, discipline returned to pre-Vietnam standards. (Photo by LCpl Phuchung Nguyen.)

several years in the early to mid-'70s, there was a heavy emphasis on drill and ceremonies, equipment readiness of our largely Korean War vintage gear, as well as maintenance of posts and stations. For a while, the highest aspiration of company commanders and their gunnies was to win the regimental yard of the month competition.

Gradually, discipline and overall deportment began to get back to pre-war standards. This was particularly true after Gen Louis H. Wilson became Commandant and vowed to get rid of the excess baggage of perennial malcontents still plaguing the Marine Corps.

Because of the emphasis on equipment readiness and safety, checklists were very important and still are. If I am flying as a passenger, I want my pilots to be following the checklists and NATOPS religiously. The same holds true with mechanics maintaining my vehicle.

There was also a general determination never to get involved in another counterinsurgency war. The emphasis switched to combat against the Russians in Europe or possibly North Korea. Many colonels and above believed that the warfighting skills of the Corps had been degraded by the wide range of combat environments in Vietnam,

where a variety of terrains called for different tactics, techniques, and procedures for areas as diverse as jungles in the lowlands to the mountains along the North Vietnamese border. The fear was that this lack of standardization and the emphasis on small unit tactics were degrading the ability to fight the big battles that senior officers had experienced in World War II and Korea. Again, these were very legitimate concerns.

This was also the apogee of NASA, the dawn of the computer age, and the beginning of systems analysis. Checklists, flow charts, and rigid adherence to SOPs were trendy throughout society, and the Marine Corps was no exception. Operationally, the Marine Corps attempted to do what Capt Cramer is suggesting. It tried to come up with a process for every conceivable tactical situation. A thick volume of flow charts detailing every contingency from movement to contact to night attacks augmented our operational Bible (*FMFM 3-1, Command and Staff Action*). Tactics consisted of “two up one back, hot chow on the objective” with an occasional envelopment thrown for variety.

A unit’s readiness was judged on rigid adherence to process in periodical tactical tests. It did not matter if the aggressor for the exercise overran your command post or wiped out an entire company in an ambush. If you followed the flow chart religiously, you were deemed good to go. A similar approach was taken in Marine Corps schools regarding PME. If you followed the school solution and scored 80 percent or higher on the multiple-choice exam, you were considered well educated.

However, near the end of the ‘70s, some officers—particularly younger ones—who studied our potential Soviet and North Korean adversaries began to ask serious questions. If their two-up, one back was five times as large as ours, would the school solution still work? What if they read our manuals and anticipated our moves when we stuck to a fixed script? Some saw firepower as a solution; but since the other side had more tanks, guns, and airplanes than us, this approach seemed to have some

serious issues. The Reagan era defense build-up in the early ‘80s helped give us qualitative equipment advantages to offset enemy numbers, but serious questions about the quality of training and doctrine remained.

In addition, outside critics began to ask similar questions. William Lind, an historical analyst with no actual military experience, pointed out that the French in 1940 operated on very similar

pointing out that they had lost both world wars; however, Lind gained many adherents for what he called maneuver warfare, and not all of them were junior officers.

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lines that both the Army and Marine Corps were currently following with a rigid insistence on adhering to process and unquestioning obedience to predetermined plans despite what the enemy was doing. Lind pointed out that, despite smaller numbers and sometimes inferior equipment, the Germans handily trounced the French. Many Marines derided his lack of military experience and his admiration for things German,

is the opposite of a checklist mentality in that it orients on what the enemy is really doing rather than to adhere to a preconceived plan. It is an attempt to get the enemy to react to you. Placing yourself in a position where the enemy is forced to attack you is as much a part of maneuver warfare as is a Rommel-like penetration into his rear areas. Done properly, it requires leadership rather than management and delegates some



Training and exercises changed with the introduction of maneuver warfare or our base doctrinal tenet. (Photo by LCpl Isaiah Campbell.)



Are we reverting to a leadership style where general officers are moving squads on the ground and displacement operations because “they know better?” (Photo by Cpl Mark Stroud.)

degree of control to subordinates while leaving overall responsibility for success or failure to the senior commander. It is a high risk, high payoff endeavor.

By 1987, Gen Alfred M. Gray was the Commandant and declared maneuver warfare to be the Marine Corps’ operating philosophy. It has remained so to this day. Military education became as much about recognition decision making as memorizing facts and spouting

doctrine. Force-on-force exercises and war games became measures of tactical competence. The emphasis was on how to think not what to think. Gen Gray believed, and rightly so, that initiative allowed by all levels in maneuver warfare philosophy would work in small wars as well as big ones. But nothing is forever, and three decades have since passed.

If indeed Capt Cramer is writing satire, she may be pointing out yet an-



Do we claim maneuver warfare as our operational philosophy or are we regressing? (Photo by Cpl Mark Fike.)

other paradigm shift in this century that she is observing around her; if so, I am concerned. Beginning in 2010, as a State Department civilian advisor in Iraq and later Afghanistan, I began to notice among our military partners that technology was beginning to recreate the Vietnam era “great fire team leader in the sky” approach where generals and colonels were moving squads and platoons around the battlefield from their helicopters. In a similar manner in Iraq and Afghanistan, it was the “great battle captain at his board” moving units around and able to disapprove even the slightest requested small unit change in mission execution via blue force tracking.

The centralized control that Capt Cramer discusses is now possible and allows higher headquarters to instantly correct any deviation from a previously formulated plan. I suspect that is now likely the norm even though both the Marine Corps and Army still claim on paper that maneuver warfare is their operational philosophy. The Captain may be merely describing the doctrinal formalization of what she is already seeing going on around her. It is possible that maneuver warfare has become like the Roman Catholic mass done in Latin with many in the congregation not understanding the words. For example, the MAGTF Staff Training Program has become as process oriented as the tactical tests of old even though maneuver warfare terms are still bandied about. Following process is rewarded and deviation is punished via a Red Team that is a teaching tool rather than a true opposing force.

Capt Cramer has probably started an intellectual firestorm. Those who take her proposals at face value will lend support. Others who still believe in a maneuver approach will defend her. A better title might have been “A Modest Proposal for the Corps.” Despite that, a professional debate is always helpful as it causes people to reexamine their beliefs. As for me, my old Corps was a process oriented, centralized system without much tolerance for low-level initiative. I have no sense of nostalgia for it, and perhaps what went around is coming around again.

