Chapter 1

The Nature of War

"Everything in war is simple, but the simplest thing is difficult. The difficulties accumulate and end by producing a kind of friction that is inconceivable unless one has experienced war."[1]

—Carl von Clausewitz

"In war the chief incalculable is the human will."[2]

—B. H. Liddell Hart

"Positions are seldom lost because they have been destroyed, but almost invariably because the leader has decided in his own mind that the position cannot be held."[3]

—A. A. Vandegrift

To understand the Marine Corps' philosophy of warfighting, we first need an appreciation for the nature of war itself—its moral, mental, and physical characteristics and demands. A common view of war among Marines is a necessary base for the development of a cohesive doctrine because our approach to the conduct of war derives from our understanding of the nature of war.

WAR DEFINED

War is a violent clash of interests between or among organized groups characterized by the use of military force. These groups have traditionally been established nation-states, but they may also include any nonstate group—such as an international coalition or a faction within or outside of an existing state—with its own political interests and the ability to generate organized violence on a scale sufficient to have significant political consequences.

The essence of war is a violent struggle between two hostile, independent, and irreconcilable wills, each trying to impose itself on the other. War is fundamentally an interactive social process. Clausewitz called it a *Zweikampf* (literally a "two-struggle") and suggested the image of a pair of wrestlers locked in a hold, each exerting force and counterforce to try to throw the other.[4] War is thus a process of continuous

mutual adaptation, of give and take, move and countermove. It is critical to keep in mind that the enemy is not an inanimate object to be acted upon but an independent and animate force with its own objectives and plans. While we try to impose our will on the enemy, he resists us and seeks to impose his own will on us. Appreciating this dynamic interplay between opposing human wills is essential to understanding the fundamental nature of war.

The object in war is to impose our will on our enemy. The means to this end is the organized application or threat of violence by military force. The target of that violence may be limited to hostile combatant forces, or it may extend to the enemy population at large. War may range from intense clashes between large military forces—sometimes backed by an official declaration of war—to subtler, unconventional hostilities that barely reach the threshold of violence.

Total war and perfect peace rarely exist in practice. Instead, they are extremes between which exist the relations among most political groups. This range includes routine economic competition, more or less permanent political or ideological tension, and occasional crises among groups. The decision to resort to the use of military force of some kind may arise at any point within these extremes, even during periods of relative peace. On one end of the spectrum, military force may be used simply to maintain or restore order in civil disturbances or disaster relief operations. At the other extreme, force may be used to completely overturn the existing

order within a society or between two or more societies. Some cultures consider it a moral imperative to go to war only as a last resort when all peaceful means to settle disagreements have failed. Others have no such hesitancy to resort to military force to achieve their aims.

FRICTION

Portrayed as a clash between two opposing wills, war appears a simple enterprise. In practice, the conduct of war becomes extremely difficult because of the countless factors that impinge on it. These factors collectively have been called *friction*, which Clausewitz described as "the force that makes the apparently easy so difficult."[5] Friction is the force that resists all action and saps energy. It makes the simple difficult and the difficult seemingly impossible.

The very essence of war as a clash between opposed wills creates friction. In this dynamic environment of interacting forces, friction abounds.

Friction may be mental, as in indecision over a course of action. It may be physical, as in effective enemy fire or a terrain obstacle that must be overcome. Friction may be external, imposed by enemy action, the terrain, weather, or mere chance. Friction may be self-induced, caused by such factors

as lack of a clearly defined goal, lack of coordination, unclear or complicated plans, complex task organizations or command relationships, or complicated technologies. Whatever form it takes, because war is a human enterprise, friction will always have a psychological as well as a physical impact.

While we should attempt to minimize self-induced friction, the greater requirement is *to fight effectively* despite the existence of friction. One essential means to overcome friction is the will; we prevail over friction through persistent strength of mind and spirit. While striving ourselves to overcome the effects of friction, we must attempt at the same time to raise our enemy's friction to a level that weakens his ability to fight.

We can readily identify countless examples of friction, but until we have experienced it ourselves, we cannot hope to appreciate it fully. Only through experience can we come to appreciate the force of will necessary to overcome friction and to develop a realistic appreciation for what is possible in war and what is not. While training should attempt to approximate the conditions of war, we must realize it can never fully duplicate the level of friction of real combat.

