

Chaos as Strategy

P. H. LIOTTA

© 2002 P. H. Liotta

This article was first published in the Summer 2002 issue of Parameters.

“A ghost is stalking the corridors of general staffs and defense departments all over the ‘developed’ world—the fear of military impotence, even irrelevance.”

— Martin van Creveld

The Transformation of War

In theory, at least, the US national security decisionmaking process is rational. During this process, the decisionmaker establishes the desired goals of policy and develops a strategy for employing often-scarce resources to achieve these goals. This rational calculus seeks to balance both ends and means.

But this rational decisionmaking process is also vulnerable, and the “chaos strategist” will target this vulnerability in challenging America. To plan a strategy of direct engagement with American military forces, as Iraq learned in Desert Storm and the Taliban did in Afghanistan, is lunacy. The chaos strategist, by contrast, must manipulate the scenario to his best advantage while striving to prevent the introduction of American military force.

Adversaries who do not practice a similar process of decisionmaking—balancing resources and constraints, means and ends—will increasingly look for innovative ways to “attack” without attacking directly the brick wall of American military predominance. The chaos strategist thus targets the American national security decisionmaking process and, potentially, the American people, rather than American military force, in order to prevail. Such a strategist seeks to induce decision paralysis.

In a strategy of chaos, the key objective will be to convince American political leaders that no clear solution, end-state, or political objective (other than the cessation of chaos) exists in the strategist’s sphere of dominance—and that sphere of dominance may be at home or abroad. Chaos strategy, employed by all warring parties in the former Yugoslavia and by Saddam Hussein in Iraq, serves to initially discourage yet may ultimately provoke American

*P. H. Liotta holds the Jerome E. Levy Chair of Economic Geography and National Security at the US Naval War College. He has lived in and traveled extensively throughout the former Soviet Union, Europe, and the Balkan peninsula, as well as Central and South Asia (including Iran). His recent books include *Dismembering the State: The Death of Yugoslavia and Why It Matters* and *The Wolf at the Door: Translations from the Macedonian of Bogomil Gjuzel*. This is his fourth article in *Parameters*.*

intervention. Yet future adversaries will almost certainly use the leverage of chaos as a strategy for gain.

In the ongoing war on terrorism, however, the practice of chaos strategy by non-state actors, rather than by the leaders of recognized nation-states, may only complicate the security calculus for the United States and its allies. On the one hand, we will practice preemption against those who seek to harm our vital interests and our way of life. Military forces will increasingly be in the business of shooting archers, and not just catching arrows. That is to say that we cannot just wait for chaos provocations to occur before we react.

On the other hand, non-state chaos strategists may soon recognize our overwhelming preemption capability, and strive to shift from being “archers” to disappear as quickly as possible. The most effective non-state adversaries that we will face will likely display some of the following characteristics: the facility to operate effectively as a lateral (and noncentralized) network, the ability to learn, the capacity to anticipate, and the capability to “self-organize” or reconstitute after they have been struck.

Non-state actors, in particular (whether or not they are sponsored by “nation-states” or by easily targetable organizations), can accomplish vanishing acts with far greater ease than adversarial leaders of problematic states. The implications are important as we assess new challenges in the war on terrorism. Moreover, we should seriously question if we are asking the right questions about military transformation in the post-11 September security environment. After all, we are not the only ones asking “What went wrong?”

In the case of the September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, a feasible chaos strategy was meant to induce not only fear but also a sense of extreme vulnerability in the American homeland. As such, the United States entered a new security era in which attacks by non-state actors on the homeland proved possible and US citizens, their way of life, and the specific liberties that they had been accustomed to were now vulnerable and at risk.

Admittedly, the attacks on 11 September represented an intelligence and interagency failure on a colossal scale; fortunately, the same intelligence network was able to track and prove the case against Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda with relative speed. Yet the vulnerability and transparency of the American system led military planners and former CIA officers to proclaim that, regarding the attacks themselves, “We couldn’t do this. . . . I have never seen an operation go that smoothly.”¹

In the future, chaos strategists may well seek gain through attacks that cause the excessive deaths of innocents and provoke further cultural/religious/ethnic fault lines both among contending adversaries and potential allies. Despite all claims to the contrary, it is not yet clear that the United States is capable of shifting from a style of warfare that might be described as the American way of war—essentially, the annihilation of an enemy—to a style of warfare that requires far more intense “closework.” In simple terms, are we planning for the wars we want to fight rather than for the wars we will have to fight?

