



The Operational Warfare Revolution

How Operational Art Can Prepare the Marine Corps for an Era of Great Power Competition

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<https://doi.org/10.36304/ExpwMCUP.2020.02>

Abstract: In 2019, General David H. Berger, Commandant of the Marine Corps, asserted that the U.S. Marine Corps is not prepared for the challenges of the future operating environment. This reality reflects the cumulative effects of protracted conflict ashore and the reemergence of great power competition. In catalyzing an operational warfare revolution, the Commandant aims to foster organizational change while realigning the Marine Corps to its role as the nation's naval expeditionary force-in-readiness. While materiel and organizational adaptations will play a central role in facilitating this revolution, the Marine Corps must also revise its theoretical approach to operations and its doctrinal hierarchy to generate greater value for the U.S. Joint Force. To do so, the Corps must shed its traditional focus on the tactical level of war and instead

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embrace operational art to retain enduring relevance during naval campaigns in the context of all-domain, globally integrated operations that span the competition continuum.

Keywords: Marine Corps, operational art, naval integration, great power competition, expeditionary warfare, maneuver warfare

On 16 July 2019, General David H. Berger, the 38th Commandant of the Marine Corps, declared in his *Commandant's Planning Guidance* (CPG) that the U.S. Marine Corps is not staffed, trained, or equipped for the challenges of the future operating environment. The CPG describes the Corps' current crisis as resulting from the cumulative effects of two decades of protracted, limited liability conflict ashore in the post-Cold War era. It also recognizes that significant changes in the strategic context of the global operating environment—such as the rise of peer competitors, the erosion of American technological and military advantages, and contested access to global commons—necessitate a return to the Corps' cultural roots and statutory role as the nation's naval expeditionary force-in-readiness to preserve its relevance in "waging great power competition and conflict."¹

By clearly identifying the sources of this crisis—including an outdated operating concept, a force structure designed for the twentieth-century model of amphibious warfare, and misalignment with the U.S. *National Defense Strategy*—General Berger catalyzed a new revolution in Marine Corps organizational theory and behavior. In no uncertain terms, he built the CPG to emphasize the significant changes the Corps must make as part of an operational warfare revolution to advance beyond its paradigm of maneuver

warfare and traditional amphibious operations. In short, the Marine Corps' traditional excellence at the tactical level of warfare, while critically important and necessary to future success, is no longer sufficient to guarantee the Corps' relevance.

Fortunately for the Marine Corps, an organization that has shown notable aptitude for reformation when confronted with existential crises of relevance in the past, this predicament presents an opportunity to innovate for the future as the U.S. Joint Force emerges from a period of strategic atrophy with many of its traditional military advantages eroded.² As philosopher Thomas S. Kuhn argued, the emergence of new theories depends on the recognition of crises that are generally preceded by periods of "pronounced professional insecurity."³ In 2020, the Marine Corps can look to its past to find many commonalities with the shifts in strategic context that spurred the amphibious and maneuver warfare revolutions of the twentieth century.⁴ Additionally, the Corps can learn important lessons by examining intellectual revolutions within other Services that occurred when those organizations were faced with paradigmatic crises resulting from fundamental changes in the character of war.

This article will argue that an enterprise-wide acceptance of *operational art*—a concept that the Marine Corps acknowledges as a partner in the nation's maritime Service but neglects in its own foundational doctrine—can help implement the CPG while providing viable and timely options for the U.S. National Command Authority, combatant commanders, combined and joint task forces, and the individual sea Services.⁵ Operational art is defined in *Planning, Joint Publication (JP) 5-0*, as "the cognitive approach by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, means, and risks."⁶

Given the direction provided in an array of U.S. strategic publications—the *National Security Strategy*, the *National Defense Strategy*, the *National Military Strategy*, and the CPG—coupled with the realities of an ever-changing global operating environment, the Marine Corps must institutionalize a Service-oriented conception of operational art to retain enduring relevance and generate value in a “new age of seapower.”⁷ Doing so will allow the Corps to design, plan, and organize tactical actions in a manner that delivers coherent, strategic effects in the context of all-domain, globally integrated campaigns and operations that span the competition continuum.⁸ Additionally, the institutionalization of operational art will help optimize current and future force design efforts—the Commandant’s highest priority—to enable the Corps to adapt and structure itself to operate in fundamentally different and disruptive ways during naval campaigns and operations.⁹

While materiel and organizational changes will play a central role in achieving this aim, resolving the present crisis will also require intellectual and doctrinal reformation that postures the Marine Corps to meet the Commandant’s intent and prepares it for the conduct of future joint operations.¹⁰ *Warfighting*, Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication (MCDP) 1, emphasizes this point, stating that “doctrine must continue to evolve based on growing experience, advancements in theory, and the changing face of war itself.”¹¹ Consequently, the success of the current revolution, as with all revolutions, requires a revision of foundational texts.

This article begins by outlining the evolution of operational art in the U.S. Army in response to the organization’s post-Vietnam crisis. It will then briefly examine the varied conceptions of operational art across the Joint Force before evincing its absence in the Marine Corps’ Service-level doctrine. From there, it will recount the Corps’ maneuver warfare revolution and demonstrate how a

series of key events—specifically, the passage of the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, the conclusion of the Cold War, and operations ashore during the Global War on Terrorism—have contributed to the organization’s present crisis. Finally, it will conclude with an appraisal of how operational art can empower the Corps to navigate the challenges outlined in the CPG.

Ultimately, this article will argue that the Marine Corps must develop its own Service-oriented version of operational art that is tailored to its needs in the arrangement of coherent tactical actions in time, space, and purpose and that delivers strategic effects in the maritime domain. As demonstrated by the development of operational art within the U.S. Army, useful, Service-oriented conceptions of operational art emerge from deep reflection and design dialogue conducted over time. This article aims to begin that dialogue, acknowledging that the concept of operational art, when stripped down to its intellectual roots, ought not be confined to a specific echelon of command or level of warfare.¹² Operational art represents a shift in mindset, and today’s crisis provides an ideal context for the Marine Corps to implement an intellectual change that will enable greater unity of effort within the Joint Force.

