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## JOURNAL

## The Perversion of Military Ideas: How Innovative Thinking is Inadvertently Destroyed

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### The Perversion of Military Ideas: How Innovative Thinking is Inadvertently Destroyed

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***Abstract:** Have you ever read a military concept or doctrine publication, or an academic or professional paper about warfare or military operations, and wondered how it came to include such an ill-conceived idea? Odds are that the idea you read is a perversion of an earlier, better idea that in its original incarnation was actually quite innovative and insightful. This article explains the process by which such innovative and insightful military ideas are inadvertently oversimplified and/or distorted into intellectually questionable caricatures of their former selves.*

A saying attributed to Confucius is that ‘the beginning of wisdom is calling things by their right names’.[1] Assuming for a minute that this is a truism, then contemporary Western militaries aren’t particularly wise. The latest buzzword to make the ‘bingo’ list is ‘ambiguous warfare’, coined to describe Russian actions in Ukraine, which involved an ‘unconventional attack, using asymmetric tactics’ (two more buzzwords to tick off on the bingo card).[2] Forgive me if I’m oversimplifying things, but doesn’t the word ‘warfare’ itself imply that a situation might be ambiguous? Also, aren’t tactics variable, and is it not good practice to continually adapt them to maximise the odds of achieving the strategic aims that one has gone to war for in the first place? In other words, Russian tactics and strategy in Ukraine need to be understood and organisations like NATO need to figure out how to respond to them. But this doesn’t warrant the invention of yet another new buzzword.

Of course I’m not the first to complain about the proliferation of buzzwords at the cost of genuine understanding; in fact what might be dubbed ‘the buzzword problem’ has grown to the extent that complaining about it has become something of a cliché. Even such world-renowned strategists as Colin Grey have observed that ‘Americans in the 2000s went to war and by and large have remained conceptually wounded’.[3] But the wittiest summary of the buzzword problem has to be that of Justin Kelly and Ben Fitzgerald, who penned a short paper entitled ‘when a cup of coffee becomes a soy decaf mint mocha chip frappuccino’.[4] Bingo!

There is a flip side to this coin, however, noting that I use the word ‘coin’ in the literal, dictionary definition sense, not as an acronym or abbreviation or attempt to employ some kind of once clever but now exhausted counterinsurgency related homonym. The flip side is that with so many buzzwords proliferating it becomes hard to separate good, innovative, insightful ideas and approaches from white noise. As far as the volume of complaints go, this flip side has been relatively neglected. People prefer to disparage the white noise, not lament what gets lost in it. I intend to buck this trend, and will do so by

offering an explanation of how good military ideas (or concepts, or theories, or models, or whatever else they may be called) are assimilated by the military community and quickly but inadvertently turned into mere buzzwords that form part of the white noise. This process might well be called the birth, perversion and death of good military ideas.

Regardless of which particular military idea (or concept or theory or model) we examine, thinking about it will tend to follow this trajectory:

(1) A very intelligent thinker comes up with an innovative idea or approach that captures the attention of a core group of people who become adherents to the thinker's ideas. Alternatively, a think tank comes up with a bad idea that someone, somewhere can profit from, and adherents are drawn to it by good old-fashioned profit motives. Either way, proceed to step 2.

(2) The core group of adherents writes secondary material (journal articles etc) about the thinker's original work, including their interpretations of it, how to practically apply it and (in the case of long-dead thinkers) how to modify it for current conditions.[5]

(3) A much broader group of military personnel (a 'lay audience') engages with the secondary literature, re-interprets and simplifies that literature, and ends up popularising an over-simplified and often inaccurate or distorted version of the original thinker's idea.[6] Usually very few within this lay audience will bother going back to the original thinker's work and actually reading and considering it directly (for example, how many people can you think of who have quoted but never read Clausewitz?). Furthermore, somewhere between the adherents and the lay audience historical context is often lost and as a result ideas that were derived within specific historical circumstances tend to morph into timeless caricatures of themselves, even if the original idea was explicitly intended only to suit the circumstances in which it was first conceived (for example, Boyd's decision making process, a complex model developed to guide fighter pilots in aerial combat, has morphed into a simplified 'OODA loop' that seems to promise victory to whichever side can go around the loop quickest).

With very rare exception it is only once a military idea (or concept etc) has reached a point of multiple reinterpretations and gross oversimplification that it tends to be incorporated into doctrine. This is for a few reasons. First, doctrine writers, sadly and due to what I call 'being a subject matter expert by virtue of posting', tend to fall into the third group of idea developer identified above (the lay audience). Second, to end up in doctrine an idea must be generally accepted by the military *as an institution*, and to reach the critical mass necessary for this acceptance an idea has to have reached the lay audience (and hence has to have been dumbed down). It also doesn't help that doctrine is written by consensus and, as the old saying goes, a committee that sets out to build a horse usually ends up with a camel.[7]

Examples of this process are everywhere; indeed, they are for the most part the white noise itself! Terms such as 'complexity', 'design', and perhaps even 'system' spring immediately to mind. Ideas like 'network centric warfare', 'effects based operations' and 'centre of gravity' also roll quickly off the tongue. These ideas all started life as novel, innovative ways to think about warfare. And all were subsequently simplified (or distorted), generalised and applied in a way that removed them from their original context. Other times, an existing idea has been altered slightly then re-labelled so that it appears to be something completely new when it actually isn't. For example, 'ambiguous warfare' is essentially a relatively minor variation to what was last year called 'hybrid warfare', itself a relatively minor variation to what was called 'irregular warfare' a few years earlier still. Such new terms create the impression of analysis and understanding, while in reality they obscure *genuine* understanding, especially if one desires to make valid and meaningful historical comparisons.