In 1998, Secretary of Defense William Cohen, in reference to the future planning and the “transformation” of the American military, declared on several occasions, “We’re not looking for a fair fight.” Indeed, neither is the chaos strategist.

How Chaos Strategy Might Work

Any adversary that risks American military force engagement must employ a method that exploits the social dimensions of strategy to offset the disadvantages in the technical dimension.² Such an adversary would be wisest to target the process of decisionmaking within the policy (social dimension) sector rather than, as a first step, planning how to engage military force (the technical dimension) once the employment decision has been made. Seeking to wreak havoc to his strategic advantage in his sphere of influence, the chaos strategist must avoid treading into the arena of “vital” American interests. He works best in the shadows, behind the curtain, off stage.

In retrospect, with regard to the September 2001 attacks in the United States, the assailants made a crucial error. The attacks did affect vital national interests, the resulting American will to accept military casualties in response appeared to be high, and all roads—rightly or wrongly—almost immediately led to Kabul.

The normal response to an enemy’s attack is to attack, of course, in kind and with a like ferocity. In conventional war, this has always been the symmetrical reaction. While admittedly all warfare tends toward asymmetry, in which one seeks to exploit the weakness of the opponent and to rely on his own strengths, the notion of rough force parity between opponents has shifted remarkably in the post-Cold War era. An opponent who can match the capabilities of US armed forces does not exist, and will not appear for the near future.

As a result, technology and new operational concepts argue the need for American military forces to move toward the capacity to induce response paralysis on the part of adversaries. Indeed, concepts and beliefs embedded in *Joint Vision 2020*, “Network-Centric Warfare,” “Parallel Warfare,” and the “Global Strike Force” all rely on overwhelming technological capability to paralyze any adversary’s response. And every adversary we have faced since the end of the Cold War has been unable to fight back; most often they simply have had to hunker down and take the hit.

Such force application is emblematic of two not necessarily contradictory ideas: first, the notion popular among mid- and senior-level military officers that the military strategist can get inside the enemy’s decision cycle (often called “the loop”), cut him off, and kill him; second, the use of technology and American reliance (some would call an obsession) on firepower allow for high enemy damages and low friendly casualties. Edward Luttwak has partially popularized this second idea with what he terms “Post-Heroic Warfare.”³

Phillip S. Meilinger has suggested that warfare can be considered of four types: exhaustion, attrition, annihilation, and paralysis.⁴ The conflict in Southeast Asia, a protracted war from which America sought to extricate

itself after three decades of involvement with no lasting goals achieved, is an example of warfare of exhaustion; Operation Allied Force in Kosovo and Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan—through coalition employment of high-intensity strikes, high-technology weapons, precise targeting, and the integration of special operations forces with indigenous forces to support and help direct firepower—are examples of warfare of paralysis.

Yet the opposing chaos strategist is fully aware of America's asymmetric, unmatched power predominance. His correct "target," as it were, is the "social dimension" of the national-level policy decisionmaking process as well as perhaps the population itself. In essence, the strategist attacks what we value most. The shift in chaos strategy is not subtle, but it is crucial that we recognize the shift. In the future, successful chaos strategists may target us where we are most vulnerable and will work to avoid presenting themselves as any direct threat. Non-state actors, in particular, will find this strategy shift far easier to accomplish than state-led chaos strategists such as Somalia's Mohamed Farah Aidid, Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic, or Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

Moreover, since our military forces are not sized and structured as a counter-value force,⁵ the chaos strategist will increasingly recognize that new vulnerabilities will present themselves through targets and methods such as these:

- Critical infrastructure degradation or collapse, to include not only physical systems and structures, but also contamination of food supplies or resources in ways difficult or impossible to detect.
- The spread of infectious disease that cannot be controlled, whether or not through the use of biological agents.
- Intrastate as well as inter-ethnic conflict in failed or failing states.
- Environmental stress, resource scarcity, and depletion.
- The trafficking of drugs, small arms, and inhumane weapons, often coupled with conflicts that are claimed as insurgencies.
- Cyber-war.
- Terrorism.

