

Attrition vs. Maneuver And the Future of War

by Lieutenant Colonel Ernest A. Szabo

“The supreme excellence lies not in defeating our enemy in battle, but in defeating him without a battle.”

– Sun Tzu

What will warfare in 2032 look like? Will it be the future of a revolution in military affairs promised by Force XXI? Will we see transformational U.S. forces destroying legions of mechanized enemies beyond visual range? Will we see the rise of a peer opponent who matches us tank for tank, computer for computer, and forces us into a higher tech version of the battles of attrition which we saw in the Civil War, WWI, and WWII? Or will it be the urban chaos of Chechnya and the West Bank? How do we predict the future, and how do we plan and prepare for it? Of all the possible scenarios, which is most likely and which is most dangerous?

Attrition or Maneuver?

Attrition - The reduction of the effectiveness of a force caused by loss of personnel and materiel.¹

Maneuver - Employment of forces on the battlefield through movement of combat forces in relation to the enemy, supported by fire or fire potential from all sources, to gain potential advantage from which to destroy or threaten destruction of the enemy to accomplish the mission.²

A recent article, “Three Cheers for Attrition Warfare” (March-April 2002 issue of *ARMOR*), argues the inevitability of attrition. The article seeks to demonstrate the futility of planning esoteric concepts of maneuver warfare based on a revolution in military affairs. The article’s thesis is that the most likely and most dangerous type of warfare likely to be faced by American soldiers in the future would be a war of attrition against a massed, mechanized peer

opponent. The article cites many historical examples to demonstrate that most wars are won by attrition. While it addresses many interesting points, the thesis is wrong.

Maneuver warfare is not dependent upon technology. In fact, we are far more likely to have it inflicted on us by a technologically and economically inferior foe than we are to wage it against him. Second, while war between evenly matched opponents does often degenerate into attrition warfare, we are very unlikely to meet a peer opponent who can force us into a war of attrition. Last, even if destroying an opponent by attrition is feasible, it is unlikely to be

“Maneuver warfare is not dependent upon technology. In fact, we are far more likely to have it inflicted upon us by a technologically and economically inferior foe than we are to wage it against him.”

considered acceptable or suitable by the American people.

If we do not see the need for maneuver warfare, our enemies certainly will. The fans of transformation and Force XXI often talk about how technology will enable us to outmaneuver our opponents. This may be true, but the converse is not true. Technology will not prohibit our enemies from maneuvering against us. Our enemies will adapt to avoid our sensors and other technology and will still arrive on our flanks and in our rear when least expected. A competent enemy will not mass his mechanized forces for JSTARs to detect, and for ATACMS and an Apache Longbow to destroy. He will disperse his armor in cities and complex terrain and strike our CSS units once we pass. We may enter the war planning a grand campaign of maneuver only to find our opponent unwilling to stand up and

fight. We will then settle in for what we think is a long war of attrition only to find our opponent waging a thousand small maneuver battles against us.

The logistics of mechanized warfare may require a secure rear area, but our enemy is unlikely to grant us that luxury. We will have to fight each and every day to secure our lines of communication. The larger our rear area, the more forces we will have to detail to secure it. The greatest battles of the next war are likely to be fought by CS and CSS units and reaction forces rather than major commands. If this “death by a thousand cuts” process sounds like attrition, it may be from our point of view. From our enemy’s, it will be maneuver 101.

Asymmetric warfare from our perspective may mean, “I have tanks and you do not.”

Asymmetric warfare from our enemy’s perspective means, “you have tanks and I blew up your 5,000-gallon fuel tankers.”

In addition to simple physical maneuver, such as envelopment and dispersion, by an enemy, we must also plan for enemies who maneuver against us off the battlefield. Maneuver warfare means to dislocate an enemy or to gain a positional advantage so that he cannot effectively respond to your attack. How many different ways can future enemies maneuver against us using the media, terrorism, NBC weapons, and electro-magnetic, political, or economic measures? How will we respond if we have not thought about them ahead of time?

None of this is an argument for scraping heavy forces. It is a fallacy to think that wars of attrition will be fought with heavy forces while wars of maneuver will be fought with light or transformational forces. Nothing in Force XXI or any of the transformation process will eliminate the need for heavy forces.

“Attrition warfare may be feasible, but it is rarely suitable or acceptable. While style does not count in war, casualties do count. The greatest numbers of casualties in battle are inflicted once an enemy has been defeated and is attempting to withdraw.”

The Army will always need a full spectrum of forces to deal with a full spectrum of threats. Even if all our enemies eliminated their tanks, we would still need them for the same reason they were first invented, to allow us to maneuver across a killing zone against a dug-in enemy.

