# Factotum

## The US Military in the Twenty-First Century

Lt Col Ryan Sanford, US Air Force

History has not ended, certainly not as Francis Fukuyama asserted it would following the end of the Cold War.[1] The enduring nature of strategy and war tick on like the mechanical movement of a timepiece. While the character of twenty-first-century conflict and its concomitant forms of warfare appear chameleon-like, an enduring nature remains. Certainly, the Soviet Union's demise hearkened novel "nation-building" and peacekeeping efforts in Eastern Europe, followed shortly by a war on terrorism. Still, novelty allures. There is sagacity, however, in a prophet's word that there is nothing new under the sun. Hence, the proper role of the US military is the same as it was since the nation's birth: it is a servant of the state. This truism borders on banality and requires qualification. As Martin Cook asserted, "The United States finds itself at a moment history hands to few . . . [which] challenges . . . our thinking about the . . . role of the profession of arms."[2] Despite this revelation, frustration foments when civilian leadership asks the military to accomplish tasks not typically considered native to its abilities.[3] Despite changes in the strategic environment, they are "unique in detail, not in kind"; thus, the US military's proper role remains constant as the dutiful servant of the state.[4]

The emergence of a bipolarity amid the international order and advent of nuclear weapons motivated Morris Janowitz to reconsider the profession of the military officer. He assessed that the boundary conditions engendered by the Cold War antagonists necessitated a new role for the military, that of a constabulary force.[5] This force would operate across the spectrum of conflict, from nuclear war to "wars among the people," always prepared to seek "viable international relations, rather than victory."[6] While portions of the Vietnam War and other conflicts exhibited characteristics evocative of conventional conflict, experiences post-victory in Iraq and Afghanistan and peacekeeping efforts in Europe and Africa suggest Janowitz was quite prescient. Whether it is helpful to cast war in different hues—such as irregular, regular, and hybrid—remains to be determined.[7] However, the past seven decades belie a context suggesting the need for the dutiful servant to function as a constabulary.

Operations other than full-scale war seem likely in the future, especially peacekeeping and stability efforts. On the African continent, where colonial machinations ossified into a panoply of weak, fierce, and warlord states, American peace-

keeping and stability assistance efforts persist with no real end in sight.[8] In such contexts, the military must remember, however, the objective is not enemy-centric but is the population itself, if it has any hope of achieving its designated political purpose—that is, to quell the conflict.[9] Moreover, modern conflict may no longer be a duel or dialectic between just two parties.[10] Indeed, the message force "offers [is] an interpretative template . . . used to persuade audiences . . . in a given way."[11] Yet, how polities perceive an antagonist's policy aims matters just as much as how such aims obtain.[12] As such, American political and military leaders must remember that although conflicts among the people exhibit characteristics different from conventional war, strategic theory is universal.[13] Ends, ways, and means must mutually enable one another to ensure coherence in the strategic narrative.[14]



*(US Army photo by Sgt Aubry Buzek)*

**Figure 1. US forces serve as a constabulary.** US Army Soldiers assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment navigate a low-water crossing with members of the Ethiopian National Defense Force during a cordon and search training exercise at the Hurso Training Center near Dire Dawa, Ethiopia, 19 July 2019. The situational training exercise was conducted as part of Justified Accord 2019. Justified Accord is an annual combined, joint exercise designed to strengthen partnerships, increase interoperability, and enhance the capability and capacity of international participants to promote regional security and support peacekeeping operations for the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).

Despite the prevalence of irregular or nontraditional warfare, new technologies usher in additional considerations for tasking the US military. In space, a militarized realm from the onset—the Soviet satellite Sputnik was a military satellite—the threat of weaponization pulls like gravity on much of the strategic space literature.[15] Current US space law and executive policy, however, set the stage for broadening the discourse to include commercial exploitation of space.[16] Thus, the military, besides adapting to defending US interests in and through space, may soon don the mantle of protecting commercial space exploration beyond merely Earth's orbit. Historically, state protection follows merchant endeavors in a "flag follows trade" fashion.[17] Consequently, the US military, specifically the US Space Force, must prepare for such a role, potentially in the vein of the US Coast Guard as a space guardian—or as international space constabulary—in addition to the extant task of defending against and deterring adversaries in space.[18]

Cyberspace, too, promises to foist upon the US military tasks traditionally conceived for law enforcement and intelligence communities. The Department of Defense's 2018 *Cyber Strategy* averred that it would "defend forward to disrupt or halt malicious cyber activity at its source, including activity that falls below the level of armed conflict."[19] Such admission inheres tasks not traditionally conceived under the auspices of Title 50 United States Code. Cyberpower may not be a panacea or independently, strategically decisive, but the military must adapt to a constabulary role in cyberspace.[20] By cultivating operators engrained with a multi-domain ethos, the military can posture, "ever-ready" to serve and protect American interests.[21]

