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R. Lynn Rylander

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The Future of the Marines in Small Wars

R. Lynn Rylander

The tactic of wearing an adversary down, one step at a time, without arousing him to meaningful response, was first articulated by Sun Tzu in the 4th century B.C. The revolution that gave birth to both the United States and the U.S. Marine Corps and served as the model for so many other struggles for freedom was in large part low-intensity conflict. Clausewitz wrote of the “people in arms” nibbling at the shell and around the edges in areas just outside the theater of war.

Roughly 50 years ago in China, Mao Zedong was combining centuries of low-intensity conflict with his own experience in works such as *On Guerrilla Warfare* and painting them with the ideological brush of Marxism-Leninism. “Wars of National Liberation” have been with us ever since. Meanwhile, the U.S. Marine Corps was distilling more than a century and a half of combat experience in its *Small Wars Manual*. In all probability this 1940 document is no longer widely read, but it should be, because it contains many truths about small wars that America has lost sight of.¹

The Small War Threat

One of the greatest difficulties in dealing with small wars, or the contemporary term, “low-intensity conflict” (LIC), is coming to an understanding of its nature. The *Small Wars Manual* notes that such wars are “conceived in uncertainty, are conducted often with precarious responsibility and doubtful authority, under indeterminate orders lacking specific instructions.”² In other words, by nature they are ambiguous, a point stressed repeatedly at the January 1986 Low-Intensity Warfare Conference sponsored by the Secretary of Defense.

For a definition, we need something more. Let me suggest this: Low-intensity conflict is that conflict between nations or between groups within a nation and the established government in which conventional military power

R. Lynn Rylander is with the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict and is responsible for special operations, low-intensity conflict, and counterterrorism policy.
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plays a less decisive role than the exercise of capabilities or assets in the social, economic, political, psychological, or unconventional military arenas of conflict.

However we choose to define low-intensity conflict, certainly, it is not peace; nor is it a major, declared war. It is not conventional warfare and it is not nuclear deterrence, although these factors form its backdrop. It was not Vietnam, at least from the standpoint apparent in the U.S. approach to that conflict after 1965. We tried to make that war something that it was not—a small version of a war on the plains of Europe.

Such conflict shows itself in a number of ways. Chief among them are insurgency, state-sponsored terrorism, trafficking in illegal narcotics for political ends, and disinformation. While these forms of struggle differ in their tactics, they share the common strategic objective of changing the existing order. Individually or collectively, they represent a complex interaction of social, political, economic, psychological, and unconventional military factors. These assaults are protracted by nature, designed to erode the will of the opponent, and avoid provoking him into effective counteraction.

Conflicts of this sort grow out of real or perceived inequities such as population explosions that outstrip resources, poverty, collapsing demand for a country's exports, and political systems that concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a few at the expense of many. In some cases, the reaction can be a legitimate desire for freedom. In others, it can be an attempt to replace the existing order with one even more repressive and inequitable, although the practitioners seldom advertise their objectives in those terms. In revolutions supported by the Communists, it is common for them to show their true colors only after achieving power, as in Cuba and Nicaragua.

While much low-intensity conflict arises from the pervasive instability of the Third World, it is not restricted to the Third World. It is, however, highly susceptible to exploitation by third parties seeking to achieve their own ends. In fact, the Soviet Union and its surrogates, recognizing the strength of our conventional and nuclear deterrent, have seized on it as an attractive way to undermine our interests without direct confrontation. Those who have studied the problem agree that LIC will pose the most immediate threat to U.S. security for the foreseeable future, certainly through the end of this century. What it means today can be easily cataloged.

Today, one out of every four countries around the world is engaged in some sort of conflict. In our own hemisphere there are at least nine active insurgencies, including those in El Salvador, Colombia, Peru, and Chile. In short, armed combat is daily fare for some 4 million individuals on this planet.

Terrorism is a particularly vicious component of LIC, with its practitioners growing in sophistication and becoming increasingly intertwined internationally. Since 1968 there have been 8,000 recorded terrorist incidents

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resulting in more than 5,500 dead and 11,000 wounded. In 1985 alone, there were nearly 900 deaths resulting from 851 incidents.