UNCERTAINTY

Another attribute of war is uncertainty. We might argue that uncertainty is just one of many sources of friction, but because it is such a pervasive trait of war, we will treat it singly. All actions in war take place in an atmosphere of uncertainty, or the "fog of war." Uncertainty pervades battle in the form of unknowns about the enemy, about the environment, and even about the friendly situation. While we try to reduce these unknowns by gathering information, we must realize that we cannot eliminate them—or even come close. The very nature of war makes certainty impossible; all actions in war will be based on incomplete, inaccurate, or even contradictory information.

War is intrinsically unpredictable. At best, we can hope to determine possibilities and probabilities. This implies a certain standard of military judgment: What is possible and what is not? What is probable and what is not? By judging probability, we make an estimate of our enemy's designs and act accordingly. Having said this, we realize that it is precisely those actions that seem improbable that often have the greatest impact on the outcome of war.

Because we can never eliminate uncertainty, we must learn to fight effectively despite it. We can do this by developing simple, flexible plans; planning for likely contingencies; developing standing operating procedures; and fostering initiative among subordinates.

One important source of uncertainty is a property known as *nonlinearity*. Here the term does not refer to formations on the battlefield but describes systems in which causes and effects are disproportionate. Minor incidents or actions can have decisive effects. Outcomes of battles can hinge on the actions of a few individuals, and as Clausewitz observed, "issues can be decided by chances and incidents so minute as to figure in histories simply as anecdotes."[6]

By its nature, uncertainty invariably involves the estimation and acceptance of risk. Risk is inherent in war and is involved in every mission. Risk is equally common to action and inaction. Risk may be related to gain; greater potential gain often requires greater risk. The practice of concentrating combat power toward the main effort necessitates the willingness to accept prudent risk elsewhere. However, we should clearly understand that the acceptance of risk does not equate to the imprudent willingness to gamble the entire likelihood of success on a single improbable event.

Part of uncertainty is the ungovernable element of chance. Chance is a universal characteristic of war and a continuous

source of friction. Chance consists of turns of events that cannot reasonably be foreseen and over which we and our enemy have no control. The constant potential for chance to influence outcomes in war, combined with the inability to prevent chance from impacting on plans and actions, creates psychological friction. However, we should remember that chance favors neither belligerent exclusively. Consequently, we must view chance not only as a threat but also as an opportunity which we must be ever ready to exploit.

FLUIDITY

Like friction and uncertainty, fluidity is an inherent attribute of war. Each episode in war is the temporary result of a unique combination of circumstances, presenting a unique set of problems and requiring an original solution. Nevertheless, no episode can be viewed in isolation. Rather, each episode merges with those that precede and follow it—shaped by the former and shaping the conditions of the latter—creating a continuous, fluctuating flow of activity replete with fleeting opportunities and unforeseen events. Since war is a fluid phenomenon, its conduct requires flexibility of thought. Success depends in large part on the ability to adapt—to proactively shape changing events to our advantage as well as to react quickly to constantly changing conditions.

It is physically impossible to sustain a high tempo of activity indefinitely, although clearly there will be times when it is advantageous to push men and equipment to the limit. The tempo of war will fluctuate from periods of intense combat to periods in which activity is limited to information gathering, replenishment, or redeployment. Darkness and weather can influence the tempo of war but need not halt it. A competitive rhythm will develop between the opposing wills with each belligerent trying to influence and exploit tempo and the continuous flow of events to suit his purposes.

Military forces will mass to concentrate combat power against the enemy. However, this massing will also make them vulnerable to the effects of enemy fires, and they will find it necessary to disperse. Another competitive rhythm will develop—disperse, concentrate, disperse again—as each belligerent tries to concentrate combat power temporarily while limiting the vulnerability to enemy combat power.

Disorder

In an environment of friction, uncertainty, and fluidity, war gravitates naturally toward disorder. Like the other attributes of war, disorder is an inherent characteristic of war; we can never eliminate it. In the heat of battle, plans will go awry,

instructions and information will be unclear and misinterpreted, communications will fail, and mistakes and unforeseen events will be commonplace. It is precisely this natural disorder which creates the conditions ripe for exploitation by an opportunistic will.

