

# Response to Marinus “Marine Corps Maneuver Warfare: A Historical Context”

In regard to the article written by Two Manueverists,  
“What Marines Believe About Warfare: A Declaration”

by Marinus Era Novum

The choice of style of prose, pseudonym, platform, and every other choice in writing makes it clear that these authors intend this series of essays to discuss nothing less than the soul of the Marine Corps and the doctrine we hold so dear as an institution. This response is not intended to be antagonistic but rather add to the dialectic that the author Marinus suggests is necessary when examining institutional changes. It is clear we are at an inflection point and this discussion is necessary. I hope to remain succinct and clear in my points while responding to points made, questions raised, as well as bringing forth some new ideas for consideration.

A word of caution to the reader, in raising questions—some of which may go against the grain—it is important to not think in absolutes. Black and white thinking rarely give us a full picture when there are so many shades of gray. When questioning ideas, especially those ideas held so dear, it is best done with an open mind and to not let the irrationalism and fear that can accompany absolute reasoning to cloud our judgment.

That is my largest complaint with “What Marines Believe About Warfare: A Declaration.” The article makes a total of 37 assertions that the reader is to take as foundational to who we are as

Marines. This is not a rebuke of those 37 points—remember to avoid absolutes. But in this time of institutional change, I challenge others to reread those points with a different lens. Why anchor our beliefs so broadly when we have the opportunity to think so freely?

The overarching goals of the paper, “Marine Corps Maneuver Warfare: A Historical Context,” seem less concrete than the absolute declaration made by the later article for discussion. The article provides historical context to the maneuver warfare movement and leaves open to question whether this doctrine should be questioned and reconsidered, a timely topic and one which is getting much attention. Marinus makes few absolute statements, and it seems to promote thought and debate. In answering Marinus’ final question is where I wish to make my only absolute statement. Yes, it is time to reconsider our basic doctrine.<sup>1</sup>

## **Iraq as a Case Study of the Possible Incompleteness of Maneuver Warfare Doctrine**

Marinus raised the question about the mixed results of maneuver warfare doctrine in practice but chose to leave that question addressed in another debate. I will offer a brief examination of the Iraq War as a case study in the failure of maneuver warfare in practice. No

doubt that many will point out the stunning results of initial tactical success in the 2003 invasion. This seemingly quick and decisive victory would also seem to align to assertion number five of the Two Manueverists, that “war is an instrument of policy” and is political in nature. The swift defeating of Saddam’s regime seemed to be just the type of victory that would excite the short attention span of the American public. After all, it would seem harder to gain much support beyond that for a war that was largely of our own choosing and not that of an existential crisis. It seems more textbook example of *MCDP 1* could not be given than the actions of Marine and Coalition forces between 20 March 2003 and 1 May 2003 beginning with crossing the line of departure in Kuwait and ending with the bold and infamous declaration of, “Mission accomplished.” Indeed, it is taught to be viewed as a glowing success in professional military education to young officers, as a stop in any Expeditionary Warfare School seminar would demonstrate. And when viewed narrowly, we can easily see the allure of this thinking.

Consider the following passage from *MCDP 1*:

Rather than wearing down an enemy’s defenses, maneuver warfare attempts to bypass these defenses in order to penetrate the enemy system and tear

it apart. The aim is to render the enemy incapable of resisting effectively by shattering his moral, mental, and physical cohesion—his ability to fight as an effective, coordinated whole—rather than to destroy him physically through the incremental attrition of each of his components, which is generally more costly and time-consuming. Ideally, the components of his physical strength that remain are irrelevant because we have disrupted his ability to use them effectively. Even if an outmaneuvered enemy continues to fight as individuals or small units, we can destroy the remnants with relative ease because we have eliminated his ability to fight effectively as a force.

This seems to be an almost Nostradamus like foretelling of the invasion. The enemy system, viewed as centered around Saddam and his regime, was rendered ineffective and resulted in the stunning tactical victory that culminated with the capturing of Baghdad and the toppling of the Saddam's Regime. But re-read the end of the passage:

Even if an outmaneuvered enemy continues to fight as individuals or small units, we can destroy the remnants with relative ease because we have eliminated his ability to fight effectively as a force.