Today's terrorism is especially dangerous because of the availability of state support and the resources implicit with that backing. Generally we understand the role of countries such as Libya and Cuba and organizations such as the PLO. But the extent to which the Soviet Union pursues a two-track policy of conventional diplomacy and covert support for terrorism is less clear. According to the Director of Central Intelligence, every year some 600 individuals travel to the Soviet Union for terrorist indoctrination and paramilitary training.

Moreover, we are beginning to see relationships develop between terrorist organizations and international narcotics interests, relationships based more on mutual self-interest than on ideology. Drug trafficking is a profitable, relatively risk-free source of income for terrorists. The drug network, terrorists, and insurgents frequently coexist in the same regions as a matter of security, and armed terrorists and insurgents may even provide security for those in the drug manufacturing and distribution apparatus. Drug running, in part, is simply a garden-variety criminal activity motivated by the prospect of great wealth. Increasingly, however, it has a political component—as with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (M-19) and Sendero Luminoso, in Peru—and, thus, must be considered part of the low-intensity assault on the West. In either case, the toll in human suffering and societal degradation is apparent.

In 1985, terrorists attacked people or their property in some 90 countries. American citizens are now targets of about 25 percent of all these attacks. In 1985, terrorists killed 38 American citizens and wounded 160. From January 1986 through the Karachi hijacking in early September, they killed 12 Americans and wounded 100. Overlying all this activity is the Soviet use of "active measures," which includes disinformation, front activities, propaganda, and agents of influence. One estimate suggests that some 15,000 Soviets are engaged in active measures and that Moscow spends approximately \$3-4 billion every year on this activity.

Since the end of World War II, the West has been under subtle assault. For too many years we viewed the various components of this assault as isolated and unconnected. Having tried without success to respond in Indochina, we closed our eyes to the threat. We can no longer ignore it and we can no longer accept the premise that low-intensity conflict is the exclusive domain of our antagonists or an inevitable, irreversible force of history.

The U.S. Response

Strategy. The U.S. response to LIC is motivated by our recognition of "the consequences of failing to deter conflict at the lowest level possible,"³ and

shaped by three realities: First, while most of the world's instability stems from local causes, the Soviet Union seeks to exploit this instability for its own purposes. Second, we are witnessing what President Reagan has called "The Democratic Revolution," local resistance to Communist regimes installed or maintained by the Soviet Union and its surrogates. Third, just as we share our stake in freedom with others, we must look to them to assume a proper part of the burden of gaining or maintaining their own freedom.

These realities and the ambiguous nature of low-intensity conflict dictate a two-pronged U.S. strategy. First, we must both deal with the underlying instability that fuels such conflict and counter Soviet and surrogate exploitation. This requires a comprehensive and coordinated program of: economic, humanitarian, and security assistance; diplomatic initiatives designed to resolve regional conflicts; the use of military forces in counterterrorism, contingency response and peacekeeping operations; and a national program of drug interdiction.

Second, we must deny the practitioners of this form of conflict the benefits of legitimacy and sanctuary accorded by law to states engaged in normal international relations. We need not and do not accept the pretension that Soviet gains are inevitable or irreversible and will, therefore, support indigenous resistance to repressive regimes. We view terrorism as a criminal activity and should take steps to disrupt and preempt the operations of state-supported terrorist organizations. We recognize that interdiction alone will not resolve the problem of illicit drugs and should act to disrupt and eradicate the underlying manufacturing and distribution mechanisms.

Components of the Strategy. The key to successful U.S. response to low-intensity conflict is to deal comprehensively with its manifestations as elements of a single threat and use every foreign policy tool at our disposal, including our military strength and the vitality of our economy. President Reagan has identified four key elements:⁴

- **Security Assistance and Arms Transfer**—to support the efforts of others who seek to strengthen their defense;
- **Economic Assistance**—to help others earn their own way;
- **Diplomatic Initiatives**—to begin resolving regional conflicts; and
- **Support for Freedom Fighters**—to give others the chance to fight their own battles.

