

BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR: THE DANGERS OF FIGHTING WITH A NETWORK CENTRIC MILITARY

Alfred I. Kaufman¹

Abstract. This paper explores the consequences that might flow from a complete networking of all systems making up a military force. The impact of both the general thought pattern involved in Network Centric Warfare as well as of its specific recommendations upon a nation's ability to fight a war are discussed. The paper is intended to provide a balance to the often-exaggerated claims made by proponents of Network Centric Warfare concerning the advantages of this way of fighting a war.

INTRODUCTION

The day when computers were networked was a very important day in the history of modern man. No doubt, networking will affect society in many significant ways, much as the commercial Internet has already profoundly modified both the economy as well as our personal lives. An extension of this technology to the realm of military operations is therefore an undertaking well worth concentrated consideration.

As is often the case, however, novelty tends to become fashion, and exaggerated hopes for the future dominate the early days in the life of any new technology. Network Centric Warfare, which describes the fundamental transformation that networking of military systems would, according to its proponents, bring to the way we fight a war, is no exception. After reading the basic writings that define Network Centric Warfare, one cannot easily avoid the powerfully tempting vision of a completely integrated, information-driven network of military systems inexorably crushing the enemy's will.

However, this vision is accompanied by an equally unavoidable feeling that the whole idea of a fully networked force might, in the end, make little operational sense. This paper is intended to explore the reasons for this natural discomfort one experiences when confronted with the claims put forth by the proponents of Network Centric Warfare. Therefore, we shall be concerned, not so much with information technology *per se*, as with understanding the network-centric concept of warfare that appears to be guiding the effort to introduce that technology into the military structure. Specifically, we want to know whether a nation would be well served by a network-centred military such as the one described by its proponents.

THE ECONOMIC PEDIGREE OF NETWORK CENTRIC WARFARE

It is well known that the proponents of Network Centric Warfare claim its legitimacy from events that have recently taken place in the world economy. On the face of it, the military establishment's desire to take the economic establishment as its model must strike one as quite bizarre. For, while it is true that violence can often be found in the market place, the free market and the battlefield are two distinct entities. The economy aims at producing wealth through a free market; war aims at destroying wealth through violent action. The economy operates within the confines of societal rules; in war, there are no rules to hamper a nation's

warlike spirit. A beaten economic competitor usually stays beaten, while a defeated nation will inevitably live on to fight another day. More importantly, however, for our argument here, war displays a significantly less graceful reaction to human error than does the free market; making the wrong decision in war is more likely to be catastrophic to society than making the wrong decision in the market.

The notion that war is business is not a mere figure of speech for the proponents of Network Centric Warfare; the idea impregnates much of their writings. To quote but one of the many examples that populate the field, David Alberts [1] says in his book that

... military operations should be designed to accomplish a task or solve a problem.

In other words, the purpose of warfare is problem solving. By contrast, Clausewitz [2] says

... the aim of warfare is to disarm the enemy so as to make him comply to our will.

Note how the hostility-based determination to submit the enemy to our will has given way to the more neutral concept of problem solving.

Clausewitz cautioned us against this peacetime tendency to think about the bloodshed of war in more philanthropic, or in this case more business-like, terms:

He who uses force unsparingly, without reference to the bloodshed involved, must obtain a superiority if his adversary uses less vigour in its application. This is the way in which the matter must be viewed and it is to no purpose, it is even against one's interest, to turn away from the consideration of the real nature of the affair because the horror of its elements excite repugnance.

In any event, even if one were to accept the proposition that war is business, the lessons learned by the proponents from what is happening in the market place today are demonstrably incorrect. Thus, it is suggested that Economy B, as the proponents call the information-driven sector of our economy, is a truly new form of economic activity exhibiting new forms of behaviour. To quote from VADM. Cebrowski's seminal paper published in the January 1998 issue of the Proceedings [3],

Economy A is characterized by stability, market share equilibrium, and decreasing return on investment. Economy B is characterized by extraordinary growth and wealth generation, increasing returns on

¹ Institute for Defense Analyses, 4850 Mark Center Drive, Alexandria, VA 22311-1882, USA.