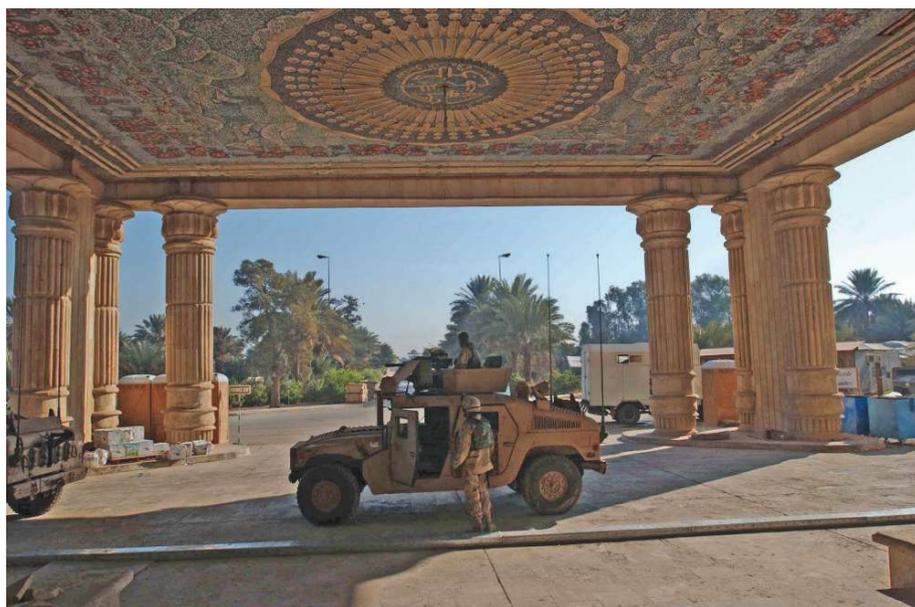
The outmaneuvered enemy in this case turned into a violent insurgency and fueled a civil war. As it turned out, it was not an enemy easily defeated in small units and not a situation that made securing strategic objectives easy. Did a destabilized Iraqi State, increased radicalism, and Iranian influence meet our political objectives? Some may point to the emergence of other factors like religious factions and sponsorship from other state actors like Iran, but remember those factors were at one point effectively under control of a single entity in the Saddam Regime. We cannot view the complexity of the will of a people as simply through the state as Clausewitz may have been able to from his historical lens.<sup>2</sup> Tearing apart an enemy system may not be fracturing a system with a unified will at all. As was the case with Iraq, this tearing apart of a system may expose how complex the will of those components are. And in defeating an enemy in this way, there exists the possibility that the strategic landscape is far less clear than before as a direct result of tactical victory. Was this war just better left unfought? Or could a different choice of tactics have produced a different result? What if Iraq was more completely defeated while Saddam was still in power before being fractured into so many disparate

wills? Was this an anomaly? A failure of political leaders? Perhaps a mixture of many things, but can a doctrine be said to be timeless if one of its largest tests can be viewed as a failure?

The possibility is presented here that failure to gain decisive strategic advantage following the 2003 invasion is not as a consequence to fail to adhere to the tenants of maneuver warfare but, rather, how adherence to that doctrine demonstrates that maneuver warfare is not complete as a warfighting philosophy. Particularly, that it has failed to demonstrate a connection between tactical victory and decisive strategic victories in anything less than wars with limited objectives. It may seem the argument presented is to revert to an attrition mindset. Do not think so absolutely. As Marinus pointed out, all warfare will contain some elements of attrition. Perhaps we should not look at maneuver and attrition in such juxtaposition. Perhaps there are shades of gray worthy of consideration. And just perhaps, the changing character of war calls for us to move past attrition and maneuver.

### On Military History

The discussion of military history and theories by Marinus and Two Manuverists reveals an odd trend that seems to also be present at the center of our current institutional changes—with the discussion of Clausewitz, Sun Tzu, Julian Corbett, John Boyd, and even Baron de Jomini. Discussion of conflict includes success of the German Army in World War II, planning for potential conflict with the Soviet Union, and brief mentions of Vietnam and other conflicts. This would seem a brief but compelling anthology of ground warfare but is missing a very key component—any influence from a naval perspective. How did it come about that a historical context of our fundamental warfighting philosophy as a Marine Corps can be summed up without a whisper of Alfred Thayer Mahan or Maj Pete Ellis? That the main conflicts of interest are that of land wars? Where is the mention of perhaps the most epic naval contest in history, the Pacific in World War II? Is the battle of Guadalcanal not a com-



**Capturing Baghdad, ousting Saddam Hussein, and the collapse of the enemy system exposed how complex that system actually was. (Photo by SSgt Michael Pryor.)**

elling example of the necessity of an amphibious force to prosecute a naval campaign?

