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# SET AND DRIFT

## “Musing on Naval Maneuver Warfare”

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Timothy E. Somes

**I**F MANEUVER WARFARE IS NOTHING MORE THAN FIGHTING intelligently, then its antithesis is ‘stupid warfare,’” is a well conceived, attention-grabbing introduction to Wayne Hughes’s important *Naval War College Review* article “Naval Maneuver Warfare” (Summer 1997, pp. 25–49). This essay continues Hughes’s effort to stimulate serious discussion of the art of naval warfare, an initiative he started with the publication of *Fleet Tactics* a decade ago. His concept of “power warfare” as “the true antithesis of maneuver warfare” demands careful reflection. Whether one completely agrees or not with all of Hughes’s concepts and analysis, how much more valuable and rewarding it is to read this article than the superficial, public relations-oriented documents that too often pass for serious thinking on naval warfare these days.

The strengths of Hughes’s article, in my view, are several. First it is important simply because it appeared. There is so little these days which constitutes a

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serious discussion of the art form of naval warfare. With the *Naval War College Review* as one of the few outlets for such ideas, it is a significant event to read a piece so rich with ideas and insights. Some of us at the Naval War College think that “naval” warfare is not an obsolete art, but rather merits some facsimile of the intellectual thought it was once given by those whose ghosts haunt these Newport halls. Hughes’s ideas will help in this endeavor, stimulating, I hope, other pieces of comparable content and quality.

A more specific strength is his analysis of the concept of *naval* maneuver warfare. I find much to commend in his idea that “*naval* maneuver warfare is associated with delivering goods and services safely,” reaffirming that what happens at sea is inexorably linked to the events ashore. Hughes’s extensive array of historic examples well illustrates the complex nature of this concept. He reminds us that maneuver warfare is not the same as bloodless warfare, certainly a useful caution in this era when limiting casualties may be one of the first directives a commander receives.

Hughes points out that maneuver warfare frequently includes the element of confounding the enemy’s ability to react successfully, in many cases creating what Jan Breemer calls the condition of “permanent surprise.” With the recent passing of Colonel John Boyd, I am reminded of how much current military thinking has been influenced by Boyd’s “OODA [observe, orient, decide, and act] loop” concept, with its stress on achieving enemy paralysis and collapse by “maneuver[ing one’s] adversary beyond his moral-mental-physical capacity to adapt or endure.” But Boyd’s ideas derived primarily from studies of air and land warfare. Hughes is examining naval warfare. Are there such differences among the domains that extrapolating from one to another is inappropriate? Hughes’s article *seems* to suggest that he thinks so. I am not so sure. Clearly this is an important issue for naval officers, one which merits continuing reflection, examination, and debate.

At its most successful, maneuver can create quite remarkable results at all levels of warfare. Hughes refers to one of the classic examples of this, the Inchon invasion. This case clearly illustrates why the contemplation of maneuver so appeals to many operational commanders, and why it is so rewarding when brilliantly executed. Of equal importance in this time of relative peace when conservatism in all things military creeps through the culture, Hughes reminds us with this case that the nature of maneuver warfare requires a significant degree of audacity, where high reward and high risk go hand in glove.

On first blush I find tantalizing Hughes’s idea of “power warfare” as the true antithesis of maneuver warfare. The history of the sea is certainly replete with examples illustrating his idea that “power warfare achieves success by exhibiting the capacity to destroy the enemy’s forces and their support faster than he can destroy ours.” Hughes expends extensive effort to establish the validity of this

idea. Reviewing these competing concepts, as I understand his summary in Table 1, he feels that maneuver warfare equates to attaining “superior posture against the enemy.” In contrast, his concept of power warfare revolves around efforts to “destroy the enemy.” “Each form of warfare has its own time and place of application. . . . The crux is, can and will the enemy concede our objective?”

Fair enough. Hughes emphasizes that “naval maneuver is an attractive *operational* concept” (his emphasis), suggesting that there is a convergence of agreement on this point by the Naval War College, the Naval Doctrine Command, and the staff of the Chief of Naval Operations. But later in the article he introduces an apparent corollary that “naval *tactics* are power warfare” (my emphasis). *If* correct these linked ideas require both careful examination and a comprehensive effort to understand the ramifications for the Navy in the future. Hughes asserts that “naval battles are won by sinking the enemy or putting him out of action before he can do the same to oneself. . . . Simply put, naval tactics are power warfare aimed at destruction. . . . Naval tactics are invariably attrition-oriented.” Is this emphasis on destruction of ships at sea adequate as a guide to the naval commander?