All these elements provide breeding grounds for future warfare. These nightmare zones present targets of opportunity. Moreover, while none of these aspects is necessarily new, the capacity to induce chaos is greater today than ever before. We know, for example, that the Soviets experimented with strategic biological weapons, such as smallpox that could be delivered with ICBMs.⁶ Soviet weapon experts recognized, however, that smallpox could be released far more secretly on enemy territory; thus, in an age of globalization where disease knows no borders, chaos strategists recognize this advantage as well. Further, the capacity and power of modern laptop computers is roughly equivalent to the entire computational power that the US Defense Department had in the mid-1960s.⁷

In the past, state-led chaos strategists have at least partially achieved their objectives even in the face of US military force. As a result, Somalia was a failure; Iraq remains "unsolved"; Bosnia-Herzegovina is ethnically cleansed

and, like Gaul before it, is divided in three parts; Kosovo is an international protectorate but still part of Yugoslavia; and Afghanistan's viability as a future state stands in question.

But the chaos strategist wants to avoid force engagement. Even when force is introduced and troops are stationed on the ground, as in Bosnia or in Saudi Arabia, he wants to prolong ambiguity. Above all, the desired outcome remains decision paralysis.

Most American defense planners naturally consider military predominance to be a major strength. But, ironically, there is an inherent weakness in it. The immense advantages of American firepower, technology, and forces available require clear and distinct application of means to reach ends. The Weinberger and Powell defense doctrines, which mandate clear definitions of political goals and American interests prior to intervention, worked in Desert Storm because they fit Desert Storm. These same defense doctrines would have prevented American intervention in Southeast Asia and they did prevent, up to a point, American intervention in Bosnia.⁸

In American warfighter terminology, deception and surprise are standard checklist items in thinking about war. But American intelligence assets—in terms of technology and capabilities the most superior in history—fall short when it comes to the unclear art of human intelligence and human unpredictability. In truth, despite all our progress with conventional and unconventional war since the American experience in Southeast Asia, there still rings an identifiable empathy with how the debacle of Somalia was, in some respects, not different from the debacle of Vietnam: “If only [they] would just come out . . . and fight like men, we'd cream them.”⁹ Such comments make the chaos strategist beam with pleasure.

One Asian expert has provided a description of war in the ideal type as having three distinct phases: engagement, chaos, and chopping of heads (*jiaofeng, luan, zhan*). The master of this “intellectual” approach to warfare, of course, is Sun Tzu, who employs *jiaofeng, luan, and zhan* through instantaneous, differential shock-wave application. This same authority refers to von Clausewitz's theory of warfare victory as an “engineering” approach, with equally distinct phases: battle, campaign, and warfare termination—all occurring in cumulative, integral stages.¹⁰ Thus, when American warfighters speak of “cutting off and killing” an enemy, they mean “to chop heads” in the metaphorical sense; when the chaotic warfighter speaks of *zhan*, or its linguistic equivalent in a different culture, he is being literal. The chaos strategist and the chaos warfighter prefer the removal of the enemy in the purest form. In former Yugoslavia, this was manifested as ethnic cleansing.

Ultimately, the best guarantee of success comes when the chaos strategist has brought chaos to his enemy without battlefield engagement. As L'i Ching, remarking on Sun Tzu's own warfare practices, noted: “From antiquity, the number of cases in which a chaotic army [that is, with chaos induced among its ranks] brought victory [to the enemy] can never be fully recorded.”¹¹ That, of course, is precisely what new operational concepts and employment sought

to produce in crushing the Taliban and al Qaeda forces in 2001—through a network of unmanned aircraft that led to increased battlefield awareness, special operations forces used as forward spotters, motivated indigenous forces, precision major fires delivered by various means, and rapid maneuver to cause the enemy to break. This led to battlefield success, though not necessarily to strategic victory.