A Catalyst for Change

According to scholar Henry Mintzberg, the first step of an organizational change process requires that people and organizations “unfreeze” themselves from their basic beliefs.¹³ General Berger’s publication of the CPG initiated that unfreezing process within the Marine Corps, reducing institutional inertia to the commencement of a new revolution to adapt the organization for the future. Yet, in the absence of progress toward a desired aim, revolutionary processes can devolve into wasteful and disruptive upheavals. As former U.S. secretary of

state Henry Kissinger theorized, “revolutions, no matter how sweeping, need to be consolidated and, in the end, adapted from a moment of exaltation to what is sustainable over a period of time.”¹⁴

Accordingly, the successful conclusion of the current operational warfare revolution will require the Marine Corps to be postured to thrive in the competition continuum and, as mandated in the *National Military Strategy*, build a force capable of employing “operational art through the integration of joint capabilities in all domains.”¹⁵ Consequently, the institutionalization of operational art will not only enhance the effectiveness of the Corps’ force design efforts, but it will also enable the organization to operate at the interface between the tangible realm of tactics and the abstractions of policy and strategy.¹⁶

The Evolution of an American Theory of Operational Art

Doctrine of the Armed Forces of the United States, Joint Publication (JP) 1, directs each U.S. military Service to be prepared to use operational art to solve problems, stating that “joint force commanders and component commanders use operational art to determine when, where, and for what purpose major forces will be employed and to influence the adversary’s disposition before combat.”¹⁷ The document expounds on the importance of the concept, asserting that it provides a method to manage “the deployment of those forces and the arrangement of battles and major operations to achieve operational and strategic objectives.”¹⁸ As an organization that must remain ready and able to operate within the structure of joint and combined forces, either as a joint task force headquarters, an element within the Joint Maritime Component Command, or an individual Service component, the Marine Corps must develop a Service-oriented concept of operational art.

The development of the U.S. Army's theory of operational art provides a useful model of the change process. The Army first introduced the concept in 1986 when it published *Operations*, Field Manual (FM) 100-5, the second edition of its revolutionary AirLand Battle doctrine that had been unveiled in 1982. The document served as an intellectual extension of the operational level of warfare established four years earlier, defining operational art as "the employment of military forces to attain strategic goals in a theater of war or a theater of operations through the design, organization, and conduct of campaigns or operations."¹⁹ Taken together, the successive revisions of AirLand Battle addressed concerns with the tactical fixation of the Army's previous active defense doctrine while working to reconcile the paradoxical experience of the Vietnam War (1955–75), where the inability to convert overwhelming tactical successes into meaningful strategic accomplishments plagued the U.S. military.²⁰

While the Army's codification of operational art in doctrine served as a forerunner to the concept's eventual integration into joint publications, such intellectual advancements were not limited to theory and doctrine alone. The Service also leveraged its educational enterprise to develop its capacity for operational warfare. In 1983, the Army founded the School of Advanced Military Studies as part of its Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Operating under a charter to provide advanced professional military education to field-grade officers, the school's first director, then-colonel Huba Wass de Czege, developed a curriculum that blended studies in theory, doctrine, and history to prepare students for operational warfare. In addition to using classical texts in military history, the school also incorporated studies of Soviet military theory to broaden the conception of operational art and facilitate its transmission to the operating forces. Not only did these studies provide depth to the understanding of America's Cold War rival, it also allowed the school to

serve as the proving grounds for the development of the Army's 1986 version of AirLand Battle.²¹

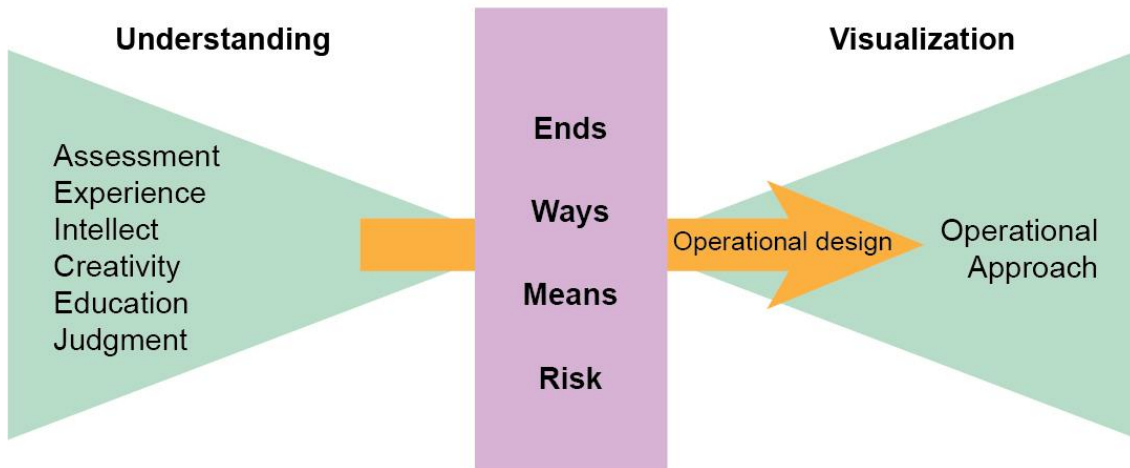
In a similar fashion to the Marine Corps' use of schools to develop amphibious warfare doctrine during the interwar period, when many military professionals dismissed the potential of landing operations in modern warfare, the Army leveraged its School of Advanced Military Studies to develop a theory of victory in future, large-scale combat operations.²² Since its inception, the Army's concept of operational art has continued to evolve with the changing character of war and its diffusion into Joint and Service doctrines. In recent years, it has merged with the coevolution of operational design, a separate but complementary concept developed to help commanders and their staffs cope with challenges and seize opportunities while operating within complex adaptive systems.²³ Although each of the U.S. military Services—with the exception of the Marine Corps—posit nuanced views on the concept of operational art, they have coalesced around a theory that provides a connective tissue for military dialogue and education. As the U.S. military enters an era of enduring competition conducted through a mixture of cooperation, competition, and armed conflict, it does so with the concept of operational art firmly established in Joint doctrine.²⁴

Operational Art in the U.S. Joint Force

In addition to offering a general definition of operational art, *Joint Planning* also describes the complementary concept of *operational design* as "the conception and construction of the framework that underpins a campaign or operation and its subsequent execution."²⁵ When employed in conjunction with operational art, operational design enables commanders and their staffs to create operational approaches that translate strategic guidance and operational concepts into actionable missions and tasks integrated in an executable plan.

Figure 1. A theory of operational art

OPERATIONAL ART



Joint Publication 5-0, *Joint Planning*, proposes a theory of operational art that is echoed in the doctrines of each of the U.S. military services except the Marine Corps. Source: *Joint Planning*, Joint Publication 5-0 (Washington, DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2017).

