

The Problem with Fourth-Generation War

Antulio J. Echevarria II
Strategic Studies Institute

For theorists of Fourth Generation War (4GW), there's both good news and bad news. The good news is that there is only one problem with the notion of 4GW. The bad news is that the theory itself is the problem. Like the fabled emperor who had no clothes, 4GW is bereft of any intellectual garments: the concept itself is fundamentally and hopelessly flawed. It is based on poor history and only obscures what other theorists and analysts have already clarified.

Although the idea of 4GW emerged in the late 1980s, it has gained considerable popularity of late, particularly as a result of recent twists in the war in Iraq. It is worth a moment, therefore, to consider the theory's basic premises.

In brief, the proponents of 4GW claim:

The first generation of modern war was dominated by *massed manpower* and culminated in the Napoleonic Wars. The second generation, which was quickly adopted by the world's major powers, was dominated by *firepower* and ended in World War I. In relatively short order, during World War II the Germans introduced third-generation warfare, characterized by *maneuver*. That type of combat is still largely the focus of U.S. forces . . . [4GW is an] evolved form of *insurgency* [that] uses all available networks—political, economic, social, military—to convince the enemy's decision makers that their strategic goals are either unachievable or too costly for the perceived benefit. (*Armed Forces Journal*, November 2004)

Unfortunately, this construct is misleading on several counts. First, the theory's sequencing of the so-called generations of war is both artificial and indefensible. Portraying changes in warfare in terms of "generations" implies that each one evolved directly from its predecessor, and, as per the natural progression of generations, eventually displaced it. However, the generational model is a poor way to depict changes in warfare. Simple displacement rarely takes place, significant developments often occur in parallel. Firepower, for example, played as much a role in World War II, and the Korean and Vietnam conflicts as did maneuver, perhaps more. In fact,

insurgency as a way of waging war actually dates back to classical antiquity, and thus predates the so-called second and third generations (firepower and maneuver) as described by 4GW theorists. Insurgents, guerillas, and resistance fighters figured large in most of the wars fought during this period. Mao was certainly not the first, nor even the most important, theorist to articulate the virtues of insurgency, or Peoples' war, as it was sometimes called. Clausewitz, for one, called it a "reality (*Erscheinung*) of the nineteenth century," and provided some valuable insights into its nature. Insurgency did, after all, help the American colonies win independence from the British crown, and it nearly thwarted the ultimate Prusso-German victory over France in the War of 1870-71. It played an important role in the histories of many Latin America states, and in Western Europe and the Soviet Union during World War II, as well as enabling the emergence of Israel in the late 1940s.

Second, even if it were valid to portray major changes in the conduct of war as an evolutionary progression from 1GW to 3GW, the next logical step in that progression would not be the sort of super-insurgency that 4GW theorists try to depict. Instead, 4GW would be closer to the vision of Net-centric warfare—small, high-tech forces networked together in a knowledge-based system of systems that enables them to act rapidly and decisively—currently propounded by some theorists. To their credit, the proponents of 4GW criticize Net-centric warfare for being too dependent on high-technology, and for being too inflexible to accommodate a thinking opponent. Yet, and quite ironically, this is the very direction in which the logic of their particular theory of military evolution would lead them, if they were true to it. The logic they use to explain key developments in the conduct of war, thus, actually undermines their case.

Third, by comparing what essentially amounts to military means or techniques—such as *massed manpower*, *firepower*, and *maneuver*—on the one hand, to what is arguably a form of warfare—such as insurgency—on the other, the advocates 4GW only bait us with a proverbial apples-versus-oranges sleight-of-hand. In other words, they establish a false comparison by which they wish us to conclude that most of the wars of the modern age, which they claim were characterized by firepower or maneuver, were narrowly focused on military power and, unlike the super-insurgencies of the information age, rarely involved the integration of political, economic, and social power. Yet, even a cursory review of the Napoleonic, and the First and Second World Wars reveals that this is not true. Political, social, and economic capabilities were, in many cases, employed to the

maximum extent possible. Some historians, in fact, go so far as to maintain that the First and Second World Wars were, in effect, examples of "total" war precisely because of the extent to which the major combatants mobilized the elements of their national power. Even the theoretical offshoots of Net-centric warfare, which 4GW rejects, recognize the need to integrate all the elements of national power in the pursuit of strategic aims.

Finally, there is no reason to reinvent the wheel with regard to insurgency as an effective form of war. A great deal of very good work has already been done, especially lately, on that topic, to include the effects that globalization and information technologies have had, are having, and are likely to have, on such movements. We do not need another label, as well as an incoherent supporting logic, to obscure what many have already made clear. The fact that 4GW theorists are not aware of this work, or at least do not acknowledge it, should give us pause indeed. In any case, the wheel they are attempting to create now does not turn.