I recollect that in a long-ago discussion Hughes gave me the impression that he was not enamored with the concept of “operational art” or the operational level of war, at least as it applied to the naval commander. This article suggests that he now accepts these concepts, albeit in a lukewarm manner. He appears to suggest that “maritime operational art is almost, but not quite, synonymous with operational logistics.” But is there something more to the concept of maritime operational art and the art form of a senior naval commander than the tasks oriented around controlling seaborne logistics flow in a campaign? At the campaign level Hughes suggests “history validates the worth of naval maneuver.” This then seems to imply that the astute naval commander needs to focus on more than obtaining a favorable ratio of ships destroyed or put out of action. Is the *manoeuvre* of Castex, “*to move intelligently in order to create a favorable situation,*” more applicable to naval success than Hughes seems to imply? Is there perhaps more to naval tactics than pure attrition?

One of the most intriguing, and most studied, battles in twentieth-century naval history is the battle of Jutland. An extraordinarily complex naval engagement, it illustrates the dilemma inherent in attempting to define with labels such actions. The tactical problem could possibly be characterized as straightforward efforts by each side to destroy the enemy’s ships, a good example of power warfare. But when closely examined within the complex context of the political, strategic, and operational environment that existed by 1916, the nature of the interplay between the contestants—certainly at the operational level, and arguably at the tactical level as well—could be characterized as maneuvering

by both sides in an effort to adjust the operational and strategic balance. Both sides appreciated that this effort to adjust the relative force ratios would apply significant, perhaps decisive, leverage in what was a tenuous but tenacious balance of power. Far less than massive destruction by one side or the other would have conceivably achieved this goal. This battle is particularly interesting because of the multifaceted role that the submarine played. The restricted submarine warfare by the Germans against shipping had failed to alter the strategic course of the war. Failure to get permission to wage unrestricted antishipping warfare prompted German Admiral Reinhard Scheer to put into motion his bait-and-ambush plan. The German High Seas Fleet was the bait, and the U-boats (and mines) were the specific tactical instruments of leverage lying in an (unsuccessful) ambush; the confused outcome of the subsequent naval battle has provided grist for endless hours of debate by subsequent generations of navalists.

Was Jutland purely power warfare (that is, attrition-based tactics)? Or were both sides searching for an opening that would enable them to use their naval instruments of war to gain (or avoid losing) a relative advantage in which to leverage further a stalemated situation? When we remember that this engagement was but one instance of repeated efforts during this war to use the revolutionary submarine platform to achieve strategic and operational leverage by tactically and selectively targeting the battleship, it is possible to appreciate the challenge of applying the appropriate conceptual label. The submarine's use repeatedly forced each side into actions the effects of which their past experience did not enable them to anticipate adequately. From the early months of the war the British were deeply concerned that they might lose a few battleships to U-boats, losses that would have altered the relative fleet-power ratio. Their fear prompted repeated, and less than desirable, tactical battle fleet moves. As the result of the admittance of the submarine, a revolutionary technology, into the naval equation, this case has long fascinated me with its implications for the future. The leverage gained by the introduction of weapons whose real nature is not well understood should give current naval thinkers pause as we try to anticipate such new concepts as moving from an emphasis on naval platforms to technologies of closely linked, internetted naval systems.

Consider the battle of Midway, certainly a familiar case to us all. There were several moves made by Admiral Chester Nimitz and Admiral Raymond Spruance that convey the special nature of naval operational art as practiced by great naval commanders, suggesting the *manoeuvre* that Castex appears to imply. The adroit use of intelligence to ferret out the operational objective of the Japanese is certainly the first. There is the entire saga of U.S. carriers, their movement across the Pacific theater and their last-minute repairs. The final positioning of these few carriers east of Midway seems to epitomize the naval

operational art at its most brilliant. With four Japanese carriers sunk, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto chose to retire, though he still maintained a vastly superior fleet. Spruance carefully avoided maneuvering his remaining ships into a position where he could have lost the decisive advantage the United States had gained.

I wonder whether either term, “maneuver warfare” or “power warfare,” completely captures the nature of what happened at Midway. Perhaps “decisive leverage” better conveys what sinking, or putting out of action, a few key enemy ships (in that case the four Japanese carriers) may achieve. Is there perhaps a parallel between these “high value” ships and the land-oriented “operational centers of gravity”? Certainly the skillful operational commander is looking for the “decisive leverage” that the terms “high value” and “centers of gravity” suggest. Is it possible that the acme of the naval operational art might include naval tactics that focus on something other than just raw enemy attrition? Certainly, if a tactical engagement results in enough of the enemy fleet being destroyed, the larger operational goals—and possibly, but not necessarily, the strategic goals—may be achieved. But is it possible that naval warfare, in some circumstances, can more profitably be focused on selected highly leveraged platforms (and in the future, on leveraged “nodes” that link vital information flow)? The answer is of great importance to the Navy’s major shift from “platform-centric warfare” to a “network-centric” focus.