The Taliban and al Qaeda made a classic mistake in Afghanistan: they were stupid enough to fight back. They apparently had forgotten the lessons of chaos, or never learned them. The true chaos strategist would have looked for ways to never engage American military force directly or would have employed methods that our emerging style of warfare is not able to handle well.

In reality, our strategy and force planning processes are laborious, methodical, and infinitely complex because they are planned for and fought with extraordinary precision and detail. The strategic theory that plans for force application as a paralysis of response does so because it wants—according to American strategic culture—fast, precise, and overwhelming conflict resolution. Such strategy and theory seek to eliminate chaos in order not to directly confront chaos.

Both the Weinberger and Powell doctrines reflect this American tradition. Vietnam did not fit this tradition; neither does Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, or many other plausible future war scenarios. The paradigm for many future battlegrounds, however, will draw on ambiguity and chaos rather than on American battlefield predominance.

Nearly four decades ago, Roger Trinquier claimed in *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* that modern war is an interlocking system of political, economic, psychological, and military actions and conflicts. Trinquier argued that armies tend to fight traditional warfare, and that in modern war they are doomed to failure despite overwhelming firepower.¹²

Admittedly, with the advent of network warfare and remarkable advances in military technology, Trinquier's gloomy prophecy may not be as set in stone as some once believed. At the same time, in view of the incredible American military successes since the end of the Cold War, one might reasonably ask why we are pushing so hard and fast toward military transformation when there are clear and present vulnerabilities that transformation does not affect, yet which the chaos strategist will likely target.

Adapting to Chaos

In a speech at The Citadel on 11 December 2001, President Bush said: “We have to think differently. The enemy who appeared on September 11th seeks to evade our strength and constantly searches for our weaknesses. So America is required once again to change the way our military thinks and fights.” The next day, John Pike, Director of GlobalSecurity.org, was quoted in the *Los Angeles Times* as observing, “Military change because they lose wars or win them with difficulty. They do not change when they win wars without hardly even trying.”¹³

Yet this is not the first time in history that we have recognized our vulnerability, as well as questioned our ability to deal with that vulnerability. In the spring of 1946, scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer, who had directed the atomic bomb project, was asked in closed congressional testimony whether it would be possible to smuggle elements of such a bomb into New York and then blow it up. “Of course,” replied Oppenheimer, “and people could destroy New York.” When allegedly a nervous Senator then asked how such a weapon smuggled in a crate or suitcase could be detected, Oppenheimer simply answered, “With a screwdriver.”¹⁴ The document that eventually came out of that testimony, known as the “Screwdriver Report,” remains classified to this day. In essence, though, there seems to have been a recognition six decades back that although there was no direct threat at the time, we were clearly vulnerable to chaos attack.

While this article does not suggest that chaos strategists will inevitably defeat the United States, such strategists can—and often do—bedevil the national security decisionmaking process. Used with the right measures of surprise and undetectability, a chaos strategy could disrupt and possibly destroy the Clausewitzian trinity. In this scenario the people’s faith in government could be erased and the third leg of the trinity, that of the commander and the army, could do little or nothing to prevent that destruction.¹⁵

In truth, chaos strategists cannot defeat the United States or its allies in any traditional sense. We will be targeted, however, where the symbols of our strength reside. Although the World Trade Center was not an irreplaceable node in terms of economic power, and even with the astounding resiliency that the United States displayed in recovering from the 11 September attacks, the total cost of lost worldwide economic growth and decreased equity value as a result of them could exceed one trillion dollars.¹⁶

Even as the United States has the capacity to bring massive firepower on the battlefield—along with an increasingly sophisticated network of intelligence systems, information architecture, unmanned systems, and joint and combined force operations—we should expect to see chaos strategies come into play in future engagements. Too exclusive an emphasis on technological solutions in warfare—and in determining political outcomes—may well prove problematic. Although a cliché, it remains true that we must prepare for the warfare we may find it necessary to fight, and not plan for the wars we want to fight.