These efforts must constitute a coherent, carefully integrated, and coordinated whole. Recent legislation has created a Low-Intensity Conflict Board within the National Security Council structure and, as a sense of Congress, proposes the establishment of a Deputy Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs for Low-Intensity Conflict. Thus, the coordinating mechanism is in place.

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The Role of the Department of Defense. Low-intensity conflict poses a serious dilemma for any defense establishment, and the United States is no exception. It is not punctuated by galvanizing events such as Pearl Harbor. It is not susceptible to solution through the application of mass and firepower. In fact, it is predominately nonviolent. It offers no prospect of decisive victory. But, because it is a protracted struggle, it does lay open the use of the military ever more widely to criticism.

Reflecting this dilemma, Secretary Weinberger has described the bounds for employment of U.S. *combat* forces in terms of six major tests:⁵

1. The U.S. should not commit forces to *combat* unless the circumstances are deemed vital to our national interest or that of our allies.

2. If we commit forces to combat, we should do so with the clear intention of winning.

3. If we commit forces to combat, we should have clearly defined political and military objectives.

4. Forces committed must be consistent with our objectives.

5. We must have the sustained support of the American people and Congress.

6. Commitment of forces to combat should be a last resort.

Clearly, the Secretary's six tests place constraints on the Defense Department's role. Yet, we have taken steps in the last 5 years to enhance our capabilities within those bounds:

- As an outgrowth of the 1980 hostage rescue attempt, we have created highly ready counterterrorist forces drawn from all four services.

- Reacting to a decade of neglect, we have made revitalization of our Special Operations Forces (SOF) one of our highest priorities.

- In recognition of the need to institutionalize the required capability, we have recently established a unified Special Operations Command.

So What about the Marines?

Old Roles and New Challenges. By law, the Marine Corps is organized, trained, and equipped for the "seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign."⁶ The Marine Corps also has primacy in the field of amphibious operations.

From 1800 to 1934, the Marines landed 180 times in 37 countries. In the 100 years preceding publication of the *Small Wars Manual*, the Marines were actively engaged in small wars in all but 15 years.

Traditionally, the Marines Corps' role consisted of two major components. The first was contingency response, as in the Boxer Rebellion and unrest in Latin America. The second was peacekeeping operations, as in Lebanon. However, the face of low-intensity conflict began to change in the 1940s.

What was once the domain of the dispossessed became the vehicle for the spread of ideologically motivated “wars of national liberation.” The postwar breakup of the old empires provided both the fuel and the test bed for such wars. More recently, the phenomenon of state-supported terrorism has been added as an important dimension of low-intensity conflict.

The breakup of the empires also meant that the traditional colonial powers would no longer maintain the established order in the Third World. Equally apparent was the disinclination of the United States to serve as “the world’s policeman,” a fact of life reinforced by our experience in Southeast Asia. The changed nature of conflict in the Third World poses a significant challenge to the Marine Corps. Clearly, traditional roles such as contingency response and peacekeeping operations will continue to be a critical part of our response. The Marine Corps is well prepared to meet such challenges.

Similarly, terrorism counteraction is essential to our national security. While the Marine Corps does not possess the specialized skills held by our forces dealing with terrorism, the nature and extent of Marine forward deployments argue that Marines may be called upon to engage in such operations *to the extent their organization, training, and equipment* permit them to do so. The real challenge for the Marine Corps is to deal with the civil-military nature of low-intensity conflict.

Clausewitz called war an “act of mutual slaughter.”⁷ This act is characterized by extreme violence with opposing forces employing mass, firepower, and maneuver. In low-intensity conflict, opposing forces still go head-to-head employing a much-modified form of mass, firepower, and maneuver. However, the most critical element is the struggle for the people’s allegiance. It is a war that cannot be won—and should not be fought—through conventional military means.

