Waging War Beyond the Battlefield

Remarks at the Celebration of 50 Years at RAND

Brian Michael Jenkins, November 8, 2018

On November 8, 2018, the RAND Corporation held an event to pay tribute to Brian Michael Jenkins and commemorate his 50 years of service at RAND. Jenkins serves as Senior Adviser to the President of the RAND Corporation and is an expert on terrorism and security. At the event, Jenkins spoke about terrorism and the United States' response to it over the past several decades, and his remarks are presented here.

I first came to RAND 50 years ago, directly from the 5th Special Forces Group in Vietnam, but returned to Vietnam within months to join a newly created military planning unit—an assignment that continued until 1971. It was an ad hoc wartime arrangement that put me under military command in Saigon, but allowed me to consult at RAND when in Santa Monica.

These were tumultuous years. The war had deeply divided the country, as well as the people at RAND. As a soldier, I was angry. Not at those opposing war, but at those running it.

It seemed to me that our military doctrine and organization—our entire repertoire of warfare—was designed for conventional war in Europe.

In Vietnam, the military stuck to its repertoire, even though it was ill-suited to the challenges we faced. Changes were proposed—repeatedly—but the obstacles were too great. For us, the war was unchangeable.[1]

I kept a photo cut out from an old copy of *Paris Match* magazine showing grim-faced French soldiers departing in 1954. They had lost.

By 1969, I was convinced we too were going to lose.

Terrorism Is Theater

Traditionally, war is a series of battles between two armies in which one side will lose and ultimately sue for peace. In Vietnam, our foes suffered losses at a far greater rate than our own, but did not accept these losses as decisive. Instead, they prolonged the conflict, while American public opposition grew.[2]

This is not an indictment of the anti-war movement. It was a first lesson. Public perceptions matter.

We were winning battles, but we had to keep winning battles indefinitely. One alternative to this Sisyphean task was to annihilate North Vietnam, reduce it to radioactive rubble—which we know

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[1] Brian Michael Jenkins, *The Unchangeable War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RM-6278-2-ARPA, 1970, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_memoranda/RM6278-2.html.

[2] My very first publication at RAND was *Why the North Vietnamese Keep Fighting*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, D-20153-ARPA/AGILE, 1970, https://www.rand.org/pubs/documents/D20153.html.

now was seriously contemplated, but fortunately rejected. Another alternative was to negotiate a way out. We left.

Since then, wars have become even more about perceptions: Outcomes increasingly depend on whose story wins.

During these same years, I began to perceive terrorism as a new mode of conflict. By 1970, there had been enough terrorist assassinations, bombings, kidnappings, and hijackings to indicate a clear trend. My concern was that we were again unprepared to deal with this new mode of conflict.

Terrorism was not a model of war that fit with America's experience. As in Vietnam, America's enormous military power was largely, though not entirely, irrelevant. Terrorists know they cannot defeat the United States in a conventional military contest—as the Islamic State recently learned.

But terrorism subverts the conventional rules of war. Terrorists choreograph violence to create an atmosphere of fear and alarm, which, in turn, will cause people to exaggerate the threat. Terrorism is aimed at the people watching. Terrorism is theater.

As terrorist violence escalated, the military was thrust into an expanding role, beginning with the rescue of American hostages and leading ultimately to a global war, which continues to this day.

The Role of Technology

The rise of this modernized terrorism reflected both political circumstances and technological developments—in particular, the spread of television and the deployment of communications satellites.

How ironic—communications satellites were the topic of RAND's first report in 1948.[3]

Satellites and television gave terrorists access to a global audience. We had already seen how television had a major impact on the perceptions and attitudes of the American public during the war in Vietnam—the first televised war. Our foes understood this.

Looking back, we can see terrorists as primitive pioneers in developing tactics, and eventually strategies, based upon the manipulation of perceptions. The critical role is the one played by the audience.

I recall that in the late 1970s, we looked at what weapons were coming into military arsenals that future terrorists might exploit—precision-guided munitions, shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles. We missed the biggest weapon of all—the Internet, which was then still in its infancy.

The Internet enabled terrorists to converse directly with sympathizers and supporters, and remotely inspire homegrown recruits to carry out actions wherever they are. It turned every local conflict into a global concern.

We see terrorism as a physical threat. But our foes see terrorism as way to incite followers and create terror.

The Continuing Threat

Terrorism has not turned out to be the existential threat we feared in the shadow of 9/11, but continuing terror still threatens our democracy in a more insidious way.

The 9/11 attacks fundamentally altered our perceptions of plausibility—after 9/11, no terrorist scenario could be ruled out. The threat has transcended what we see happening to instead what we can imagine might happen. Meanwhile, it has become harder to tell what's real and what isn't.

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[3] RAND Corporation, *Preliminary Design of an Experimental World-Circling Spaceship*, Santa Monica, Calif., SM-11827, 1948, https://www.rand.org/pubs/special_memoranda/SM11827.html.

Terrorism also magnifies society's general anxieties. It exacerbates worries about America's changing demographic landscape, immigration, crime, economic displacement, America's role in the world, the survival of our own individual liberty. Every new alarm *deepens* existing divisions.

We are today concerned about Russian interference in our domestic politics. Russian so-called active measures are nothing new, but have been amplified by technological developments.

These measures are intended to deepen our political divisions by secretly inciting all sides at the same time. They erode our trust in national institutions, and weaken us as a society.

There is a continuing theme here.

The strategic role of the people in Mao Zedong's theory of people's war, the role of public opinion in the Vietnam War, the creation of fear and anxiety by terrorists, and foreign information operations—these are all components of contemporary conflict.

Military force is not obsolete, but warfare in the future will increasingly be about manipulating perceptions—whether by hostile states or nonstate actors—fueling fear, eroding morale, fomenting distrust. As in the case of terror, we are this form of warfare's target—and its accomplices, its victims, and its agents.

RAND research has pointed to the rising partisan polarization of national politics, while RAND's recent publication of *Truth Decay* looks at the diminishing role of facts and analysis in American public life.[4] Adding to these developments an atmosphere of unreasoning terror makes a bad combination.

A Nation United Cannot Be Sundered

Neither border walls nor firewalls can protect a divided society that dismisses fact and submits to the tyranny of fear. Our defense must come from us—all of us as Americans—not just the Departments of Defense or Homeland Security.

A nation united in its commitment to fundamental values—liberty, courage, a sense of community, mutual respect—cannot be sundered, cannot be conquered.

How we get better at countering our foes while strengthening ourselves and our national institutions is the major challenge that we now face. Our democracy depends on it.

There will be much more to do in the next 50 years.

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[4] Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2314-RC, 2018, www.rand.org/t/RR2314.

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