Every single military engagement since the end of the Cold War suggests that we have dispatched our adversaries with ease on battlefields and in direct engagements. This would seem to be an argument against rapid transformation of the armed forces. Why bother, after all, to change the military when no one else can stand up to it? Increased battlefield awareness, the likely increased future use of special operations forces and indigenous forces, precision major fires delivered by various means, and rapid maneuver to cause the enemy to break, as well as what one observer has called the phenomenon of “marines turned soldiers,” has fundamentally altered how we fight.¹⁷

In truth, we have proven so successful in our post-Cold War military improvements that the likely increased costs for transformation envisioned

by the Bush Administration may well prove unnecessary and too expensive. Transformation skeptics, such as the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon, counterargue that the US military is already innovating at an acceptable rate—in what O'Hanlon terms a process of “ambitious incrementalism”—and simply does not need to radically accelerate the pace of technological advance.¹⁸

But the arguments which suggest that constrained resources and the dictates of the political economy are what most constrain transformation seem to miss the mark completely. What may well be lacking is the need to recognize “closework.” As Larry K. Smith phrases it:

Overwhelming force implies, almost by definition, a lack of precision. That won't work now. What we're going to need is a much greater emphasis on the concentrated application of street smarts. I call these sorts of operations “closework.” They are extremely precise missions that are used when the results are absolutely crucial. They demand the very highest standards of intelligence, of training, of preparation, of timing and execution. We haven't been particularly good at this in the past.¹⁹

Closework also suggests that urban warfare and often brutal forms of engagement will be likely in the future. Rather than relying more on distance warfare and precision engagement, we may fundamentally turn in a new direction. If it is true, for example, that one of two people on the face of the earth will live in urban environments and one of two people will live in “water-stressed” areas at some point within the next two decades, then the complexity of intersecting forces can bring about profound and often vicious consequences. These consequences might include—but certainly not be limited to—critical infrastructure collapse, the outbreak of infectious disease that cannot be controlled, and intrastate as well as inter-ethnic conflict related to resource scarcities (such as water) and environmental stress. We may well be entering into chaos.

We can expect to enter also into some debate about how best to meet the challenges of future chaos. Admittedly, there is a danger of overestimating one's real or potential enemy; there is a greater danger of not recognizing one's enemy at all. But there is a need to consider alternative ways to deal with future war. As General Eric Shinseki, Army Chief of Staff, admonished his own service and those who did not want to consider alternatives, “If you dislike change, you're going to dislike irrelevance even more.”²⁰

The arguments for transformation—and its relevance to protecting the vital interests of the nation—should reasonably have only just begun. To suggest that we actually understand the challenges of the future and can adapt our armed forces with relative ease is a flawed assumption. To the contrary, the science of complexity, future uncertainty, and understanding what specific changes to make in protecting our vulnerabilities should all prove central to what should be one of the most vigorous debates in our nation's history.

Policymakers and decisionmakers will need to adapt to counter future “chaos strategies,” where our adversary's essential aim is to achieve victory through avoiding defeat. Potential, though plausible, national security responses include the increased use of covert actions, as well as special forces, in place of

more traditional wartime forces and resources. In the end, it does not matter much if future chaos attacks will be illogical or disjointed. Chaos—and its intended effects—will prove more significant than a cohesive strategy that viably links means to ends. As an adage in India claims, one way to kill a tiger is to distract it from so many different sides that it tries to run in every direction at once.

Will we adapt to chaos as strategy? That remains to be answered in the war that is still to come.