As important as they are, contingency response, peacekeeping, and counterterrorism must constitute a small portion of the U.S. response to low-intensity conflict. In fact, the nature of low-intensity conflict argues for a response that relies heavily, if not exclusively, on local capabilities. Under these circumstances our response must be one of support—foreign internal defense on the one hand, and unconventional warfare on the other. The key elements are such things as security assistance training, humanitarian assistance, and civic action. This emphasis can be seen clearly in the components of the Reagan doctrine. By deduction, it is also reflected in Secretary Weinberger’s six tests for the employment of combat forces.

The challenge to the Marine Corps is vexing. The Corps’ critical, traditional roles are substantially circumscribed both by the nature of modern small wars and the fundamentals of contemporary U.S. policy. Clearly, the essence of our proper response places a premium on military capabilities that, at least in the postwar era, have not been a fundamental part of Marine philosophy.

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This is not to suggest that the Marine Corps lacks the capacity to extend its operations into the broader range of activities demanded by low-intensity conflict. In fact, the Marine Corps' Combined Action Platoons in Vietnam were one of the most well-reasoned and successful approaches to the kind of conflict we confronted there. However, the Marine Corps is not now focusing on such a broad range. This being the case, the questions become: Should the Marine Corps reorient itself to the changed nature of "Small Wars"? If so, what changes are required, and can they be undertaken without degrading current capabilities?

Recent Experience. In 1985, the Marines decided to strengthen their well-tryed Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU). The new version was to be titled Marine Amphibious Unit (Special Operations Capable)—or MAU(SOC).⁸ The Marines made this change because they saw that the Corps had an inherent capability to conduct a broad spectrum of special operations. They sought to enhance that capability through specialized organization, training, and equipment of their normal MAU. These enhancements, now in process, will improve conventional Marine operations, as well. When fully implemented, the Marine Corps will have MAU(SOC)s in both the Atlantic and Pacific Fleet Marine Forces.

Though, in large measure, the MAU(SOC) is a response to the threat of low-intensity conflict, its role is circumscribed because the Marine Corps has properly sought not to duplicate existing special operations units such as Special Forces, SEALs, or Rangers. And those forces by themselves constitute a small, if important, part of our response to low-intensity conflict. Thus, the spectrum of MAU(SOC)s *missions* is limited.

Special Operations Forces (SOF) possess a broad range of skills of which many are applicable only at higher levels of violence. Yet, low-intensity conflict must draw heavily on medical, engineering, and other military capabilities that are found only outside the special operations community.

Two key points need to be made about the MAU(SOC) concept. First, it signals no change in Marine Corps doctrine. Rather, the intent is to enhance the traditional maritime capabilities of units routinely deployed with the fleets. Within the framework of existing doctrine, however, the Marine Corps is exploring the consequences of joint special operations when and where the situation warrants involvement.

Second, the MAU(SOC) remains essentially a direct action unit focused specifically on the introduction of forces from the sea—the Marine Corps' specialty. This means that even with the creation of the MAU(SOC), Marine Corps capabilities in low-intensity conflict remain largely concentrated in the areas of peacekeeping, contingency response, and counterterrorism. Specifically, with regard to the last of these, the most visible component—hostage rescue—is seen as a MAU(SOC) mission only *in extremis*, when dedicated hostage rescue forces are not available and immediate action is required.

In low-intensity conflict, U.S. forces, and especially SOF, have six primary missions:

- **Foreign Internal Defense (FID).** FID encompasses the military facets of nation-building—military and paramilitary training, intelligence, psychological operations, and civil affairs—conducted in conjunction with other components of the Government and designed to support another government's efforts to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency. The classic counterinsurgency mission is absorbed within this category of functions.

- **Unconventional Warfare (UW).** UW missions include military and paramilitary operations such as guerrilla warfare, evasion and escape, sabotage, and subversion conducted in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive territory. In this instance, U.S. forces or the indigenous troops they advise seek to create the instability FID is designed to overcome.

- **Psychological Operations (PSYOP).** PSYOP includes psychological warfare against adversaries as well as political, military, economic, and ideological actions designed to create in neutral or friendly foreign groups the emotions, attitudes, or behavior to support the achievement of national objectives.