The Operations Process, Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 5-0, echoes the Joint definition of operational art while emphasizing that the concept applies to the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of warfare. The document states that the effective application of operational art “requires creative vision, broad experience, and a knowledge of capabilities, tactics, and techniques across multiple domains.” Interestingly, while the Army maintains its design methodology as a complementary tool to facilitate conceptual planning, *The Operations Process* demonstrates a level of convergence between design and operational art by incorporating many of the joint elements of operational design as the elements of operational art shown in table 1.26

Table 1. Comparing *Joint Elements of Operational Design* and *U.S. Army Elements of Operational Art*

<i>Joint Elements of Operational Design</i> JP 5-0 (June 2017)	<i>U.S. Army Elements of Operational Art</i> ADP 5-0 (July 2019)
Military end state	End state and conditions
Center of gravity	Center of gravity
Decisive points	Decisive points
Lines of operation	Lines of operation
Lines of effort	Lines of effort
Arranging operations	Phasing and transitions
Operational reach	Operational reach
Culmination	Culmination
Objectives*	Basing*
Effects*	Risk*
Termination*	Tempo*
Forces and functions*	
Anticipation*	
Direct and indirect approaches*	

JP 5-0 and ADP 5-0 share many concepts of operational art and design in common. Concepts that differ between the two publications are marked by an asterisk.

Moreover, the Navy and Air Force both expound on the baseline concept of operational art found in Joint doctrine, providing additional insights into Service-specific interpretations of the idea. For example, *Naval Warfare*, Naval Doctrinal Publication (NDP) 1, a multi-Service document for which the Marine Corps is a cosigner, states that operational art affords commanders and their staffs “the ability to anticipate, and the skill to monitor, assess, plan, and direct tactical actions in a manner that achieves the desired strategic result.”²⁷ Similarly, the Air Force adds to that concept by stating that operational art “uses the

commander's vision and intent to determine broadly what should be accomplished in the operational environment," and that it is "guided by the 'why' from the strategic level and implemented with the 'how' at the tactical level."²⁸

Despite the prevalence of operational art in documents published throughout the Joint Force, the Marine Corps continues to ignore the concept in its foundational doctrine. One need not look any further than *Warfighting* to see evidence of this omission that extends through the Corps' most important publications.

The Absence of Operational Art in Marine Corps Doctrine

The 2018 edition of *Warfighting* holds an important position as the keystone of the Marine Corps' entire doctrine hierarchy. Since its introduction in 1989, *Warfighting* has been revised and republished on several occasions, with each Commandant reiterating its importance as a critical part of every Marine's professional development. In fact, *Warfighting* remains the only doctrinal document on the Commandant's Professional Reading List, featured as one of seven publications that all Marines are directed to read on an annual basis.²⁹ Yet, despite its centrality to developing and maintaining the Corps' maneuver warfare philosophy, it is completely devoid of any reference to the concept of operational art.³⁰

In fact, the core publications of the MCDP series remain mute on the matter. For example, *Operations, Strategy, and Campaigning* do not mention operational art once. This is concerning, given the importance of each of these documents in shaping the Marine Corps' theory of conflict and its role as an integral member of the Joint Force. Only *Tactics*, MCDP 1-3, receives a single mention of operational art in its bibliography.³¹ Finally, even *Planning*, MCDP 5-

0, the Corps' Service equivalent to *Joint Planning*, fails to mention operational art despite the concept's ubiquity in the planning publications for each Service.³²

In a similar fashion to the MCDP series, neither *Marine Corps Planning Process*, Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 5-1, nor *Marine Corps Operating Concept: How an Expeditionary Force Operates in the 21st Century* reference operational art despite the pivotal role that both documents play in guiding the Corps' planning for operations and force design. While these documents demonstrate the Corps' commitment to the development of design—an idea that is described as the conception and articulation of a framework for solving a problem—neither document describes how planning or operational design connect to the concept of operational art.³³

Further, the omission of operational art in *Componency*, MCWP 7-0, the guiding document for Marine commanders and staffs regarding the conduct of joint operations, is cause for concern. This publication describes the responsibilities and functions of Marine forces in key roles with operational requirements, such as performing duties as a Marine service component, an element of a joint force maritime component, or a Marine logistics command with operational-level sustainment obligations. Most significantly, it addresses the potential of Marine forces serving as a joint task force headquarters, a role that requires fluency and proficiency among commanders and their staffs in the application of operational art. This elucidates a fundamental disconnect between Marine Corps doctrine and both the intellectual and theoretical underpinnings of contemporary Joint doctrine. It also highlights the risk of undermining the Corps' ability to maximize unity of effort and fulfill the responsibilities inherent within a joint operational construct.³⁴ After all, cooperation and dialogue among a joint force relies on a shared lexicon and a conceptual foundation that is built into the culture and rituals of each of the Services.

The exclusion of operational art in Marine Corps doctrine implicitly highlights the organization's tendency to view the world through a tactical warfighting lens. It also emphasizes the need for a concept that can serve as a bridging function that connects strategy, operations, and tactics vertically and horizontally.³⁵ Although the Corps has used design as an element of the *Marine Corps Planning Process* since the concept's official implementation in 2010, the future operating environment demands a more holistic and dynamic method of orchestrating functions and activities across time, space, and purpose.³⁶ The Corps' continued avoidance of the broad inclusion of operational art into its doctrine and culture places its ability to generate value for the naval Services and the Joint Force at risk.

While some organizations within the Marine Corps—most notably the School of Advanced Warfighting at Marine Corps University—have made concerted efforts to leverage operational art, its absence in doctrine leaves the preponderance of the force with little to no formal exposure to it.³⁷ This has significant implications for the Corps' ability to achieve General Berger's vision of naval integration and harmonious incorporation with the other elements of the Joint Force.³⁸ The erosion of maritime culture within the Marine Corps during the past two decades of warfare ashore amplifies these effects. Maritime security scholar Milan Vego writes in *Operational Warfare at Sea* that

knowledge and understanding of operational art are essential for subordinate naval tactical commanders' success as well. To act in accordance with the operational commander's intent, they must understand a broader—that is, operational—picture of the situation. By understanding operational art, they can make decisions that will greatly contribute to the accomplishment of the ultimate operational or strategic objective.³⁹

Operational art offers the Marine Corps a means to contribute both materially and intellectually to the success of naval and Joint Force operations in a new era of seapower while ensuring that the Corps can meet the Commandant's intent in revolutionizing its ability to think and interact with the Joint Force.⁴⁰ As such, the adoption of operational art must be a central aspect to the completion of the ongoing revolution within the Corps.