These terms are not the only examples of this process; they are merely some of the better-known or more

recent. Which brings me to the final part of the process.

(4) The oversimplified, reinterpreted version of the original idea, often perverted to the point that it has lost its original meaning (and goodness), then suffers one of two fates. If it has a high enough profile (i.e. a large enough group of adherents), it gets to ride on the ‘good ideas merry-go-round’ for the rest of infinity. Centre of gravity is an excellent example; in fact, this idea may well own the merry-go-round and therefore ride for free. Centre of gravity isn’t ever going to be applied in the way Clausewitz intended, because his writings were sufficiently open to interpretation that we don’t actually know precisely how he would have applied the term himself. So adherents are able to debate, interpret and re-interpret the concept ad infinitum—heck, one of them has even gone so far as to advocate disconnecting it from the writings of Clausewitz altogether, leaving this commentator wondering why the concept’s other adherents haven’t yet burned him as a heretic!<sup>[8]</sup>

The second possible fate is that the idea gets so distorted as to become detrimental and so is dumped from the lexicon altogether (General Mattis’ memorandum directing US Joint Forces Command to cease use of the ‘effects based operations’ concept is perhaps the most famous example).<sup>[9]</sup> Unfortunately, this second option is (by a wide margin) the one less exercised (meaning that most ideas get their infinite merry-go-round ride).

Sadly there is little that can be done to stop this process. The most effective solution may well be one that can only be implemented by individuals and to that end I offer the following advice. If you see or hear about a military idea and think it looks like a good one, first find the original source of the idea, read it and ensure you understand it. Second, find, read and critically evaluate the existing secondary literature about it.<sup>[10]</sup> Do this *before* you write something of your own about the idea (or push for it to be included in doctrine). Third, if having read what is already out there you decide that what you’ve got to say isn’t actually new or innovative, avoid the temptation to re-package the same old junk in a shiny new box; find something else to write about instead. Finally, and above all, please don’t invent a new term when there is another perfectly good term already in use! Sure, this proposed approach will involve some additional time and intellectual effort, but the alternative is worse. The alternative is ambiguous warfare.

***Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this paper are the author’s own and are not necessarily those of the Australian Defence Organisation or any part thereof.*

## **End Notes**

<sup>[1]</sup> Quoted in: Charles M. Westenhoff, *Military Airpower: A Revised Digest of Airpower Opinions and Thoughts*, Maxwell Air Force Base: Air University Press, 2007, p. 239 (available online, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/milquote.pdf>, accessed 26 November 2014).

<sup>[2]</sup> Peter Apps, ‘‘Ambiguous Warfare’ Providing NATO with New Challenge’, *Reuters*, 21 August 2014 (available online, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/08/21/nato-summit-idUSL5N0QR2AH20140821>, accessed 17 October 2014).

<sup>[3]</sup> Colin S. Gray, ‘Concept Failure: COIN, Counterinsurgency, and Strategic Theory,’ *Prism*, Vol. 3, No. 3, June 2012, pp. 18-19 (available online, [http://cco.dodlive.mil/files/2014/02/prism17-32\\_gray.pdf](http://cco.dodlive.mil/files/2014/02/prism17-32_gray.pdf), accessed 26 November 2014).

<sup>[4]</sup> Justin Kelly & Ben Fitzgerald, ‘When a Cup of Coffee Becomes a Soy Decaf Mint Mocha Chip Frappuccino’, *Small Wars Journal*, 13 September 2009 (available online, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/when-a-cup-of-coffee-becomes-a-soy-decaf-mint-mocha-chip-frappuccino>

, accessed 17 October 2014).

[5] The first two steps in this process echo the relationship between what Thomas Kuhn labelled ‘paradigms’ and ‘normal science’. The first of these terms is defined by Kuhn as the ‘constellation of beliefs, values, techniques and so on shared by the members of a given [scientific] community’ and the latter involves the conduct of further research (which Kuhn also refers to as ‘puzzle solving’) within the confines of the paradigm. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (4th ed., Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), quote p. 174.

[6] The term ‘lay audience’ is used here in deference to Ludwig Fleck’s concept of ‘thought collectives’. This concept posits the existence within any field where ideas are exchanged (e.g. science, art, religion, medicine, etc) of an ‘esoteric circle’ consisting of specialists and an ‘exoteric circle’ consisting of their followers. Core ideas within the field are generated by the esoteric circle, but the opinions and feedback of the exoteric circle are nevertheless important as they validate and give impetus to thought generation by members of the esoteric circle. Ludwig Fleck, *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (transl. by Fred Bradley & Thaddeus J. Trenn, ed. by Thaddeus J. Trenn & Robert K. Merton, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979).

[7] Although a single central authority ultimately approves doctrine, it is nevertheless developed at working level through compromise between various stakeholder groups within a military organisation (e.g. different units that have an interest in the same doctrine publication for a variety of training, teaching or operational purposes).

[8] Dale C. Eikmeier, ‘Give Carl von Clausewitz and the Centre of Gravity a Divorce’, *Small Wars Journal*, 2 July 2013 (available online, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/give-carl-von-clausewitz-and-the-center-of-gravity-a-divorce>, accessed 17 October 2014).

[9] General J. N. Mattis, *U.S. Joint Forces Command Commander’s Guidance for Effects Based Operations*, unpublished memorandum dated 14 August 2008 (available online, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/usjfcomebomemo.pdf>, accessed 26 November 2014).

[10] For those who are willing to ‘swallow the red pill’, I recommend going one step further: in addition to thinking about the idea, try thinking about thinking about the idea. This seems a bit abstract and philosophical, but such an approach helps enable an evaluation not only of why an idea does or doesn’t work, but also of the institutional reasons underlying why a military or its members covet an idea in the first place.

## About the Author



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