The answer is likely that the analysis conducted to bring about the maneuver warfare movement was conducted during a time which can be considered a historical anomaly. At that time, a credible threat to the predominance of U.S. naval power did not exist. Conflicts from the later half of the 20th century on have been largely at the time and place of our choosing due to uncontested control of the sea. Under this unique global paradigm, it is understandable and perhaps even excusable that the primary focus was not on the Marine Corps' role in importance of securing that Naval supremacy. So much of our energies have been dedicated to thinking primarily of conflict primarily on land, but if the widely discussed shift in the global paradigm is even remotely true, it is unwise to assume that we will be able to fight when and where we want with unopposed access from the sea. Are all those tenants learned from our study of land warfare easily transferable? If we have a doctrine whose main historical foundations leave out any maritime component, should we not reconsider the conclusions drawn as we seek to return to the sea?

In his conclusion, Marinus points out, "The future evolves from the past." Statements similar to this have been made about the study of history for as long ago as Thucydides wrote his history of the Peloponnesian Wars. Thucydides hoped to have his histories serve as, "knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it."<sup>3</sup> Contemporary historian John Gaddis Lewis offers this interpretation of Thucydides words and points out the key difference between resemblance and reflection. There is a difference in "patterns surviving across time and repetitions degraded by time."<sup>4</sup> Can we conclusively say that the study of history in context to the maneuver warfare movement picked up on those patterns which survive across time? Or do they only represent some repetition that with time will fade?

### On Identity

The Two Manueverists assertion number 35 describes our Spartan qualities as an institution. It is true that most Marines do hold these Spartan qualities dear. The Spartan society was built on a culture of warfighting. But perhaps when we look back at the ancient Hellenes, we have as much to learn from the Athenians, who after all were a maritime people. The Athenians were able to build an empire based off naval power. While the qualities of the Spartan warrior culture are not on trial here, the Marine Corps' identity is. As with our study of history and theory, there seems to exist an institutional tendency to fetishize ground combat and ignore naval heritage. While we can celebrate the ethos of the Spartans, we should recognize that the sea power of the Athenians brought them prosperity and power beyond that of their Spartan counterparts. Yet, we must also learn from the mistakes and misapplications of Athenian sea power, primarily in the form of the Sicilian expedition. A belief in the infallibility of their fleet and the underestimation of emerging threats lead to grave miscalculation with devastating consequences.

It is my sincere hope that we find no analogy of our own Sicilian Expedition, but that threat exists. Indeed, it is possible that the institutional pain Marinus points to in the post-Vietnam Marine Corps can see how dangerously close Vietnam was to our Sicily.<sup>5</sup> There may even be room to argue that our two decades long sojourn in the Middle East was near to our own Sicilian expedition. Though that depends on the future and how we let this recent experience define us. Are the lessons learned here timeless patterns? Or merely repetitions, soon to be degraded by time? Perhaps a combination, but it is important to understand this distinction and to not let the short-lived repetitions define our identity.

As we have focused on conflicts over the past seven decades where our dominance at sea has not required the Marine Corps to fight as a part of a naval campaign, we should ask if we draw from this patterns or repetitions. Do current changes to the global para-

digim necessitate more than lip service to returning to our naval roots as an institution? Will this cause an institutional identity crisis? It seems that we are already in the midst of this identity crisis as we make declarations about our beliefs and seek to give them so much context. While in the midst of this crisis, perhaps we should consider learning from the maritime Athenians as well as the warlike Spartans, the good and the bad.

### On Forms of Education and Thinking Other Than Military History

Marinus briefly mentions the maneuver warfare movement as emerging in a time where military operations research thinking dominated our defense complex. This is true, but perhaps should not be so quickly disregarded. As where we have not seen a direct link in maneuver warfare and strategic advantage, this is not the case for operations research. For the sake of succinctness, I will leave it to say that victories in World War II and the collapse of the Soviet Union are arguably the most important strategic outcomes of the 20th century, and they can both be tied to the application and development of operations research.

Marinus is right to point to the emergence of complexity science as key to the maneuver warfare movement. Indeed, in his essay "Destruction and Creation,"<sup>6</sup> Boyd demonstrates how much his theories are influenced by thermodynamics. Thermodynamics being one of the many fields in the interdisciplinary field of complexity science, which includes others like economics, physics, biology, computation, information theory, psychology, cognition, and yes operations research. The beauty of Boyd's efforts is how well he was able to demystify this topic, tie it so closely to the human decision making process, and meld it with such a comprehensive view of conflict in his landmark presentation, "Patterns of Conflict."<sup>6</sup> While this turn to military history Marinus pointed to was important for the maneuver warfare movement, it should not necessarily mean the divorce from other disciplines that can provide further rigor to our analysis. Rather, we should seek a more renaissance approach to our

intellectual pursuits and be informed by a wide array of fields. Indeed, many buzzwords of the day including machine learning and artificial intelligence are modern applications and developments of operations research and more broadly complexity science.