While much has changed since the end of the Cold War in 1991, an assessment of the contextual factors that fomented the intellectual and theoretical achievements of the maneuver warfare revolution provides a historical case of the Marine Corps' organizational behavior when faced with an existential crisis. This case demonstrates how the Corps can "unshackle" itself from its previous notions of war in preparation for the future.⁴¹ If "today's problems come from yesterday's solutions," as systems scientist Peter M. Senge wrote, then an informed analysis of the current crisis must begin by tracing the course of the last revolution.⁴²

From the Maneuver Warfare Revolution to the Current Crisis

According to Thomas Kuhn, successful revolutions can only be concluded through revising—or, in some cases, completely rewriting—a community's guiding body of literature.⁴³ In this light, the Marine Corps began the process of crystallizing its maneuver warfare revolution on 6 March 1989 when General Alfred M. Gray, the 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps, signed the first official copy of *Warfighting*, Fleet Marine Force Manual (FMFM) 1.⁴⁴ This seminal event, made possible by a cadre of military thinkers, marked a cultural watershed for the Corps. *Warfighting* (FMFM 1) provided the organization with a common philosophical baseline, rooted in theory, to address the post-Vietnam cultural

crisis while posturing it to succeed in future operations across the conflict continuum.⁴⁵ In short, *Warfighting* (FMFM 1) outlined a method by which the Marine Corps, a chronically under-resourced military branch, could continue to bolster the nation's security even if forced to fight from positions of numerical and materiel inferiority in the nuclear age.

While today's Corps broadly accepts maneuver warfare as an innate aspect of the organization's culture, due to its institutionalization and reinforcement among generations of Marines, the theory, as with all revolutions, required a crisis to foment its inception in the late 1980s. Despite many triumphs on the tactical and operational levels of war, the United States' ignominious exit from the Vietnam War in the mid-1970s marked a strategic defeat in Southeast Asia. Similar to the other U.S. Services, the Marine Corps faced significant organizational turmoil and confusion, which required it to engineer a new identity that addressed the woes of Vietnam while providing enduring value as the nation's naval expeditionary force-in-readiness.⁴⁶ This challenge was further complicated given the context of a peacetime military seeking change without the trust and confidence of the nation. Consequently, the Corps faced an existential crisis of relevance.

During the 1980s, General Gray, a veteran of the wars in Korea and Vietnam, served as a champion of the maneuver warfare revolution.⁴⁷ Using his military experience and education as a guide, he assembled a growing body of support that included contributions from noteworthy figures, such as U.S. Air Force colonel John R. Boyd and Marine Corps lieutenant general Paul K. Van Riper. The idea of maneuver warfare emerged during an era that Van Riper refers to as an *intellectual renaissance*.⁴⁸ Finally, with a broad base of support in place, Gray's 1987 accession to the position of Commandant of the Marine

Corps set conditions for the official acceptance and implementation of the theory.

The 1989 edition of *Warfighting* (FMFM 1), at only 88 pages, presents a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, philosophy of conflict and maneuver warfare as a guide for the development and socialization of all Marines. It reinforces its powerful message by providing a continuous, conceptual narrative across four chapters that described the nature and theory of war as well as how the Marine Corps should prepare for and conduct operations as an amphibious force in a Cold War context.⁴⁹ Under these conditions, the Corps recognized the need “to shatter the enemy’s cohesion through a variety of rapid, focused, and unexpected actions” aimed at creating “a turbulent and rapidly deteriorating situation with which the enemy cannot cope.”⁵⁰ This requirement relied on a common understanding of the phenomena of war.

Beginning with a foundational description of war as a “violent clash of interests between or among organized groups characterized by the use of military force,” the document sets the tone for a philosophy for force structure, training, and leadership.⁵¹ Aside from the importance of shaping a new culture, the most important aspect came from describing maneuver warfare. Unlike other military organizations that employ attrition-focused warfare to destroy an enemy’s capacity to fight, the Marine Corps adopted maneuver warfare as its preferred style, aiming to defeat enemies through a system-centric approach that focused the application of force at a decisive point at the correct time.⁵² Reinforcing the notion of maneuver with concepts such as commander’s intent, mission orders, and centers of gravity, *Warfighting* (FMFM 1) outlines a holistic approach for collapsing an enemy’s will while exerting minimal resources. *Warfighting* (FMFM 1) ultimately delivers exactly what its visionaries imagined,

and it has served as an acceptable philosophical guide for the Corps for 30 years.

Yet, as the CPG states, the Marine Corps needs significant change to retain its relevance in the future operating environment.⁵³ As a result, it must revise its underlying assumptions about war and its role in future operations that span the competition continuum. Doing so requires the Corps to reflect on its recent experiences and how it will provide meaningful contributions to future naval campaigns. Although maneuver warfare should remain an available tool for solving problems, the current geostrategic context of great power competition requires the Corps to advance beyond its foundational doctrine encapsulated in the *Warfighting* publications. After all, much has changed since 1989.

The Long Road to Crisis

Synchronous to the conclusion of the Marine Corps' maneuver warfare revolution, the seeds for today's crisis were sown as the U.S. military pushed to complete a defense reformation process that had been underway since the end of World War II (1939–45). While the Goldwater-Nichols Act introduced many positive changes to the U.S. defense apparatus, it had a number of unintended impacts on the Marine Corps that, when combined with the subsequent conduct of the Gulf War (1990–91) and the Global War on Terrorism (2001–present), greatly altered the Service's relationship with the Navy and its own structure and culture.

Completed in the years immediately preceding the publication of *Warfighting* (FMFM 1), the Goldwater-Nichols Act signaled the conclusion of a reformation effort that began with the National Security Act of 1947, a critical piece of legislation that codified the continued existence of the Marine Corps in

law.⁵⁴ Not only did the Goldwater-Nichols Act reinforce civilian control of the military, but it also streamlined the provision of military advice to the president, the secretary of defense, and the National Security Council. From an operational perspective, the law's most significant impact on the Marine Corps resulted from its influence on the nation's geographic and functional unified combatant commands.⁵⁵ But while the Goldwater-Nichols Act improved cooperation and interoperability across most of the Joint Force, the same cannot be said for the maritime Services. In fact, the act's forced separation of Navy and Marine Corps Service components had a profound impact on the employment of Marine Corps forces, catalyzing the gradual erosion of the Corps' traditional relationship with the Navy.