- **Civil Affairs (CA).** CA includes those activities that affect the relationship between U.S. forces and the indigenous civilian population, authorities, institutions, and resources. They can play a key role in the nation-building process.

- **Reconnaissance.** Reconnaissance encompasses the collection of intelligence either separately or in support of other SOF operations.

- **Strike (Direct Action).** Strike missions include operations such as interdiction, raids, and personnel recovery conducted in hostile or denied areas, either unilaterally or in conjunction with indigenous forces.

The last two—reconnaissance and strike—come under the categories of peacekeeping, contingency response, and counterterrorism. They are, in fact, part of the Marine Corps' specialty. But the first four, to a much greater degree, require the organization, training, and equipment that one finds in the existing special operations community—a line the Marine Corps has vowed not to cross.

Speaking before the corps of Cadets at West Point in 1962, President Kennedy said of this type of war: "war by guerrillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by combat; by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by eroding and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. . . . It requires in those situations where we must counter it, and these are the kind of challenges that will be before us . . . a whole new kind of strategy, a wholly different kind of force, and therefore a new and wholly different kind of military training."⁹

This "different kind of military training" means, for example, that Army Special Forces are specialists in the paramilitary component of LIC, largely

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training. Hence, Special Forces account for roughly one-third of U.S. Mobile Training Teams. Army and Air Force psychological operations units are designed for highly specialized missions, as are Army Civil Affairs units.

Though Marines do not specialize in those fields, they can play a training role; although, again, they are limited by doctrinal considerations. They can, for example, play a role in Civil Affairs through their two reserve component Civil Affairs Groups.

The following chart illustrates these constraints by comparing MAU(SOC) missions to the four major components of our response to low-intensity conflict.

MAU(SOC) Missions and Low-Intensity Conflict

	Counter- terrorism	Peace- keeping	Contingency Response	FID and UW
Amphibious Raids	X		X	
Security Operations	X	X	X	
Limited Objective Attack	X		X	
Mobile Training Teams		X		X
Noncombatant Evac. Ops (NEO)	X	X	X	
Show of Force Operations	X	X	X	
Reinforcement Operations		X	X	
Civil Affairs		X		X
Deception Operations	X	X	X	
Fire Support Control	X	X	X	
Counterintelligence	X	X	X	
Initial Terminal Guidance	X		X	
Electronic Warfare	X	X	X	
Hostage Rescue	X		X	

Integrating the Marine Corps' Capability

Limits. I have focused on the bounds within which the Marine Corps can fulfill its role in low-intensity conflict. First is the changed nature of low-intensity conflict. Before World War II, the Marine Corps was the leading edge of our response to small wars. This is no longer the case. Next is the changed nature of our response. Contemporary U.S. policy with regard to low-intensity conflict takes fully into account the inherent civil-military nature of the problem. It stresses economic and security assistance and places severe limits on any potential U.S. combat role.

Given these bounding factors, we can say the following about the Marine Corps' role in low-intensity conflict:

- By virtue of its routine forward deployment, the Marine Corps will continue to be a key element in U.S. contingency response.

- Even in this traditional area, the development of specialized U.S. capabilities in areas such as hostage rescue means that the Marine Corps may act only *in extremis* situations.

- The Marine Corps is unlikely, as a matter of policy, to be involved in sustained combat operations (as opposed to contingency response) in the low-intensity conflict environment.

- In the absence of doctrinal change and specialized organization, equipment, and training, the Marine Corps will play a very small role in the areas of foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare that account for the bulk of the military effort under these circumstances.

These facts do not mean that the Marine Corps has been “squeezed out of the market” by the changing world order, or that the Marine Corps should scrap its doctrine, built upon 200-plus years of tradition.

They do, however, suggest the need for a proper appreciation of those facts, and a need to optimize Marine Corps capabilities in the context of that reality. This is a two-part proposition: enhancing traditional capabilities and changing the focus.

