

2020 MajGen Harold W. Chase Prize Essay Contest: 2nd Place

“MCDP 1, Conflict”

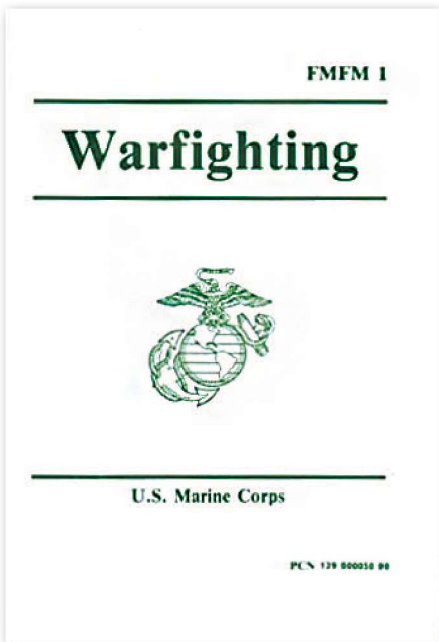
Updating a classic for the 21st century

by Maj Leo Spaeder

Upon its release in 1989, *Fleet Marine Force Manual 1, Warfighting*, was a revolutionary document that doctrinally codified maneuver warfare as the Marine Corps’ warfighting philosophy. It was an “intellectual reaction” by maneuverists, championed by the Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen Alfred M. Gray, to the attrition-based Vietnam War. While not an overnight success—see the “Attritionist Letters” in the *Marine Corps Gazette’s* back issues—it achieved its intended effect: transforming the Service’s and the joint force’s approach to and preparation for war. In 1997, Commandant Gen Charles C. Krulak evolved this philosophical foundation and issued a revision, *MCDP 1*, to expand, clarify, and refine concepts related to the nature of war, styles of warfare, and maneuver warfare.

However, as indicated by the publication dates conspicuously mentioned, *Warfighting* remains a 20th century artifact operating in the 21st century security environment—to the detriment of the Nation and Marine Corps. *Warfighting*—beginning with its title alone—anchors its readers on war, which is only a violent subset of conflict, and misses the role of military operations within conflict’s broader field. As the United States operates within a renewed period of great power competition against adversaries who are employing alternate military or political approaches to achieve their objectives, the absence of a philosophical approach to conflict is illuminated and limits the Marine Corps’ and joint force’s ability to provide the fullest range of options

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Is Fleet Marine Force Manual 1, Warfighting, (currently MCDP 1) an “artifact of the 20th century?” (Cover, FMFM 1, Warfighting, USMC 1989.)

to senior civilian policymakers. Therefore, the Marine Corps must retire the current *Warfighting* and update it as a new foundational publication titled *Conflict*. As Gen Gray himself warned in the preface to the 1997 edition, “if we cease to refine, expand, and improve our profession, we risk becoming out-

dated, stagnant, and defeated.” The Marine Corps has reached that point and requires a second revolution to prepare the Service for the next century and, once again, lead the Nation as the vanguard of military intellectual development.

What’s In a Name? The Human Dimension and Bias

According to *Warfighting*, “[T]he human dimension is central in war. It is the human dimension which infuses war with its intangible moral factors. War is shaped by human nature and is subject to the *complexities, inconsistencies, and peculiarities* (emphasis added) which characterize human behavior.” This section within “The Nature of War” chapter is central to why the title, *Warfighting*, is an imperfect description to military operations across the spectrum of conflict. Cognitive biases are the complexities, inconsistencies, and peculiarities that the publication stresses as key. Another book on the Commandant’s Reading List—*Thinking, Fast and Slow* by Daniel Kahneman—explains how the availability heuristic leads to *Warfighting’s* systematic error. The more easily one can recall a salient or dramatic event or a vivid, personal experience, the higher the likelihood one believes an event to occur; the more difficult, the lower the likelihood. *Warfighting*—and the majority of the Commandant’s Professional Reading List, for that matter, since combat makes much more interesting reading than peace—is focused on “the violent clash of interests” from its name to its end notes. This leads to an institutional overestimate regarding the likelihood of war at the expense of

the more likely: conflict that is more often non-violent than violent.

The reality is that the United States, the Marine Corps, and individual Marines will be at “peace”—more on the fallacy of this statement in the next section—vastly more than they will be at war. Yet, *Warfighting* primes its reader, every Marine as it is highlighted as a Commandant’s selection and taught at every professional military education program, to overly focus on war, not conflict. This priming is reflected in the Service’s *combat* (emphasis added) development process, schools and training curriculum, and unit mission essential tasks.

Conversely, *Warfighting* does not prime the reader to think about the full non-violent spectrum of conflict as only two paragraphs discuss military operations other than war, and it unhelpfully pairs that mission set with small wars, which are still violent struggles. This lack of rigor to challenge the reader to

think across the entire spectrum of conflict—especially the objectively more likely non-violent portion—could be one of the reasons why Congressional leadership consider Special Purpose MAGTFs as readiness sumps and

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MEUs are seemingly just theater security cooperation forces teaching the same small unit tactics repetitively: Marines do not know how to leverage them for conflict, just violence.