Although the impact of this separation was obscured by military success in the Gulf War and decades of uncontested naval supremacy following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the division resulted in the disappearance of the Fleet Marine Force that had provided Marine forces to the Navy's numbered fleets since 1933. The act also drove a wedge between the maritime Services, allowing the Navy and Marine Corps to focus on their roles in providing separate and distinct contributions to Joint operations. While the Navy focused on leveraging technology to enhance its naval warfare capacity, the Marine Corps reinforced the allure of its maneuver warfare philosophy through operational successes ashore. Despite the many benefits accrued to the U.S. military through the implementation of the Goldwater-Nichols Act, the legislation ultimately had the unintended consequence of severing the longstanding cooperation between the naval Services and set the initial conditions for the rise of the Corps' current crisis and decline of its maritime culture.⁵⁶

In today's Marine Corps, many of its leaders, including this author, have not spent a single day afloat during the course of their careers, leading to an implicit paradigm of an organization that is amphibious in nature but not in practice. The division and subsequent isolation of Navy and Marine Corps forces into separate Service components, each resourced by their own funding streams, led the Services to develop "a tendency to view their operational responsibilities as separate and distinct, rather than intertwined."⁵⁷ Further, the conduct of protracted operations ashore during the course of decades has amplified these effects while increasing the dissonance between Navy and Marine Corps operational concepts and doctrine.

The U.S. military continues to hold its stunning display of success during the Gulf War in high regard. The rapid victory represented a watershed moment for the Joint Force, marking its transformation from an "industrial-age force designed for great-power conflict to [that of the] information age."⁵⁸ The war also signaled that the United States had overcome the post-Vietnam organizational and intellectual challenges that plagued its military throughout the 1980s and validated the Goldwater-Nichols Act through unprecedented levels of cooperation and unified military action in Joint and Coalition warfare.⁵⁹ In aggregate, the U.S. military's performance embodied the convergence of organizational reform, battlefield innovation, and overwhelming force to remove the Iraqi military, then the fourth largest in the world, from Kuwait in less than 100 hours of ground combat operations. As a result, the Marine Corps and the rest of the U.S. military beheld the decisive battles of the war as the idealized model of future warfare.⁶⁰ In a sense, the experience of the Gulf War typifies Colin S. Gray's characterization of the American way of war as apolitical, astrategical, and profoundly regular.⁶¹ This legacy has continued well into the twenty-first century.

In a similar fashion to the Gulf War, the initial successes of the Global War on Terrorism—including the toppling of the Taliban government in Afghanistan in 2001 and the rapid defeat of the Iraqi military in 2003—served to further reinforce the U.S. military’s preference for tactical and technological solutions to military problems. The military’s performance in Iraq and Afghanistan led to a similar pattern of behavior displayed by the Germans in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), wherein strategy was supplanted by a perverted conception of decisive battle and overconfidence in their military preeminence.⁶² While the Marine Corps gained much from cultivating the warfighting experience of a generation of Marines in combat operations ashore, it also paid a penalty in straining its relationship with the Navy and stunting the growth of its own maritime culture.

Although the Marine Corps retains a lawful obligation to serve as the nation’s naval expeditionary force-in-readiness, the Gulf War and the Global War on Terrorism included relatively few instances of meaningful operations in the maritime domain. Aside from an amphibious demonstration during the Gulf War and General James N. Mattis’s famed seizure of Forward Operating Base Rhino with Task Force 58 in Afghanistan in 2001, the preponderance of the Corps’ wartime experience since the publication of *Warfighting* (FMFM-1) has consisted of actions ashore. And while it is crucial to remember and learn from the hard lessons of battles such as an-Nasiriyah, ar-Ramadi, Fallujah, and Marjah, it is also important to note the impact that these hard-fought battles, as well as decades of protracted conflict ashore, have had on the force structure and culture of the current generation of Marines. Everett C. Dolman, a professor at the U.S. Air Force Air Command and Staff College, echoes this thought, arguing that the allure of tactical victory is strong and can have adverse effects on strategic thought.⁶³

Reinforcement theory provides an explanation for this phenomena by emphasizing the tendency of humans to engage in and actively pursue behaviors that have been reinforced through specific experiences and desirable outcomes.⁶⁴ In this regard, conflict is a paradoxical phenomenon that can generate beneficial effects by providing organizations with operational experience, innovation resulting from competitive pressures, and cohesion among group members.⁶⁵ At the same time, conflict can also have negative effects, including the development of structural rigidity that contributes to a tendency for centralized control, a dependency on adhering to established procedures and behavioral norms, and an increased emphasis on task performance and defeating competitors. While these are important pressures, they can also be counterproductive if pursued as an end of their own to the detriment of delivering operational or strategic outcomes. Furthermore, according to Richard K. Betts, with the passage of time, organizations tend to “become oriented, not to the larger political aims they are enlisted to pursue, but to their own stability.”⁶⁶ Dakota L. Wood, a retired Marine and senior research fellow at the Heritage Foundation, explains this paradoxical impact of recent conflict on the Corps:

. . . battle blinds the Corps because of the service’s preference for such combat. It is easy to envision. It creates an environment for the maximum use of all of the skills a combat-focused service spends so much time developing. It generates funding, attention, glory, stories and career advancement. It also provides a great deal of independence, enabling the Corps to conduct multiunit, large-scale combat operations in a way that leverages the full power of the MAGTF [Marine Air Ground Task Force].⁶⁷

In an effort to meet the needs of successive administrations while also ensuring that it contributed materially to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Marine Corps pursued a course of stability, reliability, and predictability that detracted from its statutory role as a naval force-in-readiness. In a sense, the Marine Corps behaved in a similar manner described by Betts, who noted that military forces have a tendency to “conflate strategy with operations . . . focusing on how to destroy targets or defeat enemies tactically, assuming that positive military effects mean positive policy effects.”⁶⁸ This phenomena is further supported by what psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman refers to as theory-induced blindness, wherein organizations and individuals find increasing difficulty in detecting flaws in accepted theories.⁶⁹