Enhancing Traditional Capabilities. Creation of the MAU(SOC)s is an excellent example of the Marine Corps’ response to challenge in the traditional arena. Reduced to its simplest form, it makes an outstanding force even better. The concept today is limited because it concentrates solely on deployed MAUs and those preparing to deploy. Thus, the benefits derived from specialized training and equipment tend to be transitory. With time, experience, emphasis, and money, these benefits could be extended to all Marine elements regardless of their deployment status.

Changing the Focus. This arena poses the greatest challenge to the Marine Corps, for it raises the prospect of weakening the direct link between Fleet and Marine Corps deployments. Simply put, the critical element in small wars, or low-intensity conflict is not the introduction of forces ashore but rather the operations of those units on shore. The second critical element is that those operations, in most cases, will be nonviolent.

All this must be considered in the context of changes in the national security structure signed into law in October 1986. First, a Low-Intensity Conflict Board is being established by the National Security Council to provide centralized oversight for the civil-military U.S. response to LIC. Oversight within the Department of Defense is being enhanced through creation of an Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, and our special operations capability has been improved with the activation of a unified combatant command for special operations.

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This organizational structure clearly recognizes the difference between low-intensity conflict and special operations. At the same time, we must realistically expect that the new Special Operations Command will play a central role in our response to low-intensity conflict. By the same token, we can expect our response to LIC to take on a decidedly joint flavor.

The challenge here can be simply stated but will be exceedingly difficult to resolve: What is the relationship between the Marine Corps—the MAU(SOC)s in particular—and joint special operations? On the one hand, the MAU(SOC)s need not, in fact should not, be assigned to the command. On the other, the capabilities must be integrated as part of the overall effort.

The second challenge is to assess the prospect of an increased nonviolent role for the Marine Corps. This may require increased attention to, and further expansion of, the Marine Civil Affairs capability. It may mean the employment of Marine Corps medical, engineering, and other combat service support units in nation-building operations. Clearly, such operations run the risk of reducing the support essential to deployed units and may, therefore, again require increased attention and expansion, no doubt at the expense of some other elements.

The question of organization in this regard is crucial, whether in a Marine Corps or a joint context. One possible model is the Security Assistance Force (SAF) concept developed by the Army in the 1950s. (The SAF remains a part of Army doctrine in name only.) The SAF was a deployable package of medical, engineering, psychological operations, civil affairs, and other relevant military capabilities organized under a Special Forces headquarters. While they existed, they provided the U.S. with a readily available, comprehensive way of dealing with the unstable civil-military factors that underlie low-intensity conflict. For the most part, the Marine Corps possesses the same broad range of capabilities and could move to organize them in this manner within the confines of existing doctrine.

In sum, the Marine Corps is likely to play a modest role in low-intensity conflict for the foreseeable future. The traditional part of that role will remain extremely important but will not resemble the Marine Corps' first 150 years in scope or intensity. The Marines can play a less traditional nonviolent role within the confines of existing doctrine if they choose to do so. Choosing the roles they will play will be the Marines' greatest challenge for the rest of this century.

Notes

1. See U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual*, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1940).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
3. Caspar W. Weinberger, "The Uses of Military Power," Remarks to the National Press Club, Washington, D.C.: 28 November 1984, p. 2.
4. Ronald W. Reagan, *Freedom, Regional Security, and Global Peace*, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1986), pp.7-9.

5. Weinberger, pp. 5-6.
6. U.S. Laws, Statutes, etc., "General Military Law," *U.S. Code, Title 10—Armed Forces*, (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1982), sec. 5013.
7. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Howard and Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 149.
8. See Commandant of the Marine Corps Memorandum 02-85, "The Marine Corps and Special Operations," 22 July 1985.
9. John F. Kennedy, *Public Papers of the Presidents, John F. Kennedy* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1962), pp. 453-454.

This article originated as a paper presented by Mr. Rylander at the Center for Naval Analyses 1986 Sea Power Forum on the Marine Corps and will be published as part of James L. George and Christopher Jehn, eds., *The U.S. Marine Corps—The View from the Late 1980s* (forthcoming).