NOTES

1. “September 11, 2001,” *The New Yorker*, 24 September 2001, pp. 60, 64.
2. Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., “Major Regional Conflicts: The Streetfighter Scenario,” *The Bottom-Up Review: An Assessment* (Washington: Defense Budget Project, February 1994), part V, p. 42.
3. Luttwak might also argue that the significance of “Post-Heroic Warfare” lies in a “careful, purposeful patience” in the application of predominant American and American-led military force, as well as a return to the “casualty-avoiding methods of eighteenth century warfare”—nominally based on ancient Roman economically conscious war. Edward N. Luttwak, “Toward Post-Heroic Warfare,” *Foreign Affairs*, 74 (May-June 1995), 109-22. Economic embargoes and sanctions against adversary states may also prove more worthwhile than the traditional battlefield engagements that characterized previous wars. If so, they remain unpopular instruments of power (in contrast to the swift application of the military instrument) for policymakers. Economic sanctions against Serbia, for example, brought the Milosevic regime to its knees; at one point during the last war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, by some estimates, inflation ran as high as 28 billion percent. The regime, nonetheless, stayed in place (as did the two regimes of Iraq and Iran under the policy of “dual containment” despite attempted economic isolation). Further, the individual prosperity of the average Serb plummeted while the vitality of Mafia elements, black market smuggling, and “sanction busting” practices soared. One other aspect of economic sanctions points to American selectivity: the May 1997 embargo against the military dictatorship of Myanmar (Burma) proved less than effective because other nations, particularly ASEAN nations, continue to invest there. The standards applied by the United States as justification for sanctions against Myanmar could also have been applied against China—which did not and will not be “punished” with economic sanctions. Myanmar does not represent a vital national interest for the United States; China does.
4. See “Air Targeting Strategies: An Overview,” in *Airpower Confronts an Unstable World*, ed. Richard P. Hallion (Washington: Brassey’s, 1997), pp. 51-80.
5. By the use of “counter-value” as a possible military role, I am broadly referring to nuclear weapon targeting theories that refer to counter-force targets (hardened military systems and forces) and counter-value targets (that is, what we value most—our cities, our population, and our way of life). The US military is not sized and structured as a counter-value entity; as such, we can expect to see organizational resistance to military forces playing the “home game” vice the “away game” in future engagements.
6. For an in-depth examination of the Soviet biological weapons program, one of the best available sources is Ken Alibek’s *Biohazard* (New York: Random House, 1999).
7. Thomas Homer-Dixon, “The Rise of Complex Terrorism,” *Foreign Policy*, No. 128 (January/February 2002), p. 54.
8. One of the best critiques of the Weinberger doctrine, with examples of its applicability to various interventions, can be found in Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought* (2d ed.; London: Frank Cass, 1996), pp. 185-203.
9. Remarks made by a frustrated military officer to journalists; drawn from a January 1996 lecture by Professor William J. Duicker, Pennsylvania State University.

10. Based on lecture notes and drawn from discussions with Professor Arthur Waldron, the University of Pennsylvania. The “engineering” approach bears remarkable similarity with the thought process and implementation of the Bottom-Up Review as well as the 1997 and 2001 Quadrennial Defense Reviews.

11. *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, trans. and commentary by Ralph D. Sawyer, with Mei-chün Sawyer (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1993), p. 333.

12. Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

13. Quoted in Ronald Brownstein, “Success in Afghanistan Clouds Military Transformation Plan,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 December 2001, internet, <http://ebird.dtic.mil/Dec2001/e20011212success.htm>, accessed 12 December 2001.

14. Reported in Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, “The First Line Against Terrorism,” *The Washington Post*, 12 December 2001, internet, <http://ebird.dtic.mil/Dec2001/e20011212line.htm>, accessed 12 December 2001.

15. Clausewitz described war as a “remarkable trinity” composed of “primordial violence, hatred, and enmity” (the realm of the people); “chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam” (the realm of the commander and his army); and the “element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes [war] subject to reason alone” (the realm of the government).

16. Homer-Dixon, p. 58.

17. Mackubin Thomas Owens, “Marines Turned Soldiers: The Corps vs. the Army,” *National Review Online*, internet, <http://www.nationalreview.com>, accessed 10 December 2001.

18. Ronald Brownstein, “Success in Afghanistan Clouds Military Transformation Plan,” *Los Angeles Times*, 12 December 2001, internet, <http://ebird.dtic.mil/Dec2001/e20011212success.htm>, accessed 12 December 2001.

19. Quoted in Joe Klein, “Closework,” *The New Yorker*, 1 October 2001, p. 45.

20. Quoted in Owens.