Beyond the realm of organizational behavior, changes in force structure demonstrate the deeper impact on the Corps’ relationship with the nation’s maritime Services.⁷⁰ Between 1990 and 2018, the U.S. Navy’s amphibious fleet declined from a total number of 59 vessels to 32. This trend reflects shifting priorities in the Navy’s investment strategy as it postured itself for a future of naval warfare that prioritized nuclear strikes and power projection over littoral warfare. With uncontested command of the seas following the end of the Cold War, the Navy had little appetite for capital ship investments that did not contribute materially to blue-water operations as technology enabled smaller fleets to do more with less.⁷¹

The Navy, however, was not alone in pursuing an investment strategy that drove an interoperability wedge between the two Services. The Marine Corps’ participation in protracted wars ashore detracted from its own ability to advocate effectively against the Navy’s divestment of its amphibious capacity. For example, the Corps’ fleet of more than 2,000 Mine-Resistant Armor Protected (MRAP) vehicle variants, which were purchased through an accelerated

acquisition process to meet urgent requirements for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, has extremely limited utility in littoral operations, given the difficulty of embarking and transporting the massive vehicles in distributed maritime operations.⁷² Similar observations about the Marine Corps' force structure are reflected in publications such as the Heritage Foundation's *Rebuilding America's Military* and the CPG, the latter of which identifies force design and modernization as the Corps' highest priority.⁷³ Indeed, as the CPG states:

While we can and should take pride in our ability to develop a deep reservoir of knowledge on counterinsurgency operations, we must now direct our attention and energy to replicating that educational effort across the force to create a similar knowledge base regarding naval warfare and naval expeditionary warfare.⁷⁴

Analyzing the Current Crisis

In conjunction with these events and consequences, the current crisis facing the Marine Corps represents a collection of statutory, intraorganizational, interorganizational, and adversarial tensions that must be addressed in the context of great power competition in a new era of seapower. The resolution of this crisis will require the Corps to reflect deeply and leverage concepts such as operational art to design a force capable of delivering the desired strategic effects in an increasingly complex and dynamic operating environment.

From a statutory perspective, the Marine Corps must depart from decades of conducting operations that detract from its lawful role and expose the organization to substantial risk. According to Title 10 of the United States Code, the Corps "shall be organized, trained, and equipped to provide fleet marine forces of combined arms, together with supporting air components, for service with the fleet in the seizure or defense of advanced naval bases and for the

conduct of such land operations as may be essential to the prosecution of a naval campaign.”⁷⁵ General Berger echoes this principal requirement in his CPG, harkening the resurrection of the Fleet Marine Force and emphasizing that the Corps must fundamentally alter its current organization to ensure that it is “trained and equipped as a naval expeditionary force-in-readiness and prepared to operate inside actively contested maritime spaces in support of fleet operations.”⁷⁶ Neither the U.S. Code nor the CPG mention anything about the Corps’ ability to win battles or excel in tactics, since those are assumed prerequisites in the successful conduct of naval campaigns and fleet operations. As a result, the Corps must fundamentally alter its conception of its role and sever ties with the symbolic importance of victory in battle—a concept that Dolman claims “belongs wholly within the realm of tactics.”⁷⁷ Part of the current crisis is the dearth of operational thought and the absence of operational artists capable of conceptualizing the role of Marine forces in the context of naval campaigns and fleet operations.

From an intraorganizational perspective, the Marine Corps must also overcome several sizable barriers to change. As with all organizations during times of transition, the pressures that are generated by bureaucratic inertia, competing conceptions of the future, disagreement among internal constituencies regarding resource allocation, and culture all impact the progress and effectiveness of change efforts. While a sense of crisis can serve as a unifying force during periods of macro-organizational transition, significant tensions are an inevitable part of the change process that seeks to modify patterns of thought, behavior, and interaction within an organization.⁷⁸ The process will inevitably involve modifications to the organization’s structure of rituals, symbols, and myths to achieve deep penetration with change efforts. These types of transformations represent significant challenges to organizations

wherein structural inertia—generated by structures, procedures, and norms established to maintain order and control—can often stifle organizational changes perceived as a disruptive threat to short-term success.⁷⁹

Similarly, the Marine Corps' organizational language, defined "as a collection of verbal symbols that often reflect the organization's particular culture," is insufficient to meet the needs of the Joint Force in conducting globally integrated, all-domain operations across the competition continuum.⁸⁰ While battle will remain an inextricable element in the grammar of war, part of the present crisis stems from a lack of an operational lexicon that lines up with that of the rest of the Joint Force. After all, the direction and success of campaigns may be altogether different from the Corps' traditional understanding of victory since "success of campaigns is measured in war progress and the continuing impact on diplomatic, socio-cultural, economic, and information realms."⁸¹ In this regard, the ability of the Corps to adapt, innovate, and win matters, but it is not sufficient in and of itself to prepare for the future.⁸² Interorganizational tension within the Corps only serves to exacerbate the current crisis.

From an interorganizational perspective, the Marine Corps must also address the "pulling and hauling" of interorganizational conflict within the Department of Defense as General Berger charts a trajectory that departs from the status quo as well as the expectations of the other Services and combatant commanders. While the Navy and Marine Corps continue toward a solution of future naval integration, problems such as the lack of adequate amphibious shipping illustrate the challenge of relying on one Service to allocate finite resources to staff, train, and equip forces required to provide critical warfighting capabilities to a different Service. Similarly, General Berger's vision may not align with the ideas and plans implemented by each of the geographic combatant

commanders. There also exists a logical tension among Service and combatant commanders who see the Marine Corps as either a naval force-in-readiness that functions as part of a joint force maritime component or a rapidly deployable air-ground task force that can be leveraged as a discretionary force within a geographic combatant commanders' area of responsibility. The increasingly complex and chaotic global operating environment associated with the information revolution, described by public policy professors Michael D. Cohen and Robert Axelrod as a phenomena requiring fundamental reform "and policy interventions at every level of social organization," only serves to amplify the tensions of providing a meaningful offering to the nation in an era of great power competition.⁸³

