

Diving in Headfirst: The Air Force and Information Warfare

by

Maj M.J. Petersen, USAF

Is the Air Force diving into the proverbial murky lake headfirst? Are we about to split our collective heads open on a submerged rock hidden in the mud? An article in the March 1995 Air Force Magazine ("Information Warfare" by Peter Grier, pages 34-37) suggests that we may indeed be plunging into something which we have not yet prudently considered.

Granted, information warfare may indeed become "the most fearsome weapon on the emerging techno-battlefield," but will all of our battlefields be the techno- battlefields suggested by the adherents of information warfare? To a great degree, the recent emphasis on the absolute superiority of information warfare in the early years of the 21st century reminds me (as a military historian) of the overdone emphasis on nuclear warfare and the nearly single-minded preparation of the Air Force to fight on that type of battlefield. Today, we can look back at the 1950s and early 1960s and clearly see where this emphasis took us but then, we were too busy diving in headfirst. The Air Force was prepared for the nuclear war that never came, but was sadly unprepared for the wars and military operations that did come--Vietnam, Laos, Grenada, Panama, and Desert One. Even if Adm. William A. Owens is right--and information warfare would allow us to know everything necessary about an enemy's armored division within a 200 square mile box--the relevant question that must be asked is will this be the only kind of battlefield we will face in the 21st century?

Air Force experience during the 1991 Gulf War clearly demonstrated the limitations of satellite surveillance when faced with dense cloud cover over a desert region. What about dense cloud cover over a tiple canopy tropical forest when your opponent is a small number of insurgents or guerrillas carrying only light infantry weapons and relying upon verbal or written instructions for their communications? How well information warfare would work in this kind of scenario is open to speculation to say the least.

Historically, the United States in general, and the Air Force in particular has had a great deal of difficulty institutionally dealing with the notion of confronting an adversary who is much less technologically advanced than ourselves. For example, in the years following the Vietnam War, the Air Force devoted itself to preparing for a major war in Europe against the combined forces of what was the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact. However, while that war never did come about (although it had to be prepared for), we devoted ourselves to the continuing problems of nuclear war and war in Europe to the exclusion of almost everything else. Granted, our preparations for a war against the combined armies of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact may well have been a decisive factor in our stunning success in 1991, this and Korea were the only instances in over 600 Air Force operations since World War II where it can be said that the Air Force fought the

war we had prepared for. All of the other operations (including Vietnam) were either insurgencies, guerilla conflicts, presence missions, shows of force, or humanitarian operations. By and large, it seems that the Air Force spends the majority of its share of the national treasure on preparing for the wars it would like to fight and not on the wars it will be fighting. For example, a draft version of basic Air Force doctrine has even deleted special operations as a mission and strongly suggests that any Air Force unit can do military operations other than war as a sideline to the "real mission."

This is the problem with the current emphasis (perhaps over-emphasis would be the proper term) on information warfare. As an institution it seems that the Air Force is quickly dividing into two camps--the info warriors and the dinosaurs. The former are "forward looking" and the others "just simply do not understand." I have seen the Air Force's Information Warfare presentation, and have read many of the articles, pamphlets, etc that have appeared in the last two years--none of them answer the question: How do we apply this to an opponent who is not fighting on the techno- battlefield.

The Air Force must be prepared to deal with the conflicts we will be fighting in the early 21st century--nasty, dirty, unglamorous little insurgencies, guerilla conflicts, and peacekeeping/peacemaking operations. We must avoid at all costs "mirror imaging" (projecting our own attitudes and values onto a potential adversary). I hope that information warfare and its technology does not make us as capable of fighting in the 21st century as nuclear warfare and its technology did in Vietnam.

Disclaimer

The conclusions and opinions expressed in this document are those of the author cultivated in the freedom of expression, academic environment of Air University. They do not reflect the official position of the US Government, Department of Defense, the United States Air Force or the Air University.

This article has undergone security and policy content review and has been approved for public release IAW AFI 35-101.