

Intellectual Renaissance

Post-Vietnam reforms and the development of a new warfighting philosophy

by Maj Austin M. Duncan

In the wake of a long and bloody conflict in Vietnam, the U.S. Armed Forces faced the daunting task of reflecting on what went wrong and how to reorganize for future wars. Every service transformed from their experiences in Vietnam; however, none were as significant as the United States Marine Corps' intellectual renaissance, culminating with the adoption of a new warfighting philosophy. Though many organizational artifacts remain, over thirty years later, the transformation of the Marine Corps during the 70s and 80s is an unheralded part of our history. During the Marine Corps' intellectual renaissance, the Service increased education standards for potential recruits, birthed a new philosophy of warfighting, professionalized the force through education, and institutionalized maneuver warfare. We must continue to build on that legacy today.

***"Like war itself, our approach to warfighting must evolve. If we cease to refine, expand, and improve our profession, we risk becoming outdated, stagnant, and defeated."*¹**

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Social, Political, and Economic Context

Following Vietnam, service members returned from fighting elusive adversaries in the jungle to arguably an even more significant fight at home. The United States experienced significant strife, tearing at the very social fabric of the nation. Racial tensions and drug abuse were rampant, affecting every sect of society.² The situation was even more magnified in the military. In 1971, Col Robert Heil wrote in the *Armed Forces Journal*:

Historical precedents do not exist for some of the services' problems, such as desertion, mutiny, unpopularity, seditious attacks, and racial troubles. Others, such as drugs, pose difficulties that are wholly NEW. Nowhere, however, in the history of the Armed Forces have comparable past troubles presented themselves in such general magnitude, acuteness, or concentrated focus as today.³

In addition to monumental discipline and morale issues, the military faced an evolving political landscape. In 1973, President Richard M. Nixon ended the draft and the U.S. shifted to an All-Volunteer Force (AVF), emphasizing the importance of quality recruitment.⁴ Mounting casualties at the end of Vietnam and the Water-

gate scandal altered American's faith in government leaders and discredited the military for years to come.⁵ In terms of foreign policy, "Vietnam Syndrome" took root, leaving America reluctant to commit troops unless absolutely necessary—another significant blow to the military brand.⁶ Economically, the Vietnam War severely damaged the U.S. economy, spiking inflation and interest rates, spurring an economic recession.⁷ In sum, despite a significant impetus for change following the U.S.'s "unprecedented and unrepeatable defeat and humiliation" in Vietnam, the Armed Forces faced considerable headwinds.⁸ A historical social divide, cancerous discipline issues, changing political landscape, and the prospect of economic austerity prefaced any attempt at reform.

Out of all the Services, discipline and morale concerns were even more exaggerated in the Marine Corps. In the 1973 General Officer Symposium, the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen Robert Cushman, acknowledged the Marine Corps had the highest absentee and deserter rate of all Services.⁹ Ironically, he also bragged about the health of recruiting, noting each district made quota in 1973 for the first time since 1967.¹⁰ Initially, the Marine Corps was optimistic it could recruit an AVF in a fiscally austere environment while also addressing discipline concerns; however, by 1975 it was clear there was a problem: "the Marine Corps had the worst rates of imprisonment, unauthorized absence, and courts-martial in the armed forces."¹¹ The Corps needed significant reform.



Gen Robert Cushman. (File photo.)

Wilson-Barrow Reforms: Increasing the Education and Quality of Recruits

In the summer of 1975, Gen Louis H. Wilson became Commandant. Facing intimidating obstacles, Gen Wilson devised a plan to navigate the AVF era and address the poor discipline throughout the Corps. While the Army was loosening standards to meet recruiting goals, the Marine Corps chose to do the exact opposite.¹² With high school graduates accounting for less than 50 percent of recruits, Gen Wilson stated the new goal was “three out of four Marines have high school diplomas when they come in, and the remainder have completed tenth grade or higher.”¹³ Additionally, he oversaw a significant reboot of the entire recruiting system, to include establishing a chain of accountability “from the individual recruiter to the depot commander,” and implementing a recruiting management course to improve efficiencies at recruiting stations around the country.¹⁴

In 1979, Gen Wilson’s tenure as Commandant ended, and he handed over the reins to his protégé, Gen Robert H. Barrow to oversee the remainder of the manpower reform. By the time Gen Barrow changed command in 1983, 82 percent of recruits were high school graduates.¹⁵ Because of an increased emphasis on education and improved accountability of recruiting, the Marine

Corps experienced a dramatic reduction in discipline issues while also increasing the quality and elitism of the force.¹⁶

Seeking a New Philosophy of Warfare

With manpower reforms underway, another group of professionals intellectually sparred over the warfare philosophy guiding the Service. Coming on the heels of defeat in Vietnam, many veterans of the Corps questioned their “received wisdom” of doctrine and training.¹⁷ Whereas firepower and attrition previously dominated military thought, some Marines questioned if the Marine Corps, a numerically inferior and inherently seaborne force, should focus on maneuver. In 1978, a young Marine captain astutely summarized the state of the Corps in the *Marine Corps Gazette*: “In recent years, while the Marine Corps’ existence is being questioned from without, many of its members are experiencing an identity crisis of their own.”¹⁸

The heart of the identity crisis stemmed from the prospect of war on the Eastern front against a massive and highly capable Soviet military. In a renowned 1976 Brookings Institution report, the authors questioned the Marine Corp’s ability to fight alongside NATO in Central Europe, suggesting

maneuver doctrine can propel the Marine Corps into the 21st Century where it will again, as in World War II, provide the leadership to this revolution in warfare.²¹