Each encounter in war will usually tend to grow increasingly disordered over time. As the situation changes continuously, we are forced to improvise again and again until finally our actions have little, if any, resemblance to the original scheme.

By historical standards, the modern battlefield is particularly disorderly. While past battlefields could be described by linear formations and uninterrupted linear fronts, we cannot think of today's battlefield in linear terms. The range and lethality of modern weapons have increased dispersion between units. In spite of communications technology, this dispersion strains the limits of positive control. The natural result of dispersion is unoccupied areas, gaps, and exposed flanks which can and will be exploited, blurring the distinction between front and rear and friendly- and enemy-controlled areas.

The occurrences of war will not unfold like clockwork. We cannot hope to impose precise, positive control over events. The best we can hope for is to impose a general framework of order on the disorder, to influence the general flow of action rather than to try to control each event.

If we are to win, we must be able to operate in a disorderly environment. In fact, we must not only be able to fight effectively in the face of disorder, we should seek to generate disorder and use it as a weapon against our opponent.

COMPLEXITY

War is a complex phenomenon. We have described war as essentially a clash between opposed wills. In reality, each belligerent is not a single, homogeneous will guided by a single intelligence. Instead, each belligerent is a complex system consisting of numerous individual parts. A division comprises regiments, a regiment comprises battalions, and so on all the way down to fire teams which are composed of individual Marines. Each element is part of a larger whole and must cooperate with other elements for the accomplishment of the common goal. At the same time, each has its own mission and must adapt to its own situation. Each must deal with friction, uncertainty, and disorder at its own level, and each may create friction, uncertainty, and disorder for others, friendly as well as enemy.

As a result, war is not governed by the actions or decisions of a single individual in any one place but emerges from the collective behavior of all the individual parts in the system interacting locally in response to local conditions and

incomplete information. A military action is not the monolithic execution of a single decision by a single entity but necessarily involves near-countless independent but interrelated decisions and actions being taken simultaneously throughout the organization. Efforts to fully centralize military operations and to exert complete control by a single decisionmaker are inconsistent with the intrinsically complex and distributed nature of war.

THE HUMAN DIMENSION

Because war is a clash between opposing human wills, the 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 which characterize human behavior. Since war is an act of violence based on irreconcilable disagreement, it will invariably inflame and be shaped by human emotions.

War is an extreme trial of moral and physical strength and stamina. Any view of the nature of war would hardly be accurate or complete without consideration of the effects of danger, fear, exhaustion, and privation on those who must do the fighting.[7] However, these effects vary greatly from case to case. Individuals and peoples react differently to the stress of

war; an act that may break the will of one enemy may only serve to stiffen the resolve of another. Human will, instilled through leadership, is the driving force of all action in war.

No degree of technological development or scientific calculation will diminish the human dimension in war. Any doctrine which attempts to reduce warfare to ratios of forces, weapons, and equipment neglects the impact of the human will on the conduct of war and is therefore inherently flawed.

VIOLENCE AND DANGER

War is among the greatest horrors known to humanity; it should never be romanticized. The means of war is force, applied in the form of organized violence. It is through the use of violence, or the credible threat of violence, that we compel our enemy to do our will. Violence is an essential element of war, and its immediate result is bloodshed, destruction, and suffering. While the magnitude of violence may vary with the object and means of war, the violent essence of war will never change.[8] Any study of war that neglects this basic truth is misleading and incomplete.

Since war is a violent enterprise, danger is ever present. Since war is a human phenomenon, fear, the human reaction to danger, has a significant impact on the conduct of war.

Everybody feels fear. Fear contributes to the corrosion of will. Leaders must foster the courage to overcome fear, both individually and within the unit. Courage is not the absence of fear; rather, it is the strength to overcome fear.[9]

Leaders must study fear, understand it, and be prepared to cope with it. Courage and fear are often situational rather than uniform, meaning that people experience them differently at different times and in different situations. Like fear, courage takes many forms, from a stoic courage born of reasoned calculation to a fierce courage born of heightened emotion. Experience under fire generally increases confidence, as can realistic training by lessening the mystique of combat. Strong leadership which earns the respect and trust of subordinates can limit the effects of fear. Leaders should develop unit cohesion and esprit and the self-confidence of individuals within the unit. In this environment, a Marine's unwillingness to violate the respect and trust of peers can overcome personal fear.