Finally, from an operational perspective, the 2017 *National Security Strategy* and its accompanying *National Defense Strategy* and *National Military Strategy* reflect the most significant contextual changes in the current global geopolitical environment. These changes include the reemergence of great power competition, the atrophy of America's traditional military advantages, and the need to exert wide-ranging influence to advance the nation's interests in an increasingly interconnected world. The documents note the rise of revisionist powers, such as China and Russia, that seek to change the global order built through international institutions and norms following the end of World War II. They also recognize the threats that rogue regimes, violent extremist organizations, and transnational criminal organizations pose to American citizens and U.S. interests abroad.⁸⁴ The *National Defense Strategy* expands on the consequences of these competitive forces to include China's militarization of islands in the South China Sea and Russia's gray-zone activities in Ukraine and Syria that avoid triggering U.S. military responses while extending influence in Eastern Europe and the Levant. It also discusses regional instability generated by

nonstate actors, such as the Islamic State, as well as rogue regimes in North Korea and Iran that violate international norms while continuing to pursue weapons of mass destruction. Finally, the *National Military Strategy* uses current security trends—including the decline of the post-World War II world order, the diffusion of technology, and the battle of narratives—to anchor its strategic approach for achieving global integration in an increasingly complex operating environment. Collectively, these documents describe a chaotic operating environment wherein the U.S. military must remain capable of delivering strategic effects in an era where “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism,” is the primary concern of American security.⁸⁵

According to former U.S. secretary of defense James N. Mattis, a retired Marine general, the American military advantages displayed during the Gulf War and the initial phases of the Global War on Terrorism have since eroded. Revisionist powers have studied American dominance in Iraq and Afghanistan and have invested considerable resources to counter U.S. military capabilities, such as long-range fires, antiaccess and area denial capabilities, and hypersonic weapons. They aim to deny the United States its fundamental strengths of precision munitions, conventional warfighting capacity, and global power projection. Competitors have also made significant efforts to contest U.S. military supremacy in arenas with lower barriers to entry, such as cyber and information warfare. These efforts have the potential to disrupt American command and control capabilities while influencing the opinions of both domestic and foreign audiences in ways that undercut U.S. interests. In addition to the readiness struggles that have resulted from the United States’ continued employment of military forces in the Global War on Terrorism, the absence of sustained, predictable resources has detracted from the modernization of equipment and concepts to build a more lethal joint force for the future.⁸⁶

In an age wherein the democratization of technology and proliferation of global communication networks have heightened the velocity, tempo, and volume of information transmissions, military leaders must face the reality of vertical and horizontal compression through the different levels of warfare. To further complicate matters, the Marine Corps must also confront the fact that its paradigm of war needs revision to accommodate the nuances of the competition continuum and a state of persistent campaigning. In fact, during his first public remarks delivered at the Heritage Foundation shortly after his ascent to the position of Commandant in July 2019, General Berger acknowledged that the Corps is not prepared for confrontation with rivals such as China or Russia, specifically stating that the Service “is not optimized for great power competition.” He also elaborated on the Corps’ inability to support naval campaigns and operations through essential functions such as the ability to exert sea control in littoral regions or provide credible deterrent value against peer or near-peer actors who jeopardize U.S. national interests.⁸⁷

The current crisis, which requires the Marine Corps to address a wide range of organizational, ecological, and contextual problems, is unlike anything it has faced. While the maneuver warfare revolution helped assure institutional relevance at the end of the Cold War, the present crisis requires an operational warfare revolution that enables the Corps to cope with the complexities of naval campaigns and fleet operations in a new age of seapower. This requires a change in mindset toward the idea of campaigning “that recognizes joint force activities of all kinds—not just armed conflict—that should be continually adapted in response to evolving strategic conditions and policy objectives.”⁸⁸ The Service must also find a way to circumvent what the moral psychologist Johnathan Haidt describes as the *rationalist delusion*, wherein a group loses the ability to think rationally about the things it holds sacred.⁸⁹ In the case of the

Marine Corps, this includes reflecting deeply on the need for changes in maneuver warfare doctrine, the Marine Air-Ground Task Force construct, the value placed on battlefield preeminence, and the sense of security offered by the realm of tactics. Rather than adhering to the traditional Jominian and Clausewitzian conceptions of Napoleonic warfare that fill the pages of *Warfighting* (MCDP 1), the Corps should perhaps expand its aperture and study the works of influential twentieth-century Soviet military theorists—such as Georgii S. Isserson, Mikhail V. Frunze, Mikhail N. Tukhachevsky, and Aleksandr A. Svechin—who recognized that they were facing a “new epoch of military art” and that tactics alone were no longer enough to confront the changing face of war.⁹⁰ Ultimately, the Marine Corps must find a new way forward for its needed intellectual revolution.

Completing the Operational Warfare Revolution

In his seminal work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas S. Kuhn described the process of resolving revolutions as a competition between existing and emerging paradigms when a community is confronted with anomalies that lead to crisis. For the Marine Corps, successive revolutions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries spawned paradigms that provided solutions to existing challenges, such as the Navy’s adoption of steam power, the development of amphibious assault operations, and the establishment of maneuver warfare. Today’s crisis, however, is fundamentally different, for it requires a focus on joint operational warfare in a globally integrated fashion. Given the context of great power competition, an increasingly complex operating environment, and the emergence of disruptive technologies, the Marine Corps must redesign itself to confront the challenges of today as the nation’s naval expeditionary force-in-readiness. Consequently, there are several reasons why the Corps should

institutionalize operational art as a critical aspect of bringing closure to the current revolution.

First and foremost, operational art will help the Marine Corps design, plan, and organize tactical actions in a manner that delivers desired operational and strategic results during naval campaigns that are conducted in conjunction with all-domain, globally integrated operations spanning the competition continuum. This is essential in the conduct of twenty-first century warfare, where “joint force commanders and component commanders [must] use operational art to determine when, where, and for what purpose major forces will be employed and to influence the adversary’s disposition before combat.”⁹¹ The institutionalization of operational art will also contribute to optimizing current and future force design efforts, enabling the Corps to adapt and structure itself to operate in fundamentally different and disruptive ways as an integral member of the naval Services.⁹² Finally, operational art—and its ability to force Marines to think beyond the realm of tactics—will prepare the Corps to resolve some of the most pertinent issues of the current crisis by revising its doctrinal, conceptual, and educational enterprises; preparing for the future of joint operational warfare; and fostering effective naval integration that enables meaningful contributions during the conduct of naval campaigns and fleet operations.

As General Charles C. Krulak, the 31st Commandant of the Marine Corps, wrote in his introduction to the 1997 edition of *Warfighting* (MCDP 1), “Military doctrine cannot be allowed to stagnate, especially an adaptive doctrine like maneuver warfare.”⁹³ Given the wide acceptance of operational art throughout the Joint Force, the time has come for the Marine Corps to introduce the concept into its own doctrinal hierarchy. Not only will this provide a bridging mechanism that can join ideas horizontally and vertically across the different

levels of warfare, but it will also ensure that the Corps shares a common operational warfare lexicon that is accepted across the Joint Force.