The 1982 Falklands campaign illustrates the concept of leveraging a naval operation by sinking, or attempting to sink, certain ships. The sinking of the Argentine cruiser *Belgrano* removed the Argentine fleet from further involvement, for a variety of reasons. In contrast, while the British had a number of ships sunk and damaged by aircraft-delivered weapons, the pursuit of a single, conventionally powered Argentine submarine became a virtual obsession for the Royal Navy. The loss of a British carrier, or a heavily laden troop transport, to the torpedoes of this submarine (or any weapon delivered by any platform), could have in a single blow altered the course of that maritime war. On both sides the nature of the use of the modern submarine seems closer to Castex’s concept of *manoeuvre* than to the attrition suggested by “power warfare.” Or is this concept perhaps even better characterized as an example of an attempt to use precisely focused targeting to gain decisive operational and strategic leverage in a naval environment? Remaining as the modern submarine does the closest manifestation of the ultimate stealth platform, is it an instrument for achieving Jan Breemer’s “permanent surprise” at the tactical, as well as the operational and strategic levels of warfare? Many submariners think so.

As a submariner, I have long found the idea of maneuver and leveraging through selective targeting and exploitation appealing, because of the stealthy nature of the platform and the finite nature of its resources. Much of the intense

debate over the "Maritime Strategy" of the 1980s centered around the question of whether an aggressive campaign using U.S. attack submarines against selected Soviet naval targets, including their SSBNs, might decisively shift the strategic balance if the Cold War went hot. Fortunately the world was spared an empirical answer. But the massive maneuvering of naval assets by both sides during the 1980s (as well as the importance of naval forces in influencing the 1962 Cuban crisis) suggests that naval operations can decisively impact the political process. In Alexander George's work on the general theory and logic of coercive diplomacy, he discusses "the central task of coercive strategy: to create in one's opponent, the expectations of costs of sufficient magnitude to erode his motivation to continue what he is doing." It will be many years, if ever, before we know the full impact of naval operations, and more specifically submarine operations, on the ultimate outcome of the Cold War. But it is my belief that it was tangible. Does it illustrate naval art? Or maneuver? Or perhaps leveraged influence? Perhaps the implicit nature of the concept is what is important, not a debate about the correct semantic label.

Each of the cases I refer to has a common factor, the introduction of a new technology that fundamentally altered the nature of the conflict as preconceived by the participants. Whether the diesel submarine, the airplane with precision bombing, the nuclear submarine, or nuclear weapons, each moved the modern naval battlefield in a direction not previously anticipated (and generally not appreciated prior to the use of the new technology in a war—if one concedes that the Cold War was in fact a war, as I do). It is not clear that either attrition or maneuver-based concepts adequately address the changing nature of the use of military and specifically modern naval instruments. The question of whether the introduction of new technologies into twentieth century, and future, warfare has impacted decisively, or will, the manner in which one actor forces an adversary to capitulate is perhaps the most important issue facing the current generation of military strategists and force planners. When coupled with a full understanding of the political and strategic nature of war, a high level of training and preparation, innovative warfighting concepts, and orchestrated by the appropriate (often new) organization, technology appears to offer a significant degree of leverage. But modern history suggests that this advantage can be canceled for a variety of reasons. Mark Herman, in his article\* on modeling the "revolution in military affairs," asserts that "future warfare cannot be adequately modeled using attrition as the primary measure of effectiveness." He uses the term "entropy-based warfare" as a way "to describe the state of

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\* Mark Herman, "Entropy-Based Warfare: A Unified Theory for Modeling the Revolution in Military Affairs," Booz-Allen & Hamilton, Inc., unpublished, copyright 1997.

disorder imposed on a military system at a given moment.” He is not alone in this concern with attrition as the *sine qua non* of war.

Naval commanders need to understand the concepts embodied in the terms “maneuver warfare” and “power warfare.” But the history of this century and the changes that the next century will introduce to the naval environment suggest, at least to me, that these theories are inadequate. As such technologies as the submarine, the airplane, nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, land-attack cruise missiles, and powerful seaborne sensors have each fundamentally altered and enhanced the nature of seapower, so new ideas wedded to powerful linked sensors, computers, and space systems will further modify the concepts that best utilize future naval forces. Perhaps labels like “entropy” or “focused leverage” are not the correct terms, but the implied concepts are worth consideration. If future naval commanders are to exploit fully the powerful leverage that navies should offer in the future, they need to reflect carefully on the nature of the changed and still-changing security environment.

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