PHYSICAL, MORAL, AND MENTAL FORCES

War is characterized by the interaction of physical, moral, and mental forces. The physical characteristics of war are generally easily seen, understood, and measured: equipment capabilities, supplies, physical objectives seized, force ratios,

losses of matériel or life, terrain lost or gained, prisoners or matériel captured. The moral characteristics are less tangible. (The term "moral" as used here is not restricted to ethics, although ethics are certainly included, but pertains to those forces of a psychological rather than tangible nature.)[10] Moral forces are difficult to grasp and impossible to quantify. We cannot easily gauge forces like national and military resolve, national or individual conscience, emotion, fear, courage, morale, leadership, or esprit. War also involves a significant mental, or intellectual, component. Mental forces provide the ability to grasp complex battlefield situations; to make effective estimates, calculations, and decisions; to devise tactics and strategies; and to develop plans.

Although material factors are more easily quantified, the moral and mental forces exert a greater influence on the nature and outcome of war.[11] This is not to lessen the importance of physical forces, for the physical forces in war can have a significant impact on the others. For example, the greatest effect of fires is generally not the amount of physical destruction they cause, but the effect of that physical destruction on the enemy's moral strength.

Because it is difficult to come to grips with moral and mental forces, it is tempting to exclude them from our study

of war. However, any doctrine or theory of war that neglects these factors ignores the greater part of the nature of war.

THE EVOLUTION OF WAR

War is both timeless and ever changing. While the basic nature of war is constant, the means and methods we use evolve continuously. Changes may be gradual in some cases and drastic in others. Drastic changes in war are the result of developments that dramatically upset the equilibrium of war such as the rifled bore, mass conscription, and the railroad.

One major catalyst of change is the advancement of technology. As the hardware of war improves through technological development, so must the tactical, operational, and strategic usage adapt to its improved capabilities both to maximize our own capabilities and to counteract our enemy's.

It is important to understand which aspects of war are likely to change and which are not. We must stay abreast of the process of change for the belligerent who first exploits a development in the art and science of war gains a significant advantage. If we are ignorant of the changing face of war, we will find ourselves unequal to its challenges.

THE SCIENCE, ART, AND DYNAMIC OF WAR

Various aspects of war fall principally in the realm of science, which is the methodical application of the empirical laws of nature. The science of war includes those activities directly subject to the laws of ballistics, mechanics, and like disciplines; for example, the application of fires, the effects of weapons, and the rates and methods of movement and resupply. However, science does not describe the whole phenomenon.

An even greater part of the conduct of war falls under the realm of art, which is the employment of creative or intuitive skills. Art includes the creative, situational application of scientific knowledge through judgment and experience, and so the art of war subsumes the science of war. The art of war requires the intuitive ability to grasp the essence of a unique military situation and the creative ability to devise a practical solution. It involves conceiving strategies and tactics and developing plans of action to suit a given situation. This still does not describe the whole phenomenon. Owing to the vagaries of human behavior and the countless other intangible factors which influence war, there is far more to its conduct than can be explained by art and science. Art and science stop short of explaining the fundamental dynamic of war.

As we have said, war is a social phenomenon. Its essential dynamic is the dynamic of competitive human interaction rather than the dynamic of art or science. Human beings interact with each other in ways that are fundamentally different from the way a scientist works with chemicals or formulas or the way an artist works with paints or musical notes. It is because of this dynamic of human interaction that fortitude, perseverance, boldness, esprit, and other traits not explainable by art or science are so essential in war. *We thus conclude that the conduct of war is fundamentally a dynamic process of human competition requiring both the knowledge of science and the creativity of art but driven ultimately by the power of human will.*

CONCLUSION

At first glance, war seems a simple clash of interests. On closer examination, it reveals its complexity and takes shape as one of the most demanding and trying of human endeavors. War is an extreme test of will. Friction, uncertainty, fluidity, disorder, and danger are its essential features. War displays broad patterns that can be represented as probabilities, yet it remains fundamentally unpredictable. Each episode is the unique product of myriad moral, mental, and physical forces.

Individual causes and their effects can rarely be isolated. Minor actions and random incidents can have disproportionately large—even decisive—effects. While dependent on the laws of science and the intuition and creativity of art, war takes its fundamental character from the dynamic of human interaction.