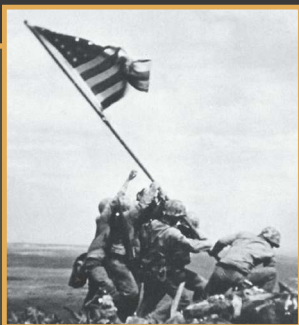
In understanding availability bias, it is critical to note why *Warfighting* was written so focused on war. It is

the product of availability’s central premise: a vivid, personal experience. Gen Gray and other maneuverists developed maneuver warfare in the aftermath of the Vietnam War as an emotional response to the bankruptcy of its attrition-based tactics. It was also developed before behavioral science was a widely-appreciated field as it is today. Armed with this revealed knowledge, the opportunity exists to remove the underlining availability bias and correct the accompanying systematic error to craft an improved doctrinal philosophy.

Renewed Great Power Competition, Spectrum of Conflict, and Joint Doctrine

In the first two years of the Trump Administration, the *National Security Strategy* and *National Defense Strategy* proclaimed a renewed great power competition. While these two documents change frequently, these two particular editions highlight an enduring

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principle overlooked in *Warfighting*: there is no “peace,” there is always inter-state competition, but it rarely actualizes into war. The publication recognizes the concept when it refers to a “spectrum of conflict” but does not fully embrace its implication. Secretary James N. Mattis’ *National Defense Strategy* specifically directed the military Services to “expand the competitive space.” Yet, *Warfighting* does not adequately describe the competitive space fully; therefore, it is not in consonance with higher-level strategic documents as it does not provide philosophical foundations to generate the fullest range of military options to support senior civilian policymakers.

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Failing to update its capstone publication, the Marine Corps is relinquishing its ability to drive joint doctrine in the way the original *Warfighting* institutionalized the tenets of maneuver warfare across the entire joint force. In particular, the current *Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, Competition Continuum*, published in June 2019, includes foolhardy notions about cooperation with revisionist states, despite the empirical evidence provided from the Peloponnesian War to today’s Belt and Road Initiative that great powers are always in conflict.¹ Updating *MCDP 1* to *Conflict* would allow the Marine Corps to properly frame what international relations theory and world history already know: states are always in a state of conflict, more often non-violent, but sometimes violent. Even when Marines could be responding to a humanitarian disaster in close proximity to or possible cooperation with Chinese forces, they are still in conflict: “fighting” to be seen as the most benevolent, most caring, most competent. Competition is for the playing field; conflict is for

national power. Allowing the Joint Staff to confuse those hard-won lessons is only done at the Marine Corps’ peril.

Continuing a Winning Formula: Simple to Understand Yet Genius to Craft

The single most important achievement of *Warfighting* is how it took complex, doctorate-level concepts and distilled them into an accessible, readable publication from general officer to lance corporal. “*MCDP 1, Conflict*,” will build upon that winning formula and add to the document, not remove. In its current form, there is room to incorporate deterrence (at the time of *Warfighting*’s writing and subsequent revision, deterrence referred exclusively

to nuclear deterrence), coercion, and compellence theory. *Conflict* should also more explicitly incorporate the Chinese approach to employing non-lethal military power to achieve encirclement (*wei chi*), the growing opacity of alternate military approaches to achieving strategic ends, and expand upon the interrelation between military operations and other elements of national power (to include finance, intelligence, and law enforcement).² Meanwhile, the central premise of the philosophy, maneuver warfare, would remain as its tenets are as applicable to *Conflict* as to *Warfighting* by the neutralization of the enemy’s system and will through rapid, focused, and unexpected actions in both space/domain and time. The Marine Corps would do itself, the joint force, and allied and partner militaries a service to fulfill this same task for *Conflict* as it did with war.

Conclusion: Updating a Classic

In conclusion, *Warfighting* is and always will be a classic, just not in the literary sense where its flaws only en-

hance its timelessness; it will forever stand as a guidepost for the intellectual expansion of the military profession and a monument to the Marine Corps’ institutional development. However, the Marine Corps’ contribution to national security is too important to let stagnate and, as the document itself warns, “[w]hile conflict is timeless, it is also ever-changing.” The Marine Corps must recognize that *Warfighting* was appropriate for its era and achieved its desired effects but must be re-named and re-conceptualized to prepare the next generations of Marines for 21st century conflict. It must expand its understanding of conflict and overcome its anchoring effects to provide an improved doctrinal philosophy. After three decades, the Marine Corps must retire *Warfighting* and embrace “*MCDP 1, Conflict*.”

Notes

1. The Belt and Road Initiative (also called the New Silk Road and formerly known as One Belt, One Road) is a transcontinental infrastructure program designed to expand China’s economic and political influence. A helpful primer is available from the Council on Foreign Relations at <https://www.cfr.org>.

2. Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* directly influenced the development of *Warfighting* from the notes section, but the Chinese encirclement strategy of *wei chi* could be linked with ideas about deterrence and coercion to expand upon its value within non-lethal conflict. The author deliberately did not use gray zone warfare, hybrid warfare, or other associated terms as those concepts do not have definitive definitions. *Conflict* can address the underlying nature of these approaches (ambiguity, non-/mis-attribution, asymmetry, etc.) instead of the changeable means (non-declared combatants, militias, private military contractors, etc.) similar to the character of war described in the same way as *Warfighting*.



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