Though his articles marked the start of the official Marine Corps debate, Capt Miller appropriately noted the origins of maneuver doctrine trace back to Genghis Khan and the more recent unpublished works of Col John Boyd, USAF, (Ret).²² Maneuver warfare was nothing new, but a debate emerged within the Corps, spurring a clash of “maneuverists” versus “attritionists.”²³

Between 1979 and 1993, the *Marine Corps Gazette* published more than 50 articles concerning the debate on warfighting.²⁴ Though there was no shortage of opinions on the matter, the intellectual giants of the time were Col John Boyd, LtCol Michael Wyly, and William Lind. As Robert Coram later summarized, “Boyd’s ideas were the foundation and impetus for changes, but Wyly, as an active-duty Marine Corps officer [head of tactics at the Amphibious Warfare School], was the agent of change.”²⁵ Additionally, William Lind heavily advocated for maneuver doctrine, often hosting study groups in Quantico with anyone who would listen while also writing prolifi-

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the Corps should reorganize as a land force to fight together with the Army.¹⁹ However, doing so threatened to alter the defining character of the Marine Corps as an amphibious force, a sacrosanct consideration for a force plagued by the perpetual organizational paranoia of its looming demise.²⁰

In 1979, the *Marine Corps Gazette* featured a two-part series by Capt Steven W. Miller arguing that

cally in the *Marine Corps Gazette* and later penning the *Maneuver Warfare Handbook*.²⁶

The maneuver theorists had a tremendous impact, ultimately informing a new philosophy of warfare. Opposed to the firepower-attrition doctrine prescribed in Army field manuals, which intended to defeat the enemy in the physical domain, maneuver doctrine sought to disrupt and disorganize the

enemy psychologically.²⁷ The new style of warfare stressed mission-type orders, decentralized operations, creative thinking, and opportunistic initiative.²⁸ Most importantly, it offered the Marine Corps a way to remain uniquely amphibious while shedding the baggage of defeat in Vietnam. As such, the Corps birthed a new warfighting philosophy: maneuver warfare.

Professionalizing the Force

With the seeds of maneuver warfare taking hold at the grassroots level, the Corps needed a champion to professionalize the force and institutionalize the new philosophy. During Gen Alfred M. Gray's 1987 confirmation hearing to be the 29th Commandant, he stated a priority goal was improving the "understanding of the art, as well as the science of war."²⁹ He made quick work realizing that goal. On his second day in office, he ordered the creation of Marine Corps University, an organization to synchronize the disparate education commands under one roof with a common vision.³⁰ He also demanded each school be accredited and yield degrees for their students, an enormous undertaking which was not realized until the mid-1990s.³¹ Furthermore, Gen Gray, with the help of LtGen Paul K. Van Riper, implemented a professional reading program organized by grade.³² The education reforms during the late-1980s cannot be understated. Not only did Gen Gray accelerate professionalism throughout the force, many elements of his education reform remain intact today—a true testimony to their impact.

Though Gen Gray's acute focus on education was remarkable in its own right, his legacy stems from the publication of the Marine Corp capstone document: *FMFM 1, Warfighting*. Enlisting a small group of deep thinkers, including Col Boyd and Capt John F. Schmitt, Gen Gray turned years of maneuver warfare debates into the guiding philosophy of the Corps. *FMFM 1*, now known as the *MCDP 1*, crystallized maneuver warfare as "the Marine Corps concept for winning."³³ After nearly two decades of debate following the embarrassment of Vietnam, the Corps

institutionalized maneuver warfare as their new philosophy of warfighting, and the credit belongs to Gen Al Gray.

Conclusion

Post-Vietnam reform redefined the Marine Corps. On the battlefield, adversaries threatened to defeat an outmoded warfighting philosophy; at home, skyrocketing discipline issues threatened to destroy the Corps from

noted, the Corps was able to achieve an intellectual renaissance because

in the late 1980s the ranks were then filled with tough smart, elite, physically fit, ethical warriors who graduated from high school, scored well on their enlistment tests, were completely drug free, and were capable of understanding the more sophisticated operational and tactical concepts called for by maneuver warfare.³⁵

Post-Vietnam reform redefined the Marine Corps. On the battlefield, adversaries threatened to defeat an outmoded warfighting philosophy; at home, skyrocketing discipline issues threatened to destroy the Corps from the inside out.

the inside out. To preserve the legacy, the Marine Corps recruited "the few, the proud," deliberated a new warfighting philosophy, and professionalized the force through education.³⁴ The dramatic post-Vietnam transformation culminated with the publication of *Warfighting*, marking the institutional adoption of maneuver warfare and punctuating the Marine Corps' intellectual renaissance. As Gen William Bowers wisely

Today, there is no shortage of spirited debates and admissions of shortfalls within our service. But these are not only the opinions of young authors filling the pages of our *Marine Corps Gazette* and other professional outlets. The *National Defense Strategy* and *Marine Corps Operating Concept* openly acknowledge we are in the midst of "a period of strategy atrophy" and "currently not organized, trained, or equipped to



Gen Louis Wilson. (File photo.)



Gen Robert Barrow. (File photo.)

meet the demands.”³⁶ Following two decades of land war, our Corps is once again struggling to define its identity and rectify known deficiencies—not all that much different from the post-Vietnam identity crisis. Much like the Marine Corps intellectual renaissance of the 70s and 80s, we must invest in the intellect of our youth and champion their ideas if we are to inspire the next generation of our Corps. America’s youth continues to demonstrate they will clear the bar; it is on us to keep raising it.

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