The ability or necessity to conduct maneuver warfare is not simply a question of technological or economic differences. Schlieffen's quote about “a perfect Cannae requiring both a Hannibal and a Varro” is pithy, but half wrong. Maneuver warfare requires a mobility differential between the forces. One side has to be more agile than the other. This can come from a difference in abilities of the commanders, but there are many other sources. In addition to leadership at the top of an army, there is also the quality of the soldiers, their subordinate leaders, and their training. Many of the famous maneuver battles were not due to brilliance of the generals but to the quality of the troops who were able to execute complex courses of action beyond the capability of the enemy soldiers and units.

The early success of the German army in WWII was largely due to the quality of its soldiers and junior leaders compared to their opponents. When the British army made their frontal attack on the Somme in 1916, they did not intend to needlessly waste their soldiers lives. However, their leaders were afraid that the recently raised levies would be unable to execute a more complicated maneuver and chose a battle of attrition as their only viable course of action.

Beyond military specific training, there are also cultural differences that may allow one side to obtain a significant mobility advantage over an opponent. It was the American soldier's ability to use machines as much as the machines themselves that gave us a mobility advantage and allowed us to conduct maneuver warfare in WWII and in Iraq. Maneuver warfare requires a mobility differential between opponents. It can come from technological, economic, leadership, training, cultural differences, and more. Many of these differences are already evident or can be predicted.

The most likely course of action is that we will be able to maneuver against our enemies and that they will find a method of maneuvering against us.

Lack of a Peer Opponent

What about the most dangerous course of action? What happens when all of these potential differences go away? The result can be a deadlock that results in a war of attrition. For this reason, we should also study doctrine for attrition warfare. But how likely is it? Who will have the ability to fight us to a standstill in the next 30 years?

While none of us can name whom we will fight in 2032, we can predict how they will fight. We can do this by looking at world economies. We cannot predict the political insanity and delusions that cause war; we can predict the economic power that supports war. Who has the means to create a massed mechanized army? While, our enemies will likely have some number of tanks, no country will have enough to challenge us as a peer opponent. There is no country or coalition of countries with the industrial base to challenge the U.S. in a mechanized war in the next 30 years. If any country is going to fight a massed, mechanized war in 2032, they need to be building that army today. The tanks, personnel carriers, SP field artillery, and hundreds of trucks will not need to go into production for another 10-15 years, but the factories that make them are currently behind schedule.

One of the reasons that Iraq lost so quickly was that the thousands of armored vehicles in its inventory were purchased rather than manufactured. The Iraqi nation did not have the means to produce its war machines internally and did not understand them. They could not properly crew their vehicles or employ them en masse. They could not replace what was destroyed.

While we did not know we would fight Iraq in 1962, we did know that tanks and other weapons were being produced and that we would someday fight a massed, mechanized opponent. The T-72s that Iraq used in 1990 were built in the 1970s and '80s. The T-55s

that made up the bulk of their armor were built in the '60s and '70s. When were the Chinese and Soviet factories that produced them constructed? When did these tanks go into development?

We knew long ago that our M1s would be facing T-72s, we just did not know where. Which nations now have, or are developing, the industry to rival the U.S.? Look for the steel mills and factories and your potential mechanized opponents fall out quickly. Russia and China, or a client state, are the two most likely. India is possible. The only other countries with the capability to produce large numbers of mechanized units are in Western Europe and Japan. Even they cannot or will not produce the integrated systems that would allow them to take part on equal footing with the U.S. during the campaigns in Yugoslavia and Afghanistan.

Which nation will wrest air superiority away from the U.S. Air Force? Where are their thousands of fighters, dozens of AWACS, hundreds of refueling tankers, and the global command and control system to synchronize this air battle? The bottom line is they don't exist and will not exist before mid-century. We *can* trade gold for blood at a pace no mechanized enemy can match. Our enemies will be forced into campaigns of asymmetric maneuver to stay alive.

Is There Ever a Time for Attrition?

If we are forced into battles or campaigns of attrition in future war, it should generally be against our will. Attrition warfare may be feasible, but it is rarely suitable or acceptable. While style does not count in war, casualties do count. The greatest numbers of casualties in battle are inflicted once an enemy has been defeated and is attempting to withdraw. Whether the initial battle was maneuver or attrition, the loser is generally destroyed once he accepts defeat and attempts to get away.

The greatest past victories have occurred when an encircled or cut off enemy was destroyed in open terrain or began to surrender en masse. It is always easier to take an enemy prisoner than to kill him. In breaking an enemy's will to fight, it is important that

casualties occur quickly and visibly, rather than slowly. A unit that defends a fortification may suffer 50 percent casualties over a period of weeks, yet still defend effectively because it has had time to adjust to the losses. The same unit that finds itself flanked or encircled in the open will often break and run or surrender after suffering 25 percent casualties in the first few minutes. Battles of attrition, which attempt to destroy the enemy before he begins to withdraw, will run up body counts almost as high for the victor as the vanquished. "Meat grinder" battles such as Petersburg, Verdun, Aachen, and the Huertgen Forest leave the victors as exhausted as the vanquished and unable to pursue or exploit the victory.