While many field-grade Marine officers receive exposure to operational art during professional military education experiences, the concept must also be included in the doctrine that the Corps uses as a foundation for everything it does, for neither joint doctrine nor maritime Service doctrine will ever have the same penetration power or relevance as Service-oriented doctrine.⁹⁴ As Milan Vego argues in *Operational Warfare at Sea*:

There should be some agreement within a naval service and among sister services about the meanings of key operational terms; otherwise, it is difficult to write sound service or joint doctrine. . . . The lack of common terms, the abuse of commonly understood terms, or the use of existing terms interchangeably also greatly complicates discussion among theoreticians of various aspects of operational warfare at sea.⁹⁵

The Marine Corps runs significant risk in its ability to make relevant contributions to the Joint Force and combatant commanders if it does not institutionalize operational art as a common mental model. In an era during which the dispersion of forces across various layers of the global operating model will remain a necessity in operations ranging from cooperation to armed conflict, the Corps needs agile company-grade and noncommissioned officers capable of thinking beyond the level of tactics. The same holds true for senior leaders and their staffs in the conduct of joint operational warfare. The education, training, and socialization of Marine Corps leaders must therefore include deliberate, long-term exposure to the concept of operational art if the Service desires to fight above its weight class.

However, the Corps need not simply adopt wholesale concepts of operational art or operational design from the Joint Force. After all, the variant of operational art developed for the U.S. Army was focused on the conduct of terrestrial large-scale combat operations. Given the Marine Corps' statutory role as the nation's naval expeditionary force-in-readiness, coupled with the current need to achieve new levels of naval integration, the Service must take a deliberate approach in developing a theory of operational art that prepares it for conflict in the littorals. The Corps should design its own specific version of the idea through exploration, experimentation, dialogue, and reflection. Doing so will allow it to optimize its conception of operational art while providing greater value to the Joint Force. Naval warfare theorist Geoffrey Till captures this sentiment when he states that "effective jointery is a tremendous advantage in military operations, but only if it is based on a clear recognition of the differences between the Services as well as their similarities."⁹⁶ Consequently, as an organization established to bridge the gap between operations at sea and operations ashore, it is particularly important for the Marine Corps to incorporate applicable aspects and nuances of operational art from each of the U.S. Services insofar as they apply to the conduct of naval campaigning in all domains. Doing so will provide the Corps with a Service-tailored concept of operational art that enables it to not only think on the operational level but also maximize unity of effort and interoperability with the rest of the Joint Force.

Further, Marine commanders and their staffs must be capable of leading and coordinating the employment of joint, combined, or coalition forces to advance American interests and generate strategic results. Just as a Marine Air-Ground Task Force can serve as the nucleus of a joint task force, Marine Corps components must also be prepared to lead other operational warfare organizations. These responsibilities range from leading combined and joint

maritime components to establishing marine logistics commands to manage operational-level sustainment in support of joint and multinational operations.⁹⁷ In any of these cases, it is vital for commanders and their staffs to speak a similar language as the rest of the Joint Force. A continued reluctance to embrace the idea of operational art in the Corps' doctrine and lexicon jeopardizes the ability of Marines to contribute to and lead military activities on the operational level.

Finally, operational art can also go far in realizing the future of naval integration. In an era wherein the significance of sea control and naval supremacy can no longer be assumed, the Marine Corps has an obligation to assist the maritime Services in preparing for a future in support of naval operations and campaigning.⁹⁸ After all, "maritime campaigns and major naval operations cannot be successfully conducted unless the naval operational commanders [Marines included] and their staffs have a common view of the fundamentals of operational warfare at sea." This requires the Corps to achieve a new consensus on the future employment of Marine forces as an integral part of the maritime Services since, according to Vego, the absence of such agreement "complicates the planning, preparation, and execution of a maritime campaign or major naval operations."⁹⁹ When applied appropriately, operational art can help build consensus and shared mental models across the maritime Services while also guiding them in advancing beyond their traditional conceptions of warfare and preference for the tactical level of warfare. In this regard, the effective application of operational art in the maritime domain requires imagination and creativity that allows operational commanders to overcome Service parochialism and the inertia of tradition.¹⁰⁰

This is particularly important since maritime Services often struggle to think on the abstract and emergent levels of strategy and operations, focusing instead on new applications of military technology, "targeteering," and the

idealized concept of decisive naval battle.¹⁰¹ This, of course, makes sense with a history steeped in the great, decisive naval battles of centuries past, such as Quiberon Bay (1759), Trafalgar (1805), Tsushima (1905), and Midway (1942). Given the evolutionary changes in telecommunications, area denial capabilities, precision-guided munitions, and the global dispersion of military capabilities, however, the prospects of decisive naval battles that destroy the entirety of an enemy's combatant fleet appear are little more than wishful thinking in the twenty-first century. Despite its allure, the concentration of forces at sea in traditional naval warfare continues to lose relevance with the passage of time.¹⁰² Given the many competing tensions in the conduct of future naval operations—including Service parochialism, institutional inertia, and resource priorities—operational art will enable greater inter-Service cooperation in the drive toward naval integration. As Vego states,

operational warfare at sea is the only means of orchestrating and tying together naval tactical actions within a larger design that directly contributes to the objectives set by strategy. A tactical concept for the employment of one's maritime forces cannot lead to victory if it is not an integral part of a broader operational concept.¹⁰³

Ultimately, the success of tomorrow's joint combined operations and campaigns will depend on the ability of each of the military Services to generate operational and strategic effects through the orchestration of harmonious and coherent actions and activities on the tactical level of warfare. Therefore, to prepare for the challenges of great power competition and the global integration of operations, the Marine Corps must institutionalize operational art to drive effective force design and enable the Service to play a critical role in designing, planning, and executing naval campaigns. Operational art exists in the

cognitive domain, and it represents a human-centric creative activity. Given the Corps' continued focus on the centrality of human capital as its key competitive advantage, success in the future will rest on the ability to harness the power of thought and ideas. Operational art is an essential element of the operational warfare revolution, and its incorporation into the doctrine, culture, and lexicon of the Marine Corps offers the Service an opportunity to bolster its ability to "out-think, outmaneuver, and out-fight any adversary under conditions of disruptive change."¹⁰⁴

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