To ignore the importance of this interdisciplinary approach may see us lose critical advantage in emerging technologies. Two Maneuverists' assertion number 32 acknowledges the importance of technology but values the human component more. That point is not to be disputed, but overreliance on the human without looking at how changing technology can change the character of war in which humans engage could have possibly disastrous effects for those humans. One should not prefer a bow and arrow to gunpowder for a belief in human will. Nor can we rely on the accuracy of a rifled barrel without a skilled marksman. The interaction of humans and technology makes capability and changes the character of war. The risk of falling behind in this sphere real and the consequences have the potential to be extremely damaging.<sup>8</sup> The presence of these emerging threats is perhaps more than power point deep. Two Maneuverists' assertion number 28 states that militaries have been unsuccessful in predicting the changing character of war and that a Marine Corps we should prepare for a wide range of possibilities and adapt quickly when conflict arrives. Again, it is not the position to say that this assertion is entirely incorrect but point out the possibility that being behind the curve in certain emerging technologies may present the dilemma where adaptation when conflict arises is not enough.

Assertion number 29 of the Two Maneuverists points to the importance of learning for a leader and the lifelong commitment to learning needed in the profession of arms. This may be the assertion with the least amount of room to give debate. I would expound on this thought, to say that this learning must not be constrained to a single discipline. While we should look for the patterns of history to provide insights to the future, we should also study other disciplines to inform our perceptions.

This approach provides the best defense from being caught unaware of emerging technological threats and provides leaders with necessary technical literacy. The same informed approach to emerging technologies in discovering patterns and repetitions is needed as it is in our study of history.

### Conclusion

Writing in 1888 at the dawn of a new era of global competition, Alfred Thayer Mahan had following to say:

Our new Navy is preparing now; it can scarcely be said, as regards its material, to be yet ready. The day of grace is still with us—or with those who shall be future captains and admirals. There is time yet for study; there is time to imbibe the experience of the past to become imbued, steeped, in the eternal principles of war, by the study of its history and the maxims of its masters. But the time of preparation will pass; some day the time of action will come. Can an admiral then sit down and re-enforce his intellectual grasp of the problem before him by a study of history, which is simply a study of past experience? Not so; the time of action is upon him, and he must trust his horse sense.<sup>9</sup>

There are many similarities for us today as a Marine Corps. The experience of naval officers of this era, to include Mahan, was predominantly from the civil war, but they were being asked to create a new Navy to project sea power across the globe. A challenge they proved up to during the Spanish-American War and in doing so drastically changed the global landscape at the onset of the 20th century. In our similar time of grace, will we be able to prepare ourselves for what comes next? It is widely suggested that the next fight will be drastically different than the last. Should we carry with us the same possibly incomplete doctrine with us to the next fight? Either way we must take advantage of this time to prepare, and much of that preparation will come in the form of learning, education, and shaping our identity. In doing so we should take a renaissance approach to learning. Being informed by history as well as by what technical disciplines may teach us about emerging

technology and the evolving character of war. As we continue to study and learn, much will depend on our ability to pick up on those patterns across time that will prove a useful guide without falling victim to repetitions that could lead us astray. As we take on this challenge it is necessary, as Marinus suggests, to ask the tough questions about our doctrine and identity to ensure the Marine Corps will be ready to meet the demands of the Nation.

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### Notes

1. An opinion that seems to be gaining traction as we can see from articles in recent issues, specifically *The Fantasy of MCDP 1* by LtCol Thaddeus Drake Jr. and *MCDP 1, Conflict* by Maj Leo Spaeder.
2. Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984). In opening definitions in chapter 1 of *On War*, Clausewitz expressed that physical violence is only made moral by the state and the law. This definition which preceded so much subsequent analysis may not be wholly appropriate in all views of modern warfare.
3. Thucydides as quoted from John Gaddis, *On Grand Strategy*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2018).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. John Boyd, "Destruction and Creation," (1976).
7. Robert Coram, *Boyd: the Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War*, (New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown, 2004).
8. Christian Brose, "The Kill Chain: Defending America in the Future of High-Tech Warfare," (New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2020). Provides compelling arguments to look at how we may be falling short in our information capabilities and the impacts to the character of war.
9. Allan F. Westcott, *Mahan on Naval Warfare: Selections from the Writings of Rear Admiral Alfred T. Mahan*, (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1941).