Will the American people support such bloodlettings? Battles of attrition destroy more than lives. They destroy economies, infrastructure, and often the society itself. How many of our Allies will submit to having their countries destroyed to save them? Americans are impatient people and value their children's lives. They have always and will always demand that wars be won quickly and at the lowest human cost possible. We know that future wars will be broadcast live to the world by the media. We will have to explain our actions in real time. We will constantly be asked if we could not have found a better way to resolve any tactical problem.

Attrition is generally what happens when our plans fail and we can no longer maneuver. If maneuver is the essence of the art of tactics, then attrition is the absence of art. It is important to remember that maneuver should not be reduced to formulas based on correlation of forces and means (COFM) or historical examples. Maneuver is not always the "indirect approach" of Liddell Hart. Sometimes the best maneuver might be a frontal attack on a wide sector, if the enemy is disorganized but will recover if given time. Other times it might be to disperse into small elements over a wide area to deny the enemy targeting systems a lucrative target. The goal is always to create a situation in which you can strike at the enemy while limiting his ability to strike at you. There may be times when it is tempting to create a scenario that will allow us to bleed the enemy white, however, these have rarely turned out as planned.

Examples of ineffective attempts at battles by attrition were the battles of

Dien Bien Phu and Khe Sanh. In the first, the French were frustrated by their inability to bring the Vietnamese to battle. The enemy possessed a significant mobility advantage over the French and was able to avoid decisive engagement with the superior firepower of the French. The French thought that by occupying a fortified position in the heart of enemy territory, they could force the Vietnamese to fight. The French could then bleed their enemies white as the Vietnamese impaled themselves against the French positions. However, the French did not have the firepower to withstand the resultant siege, and it was they, not the Vietnamese, who marched into the POW cages. The fact that the French may have inflicted nearly equal numbers of casualties on the enemy did not alter the result. They lost the battle, and it was the political fallout rather than the losses in men and materiel that caused France to lose the war.

Less than 20 years later, the U.S. military attempted a similar attrition strategy. We occupied a fortified position at Khe Sanh. Like Dien Bien Phu, it was on a valley floor in the northern part of our area of operations in a place that the enemy could not abide us owning. We would then bleed the enemy white as he tried to assault our position. We thought we had learned from the French. Unlike the French, we owned the hills around the airstrip. Unlike the French, we had the firepower to defeat every attack and the airpower to resupply the position, despite heavy losses. Unlike the French, Khe Sanh was never in danger of being overrun and was evacuated by ground after inflicting many thousands of casualties while suffering relatively lighter losses ourselves. Yet, like the French, we also lost this battle. We did not lose it in the hill fights or on the airstrip. We lost it a little bit every day on the six o'clock news when the newsmen reported how many Americans had died that day, the XXX day of the siege of Khe Sanh.

So what does the future hold? All of these historical examples do not prove that we will fight wars of maneuver any more than the examples of the previous article on attrition prove that it is inevitable. We cannot deduce a theory of war from historical examples since we can never know all of the tiny variables that cause a battle to be won or lost. Nor can we predict the future through purely technical analysis since technological change has an unpredictable.

nature. First we must study history to understand the nature of war, which is unchanging. This is because the nature of war depends on human nature, which changes at an evolutionary pace. We still kill each other for the same reasons our ancient ancestors did. We must combine this study of the historical nature of war with the study of technological change. For technology determines the characteristics of war and this changes at an ever-increasing pace. In combining the two, we can better understand the how and why of future war.

We know that we will fight somewhere at least every 20 years, if not more often. We know that our wealth and technology will give us the ability to move against and strike large distinct enemy forces from a relative advantage. We know that our enemies will respond to this by dispersing, and in other unpredictable ways that will negate or limit the effects of our weapons. We know that we will fight in other population centers under the media's scrutiny. We know that our enemy's culture is likely to be far more tolerant of the prolonged and indecisive nature of attrition warfare than our own. We know that our soldiers and our people do expect us to win with style, that is, quickly, with as few casualties as possible. Attrition can happen and we must be prepared for it. But, it is our duty to avoid the bloodlettings and find ways to maneuver to defeat our enemy quickly and at the lowest cost.

Notes

¹Department of the Army, Field Manual 101-5-1, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 30 September 1997, p. 1-14.

²*Ibid.*, p. 1-96.

LTC Ernest Szabo currently commands 3-362 AR (TS) at Fort Carson, CO. He was commissioned in Armor from S.U.N.Y Oswego in 1984. He served as a platoon leader and XO with 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment in Bindlach and Nuernburg; as commander, C/4-8 Cav in Gelnhauzen and Desert Storm; as division plans officer, 4ID and XO, 1-66 AR, both at Fort Hood, TX. He holds a Masters in Education from Canisius College, Buffalo, NY, and a Masters in Advanced Military Studies, CGSC, Fort Leavenworth.