While twenty-first-century conflict exhibits characteristics foreign to earlier times, the quintessence of war and the role of the US military remain unchanged. "Tools and agents change."[22] Advances in cyber, space, and robotic capabilities precipitate changes in warfare, and since the nation "cannot always pick [its] fights," it must be ready for these myriad capabilities and tasks.[23] However, "war and strategy do not change their nature."[24] Indeed, war is still "a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on by other means."[25] Notwithstanding Emile Simpson's recognition of multiple audiences in said intercourse, policy reigns supreme.[26]

The proper role of the military, therefore, remains the servant of the state—whether as a peacekeeping force or a space guardian. Equally important, the military, through its officer corps, retains the lesser included role of "manager of violence."[27] Whether employing autonomous systems, "pushbutton" cyberattacks, or executing counterinsurgency campaigns, the management of violence necessitates moral behavior within the conflict, or *jus in bello*. Morality in war is even

more critical, given that the strategic narrative engendered by the use of force loses legitimacy and viability when the managers thereof wield such force immorally. The imperative to adhere to just war principles is not novel. The ability to wage war remotely and perhaps highly asymmetrically, or to participate in civil wars where legitimacy correlates inversely with indiscriminate violence, however, reinforces such a moral imperative.[28]

Being a dutiful servant certainly requires ethical and moral conduct within conflict—lest misconduct warp the strategic narrative and hinder intended aims. The role also requires the military to participate in aspects of the justification for war, or *jus ad bellum*. At times, however, the military has abdicated such responsibility.[29] Current policy, however, calls for a military able to compete across the spectrum of conflict; thus, the military must explain when it can or cannot compete as desired.[30] The military is an instrument of policy, but policy is not a tyrant.[31] There must exist a dialogue between political and military leaders regarding the decision to use force.[32] Previous thinking suggested "it was not the moral responsibility of the officer to assess the . . . justice of the war the officer is ordered to conduct."[33] The dutiful servant, however, must be "intellectually independent" and willing to articulate why using force may not be the *ultima ratio*, provide a reasonable chance of success, or lead to a better peace.[34] Indeed, the military provides options and acts as an appetite suppressant against the hunger to use the military for all tasks.[35] In the end, the military should act as the "voice of caution . . . reminding the nation" of what is feasible for the military.[36] Still, "the military does not set the terms of its social contract, and at times, the strategic context necessitates a change in terms"; however, by providing thoughtful feedback, the military helps align means to the ends political leaders desire.[37] In so doing, political leaders may avoid embarking upon an endeavor whose nature they do not understand and, instead, adapt policy aims to "its chosen means" to ensure strategy's success.[38]

Although prosaic, the proper role for the military amid twenty-first-century conflict is, as it ever was, servant of the state. Despite being the servant, the military need not "embrace all tasks assigned by society," nor should society expect the "one-way, unquestioning execution of policy."[39] Instead, dutiful service requires preparing for the unique characteristics of modern conflict as elucidated here but also requires a willingness to explain when the military instrument is ill-suited for the task. Otherwise, "war [becomes] disconnected from politics and becomes a purely destructive act."[40] The signal of the strategic narrative may fade in the noise of war. Future contexts may require constabulary roles or high-end technology to defeat a peer adversary. In a so-called era of great competition, the military must be ever-ready—not just operationally but also intellectually. Understanding its

foremost role as servant, one who advises on the proper use and management of violence, helps policy makers to "convert the overwhelmingly destructive element of war," a "terrible battle-sword," into the "light, handy rapier" wielded deftly for the ends a nation seeks.[41]

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## Notes

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3. Cook, *Moral Warrior*, 82; Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier* (New York: The Free Press, 1960), 13, 435–40; and William J. Gregor, "The Politics of Joint Campaign Planning" (paper, International Biennial Conference of the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, 21–23 October 2005), 3.

4. Colin S. Gray, "21st Century Security Environment and the Future of War," *Parameters* 38, no. 4 (2008), 18.

5. Janowitz, *Professional Soldier*, 417–30.

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7. Colin S. Gray, *Categorical Confusion? The Strategic Implications of Recognizing Challenges Either as Irregular or Traditional* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2012), 44–50; and Donn M. Starry, "Technological Change and War's Nature: Profession at the Crossroads," *Parameters* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2018–2019), 61–62.

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10. Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up: Twenty-First Century Combat as Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4–5, 67, 73, 132, 207.

11. Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 230.

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14. Gray, *Categorical Confusion?*, 38–39; and Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 4–5, 179–80.

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23.   Gray, "21st Century Security Environment," 24.

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31.   Clausewitz, *On War*, 87.

32.   Simpson, *War from the Ground Up*, 237.

33.   Cook, *Moral Warrior*, 46.

34.   Cook, *Moral Warrior*, 61–65.

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41. Clausewitz, *On War*, 606.

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