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In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age

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BOOK REVIEWS

The Shift to a New Paradigm

Arquilla, John, and David Ronfeldt, eds. *In Athena's Camp: Preparing for Conflict in the Information Age*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1998. 501pp. \$20

THIS LIVELY AND HIGHLY READABLE SURVEY of trends in information warfare provides an excellent overview of an expanding field in military science. The editors, John Arquilla of the Naval Postgraduate School and David Ronfeldt of the RAND Corporation, are well versed in the complex theories of information warfare, and they render the subject highly approachable to those not fully engaged in the debate.

The central theme of the work is that today we are in the midst of a shift from traditional approaches to conflict—where power is based on material strength and information—to a new paradigm in which “information becomes physical and power immaterial.” The more traditional approach is embodied in Mars, the ancient Roman god of war, while the new construct is represented by Athena, the cerebral goddess of warrior wisdom—hence the title. This fundamental theme is repeated by a wide variety of contributors in nearly twenty essays.

Interestingly, Arquilla and Ronfeldt believe this shift is not completely a product of the late-twentieth-century technology explosion. They point to the Mongol hordes of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries as the progenitors of this mode of warfare. The Mongols relied almost entirely on learning exactly where their enemies were while maintaining secrecy concerning their own location. Despite inferiority in numbers, the Mongols were able to win overwhelming victories over their opponents with seeming ease. Using pony-express teams of high-speed horsemen (the “arrow riders”), they were able to see the battlespace with relative clarity, while their opponents remained effectively blind. The Mongols used carefully coordinated operations, struck at the command-and-control networks of their opponents, and relied on information, mobility, and precisely applied power—an information-age strategy.

Another fascinating example of information-style warfare offered is that of the U-boat campaigns of the Second World War. These boats did not operate routinely in the famous “wolf packs” but were spread widely over the entire battlespace until information caused them to assemble and attack at a specific vulnerable node, for instance a laden convoy. As succinctly stated in this work,

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“This is the first case in naval history of a force whose maneuver units stayed quite far apart most of the time, then coalesced to swarm to the attack, and afterwards dissevered to return to scouting for new targets.”

Much of the historical and analytical material supports the ideas contained in the final essay, “Looking Ahead: Preparing for Information Age Conflict.” One key idea advanced is the concept of “battleswarm,” as a new doctrine for combat. In battleswarm, U.S. forces would rely not on overwhelming material force but instead on near-perfect knowledge of the battlespace, the ability to maintain networked communications, and the capability to coalesce suddenly at a time and place of their own choosing to destroy (swarm attack) and then suddenly disperse.

Essentially, three key points appear throughout the book. First is the idea that information is “reshaping the traditional political, economic, and military domains of grand strategy”; second is the concept that a distinct new domain of information strategy is emerging, with its own dynamics; and third is that the United States should pursue a strategy of “guarded openness,” described as “a deliberately ambivalent pairing of words . . . which will entail a constant balancing act, in which competing goals and concerns may be at stake, involving tensions and trade-offs between whether to stress openness or guardedness.” While the first two ideas are largely self-evident at this point in the information revolution, the third idea is not so well laid out and begs further explanation. It may strike some as excessively ethereal, a quality that has been a lingering criticism of the entire concept of a revolution in military affairs and the associated information revolution.

The truth in all this lies, as it usually does, somewhere in between. Most analysts believe there is a middle ground between the camps of Athena and Mars where the bulk of our efforts should remain. We cannot entirely discard the mass and depth of firepower afforded by the more traditional doctrines of warfare, yet we must clearly continue to move forward in exploring information warfare as an integral part of our strategy, operational art, and tactical execution.

This excellent volume provides the background to the debate, and it represents one-stop shopping for any serious military analyst seeking to understand the current language, trend lines, and tensions in the discussion of information warfare. It may not provide all the answers, but it serves as a superb starting point.

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