

PRESIDENT'S FORUM



*What Will Be Asked of Our Navy? Some Reflections on
“What It All Means”*

A RECENT ARTICLE IN *FORBES* by Steve Cohen discusses the future of aircraft carriers in the larger context of maritime security and argues, even more important, that the American public seems uninterested in what is happening in the Navy generally.¹ Jim Bencivenga recently addressed in the *Christian Science Monitor* the impact the state of the economy will have on future naval forces.² Finally, Dr. Hew Strachan has written about civil-military relations and grand strategy.³

The interesting thing is that these three articles have appeared within days of each other, in three very different venues, none of them particularly “naval” publications. Here in Newport at the Naval War College—a place chartered for the past 125 years to think about these issues—it is very interesting and gratifying that journalists are beginning to write about naval issues and that Dr. Strachan, who has frequently visited us here, is addressing the state of civil-military relations and their relevance to strategy and operations. These issues are right in our “sweet spot,” and we have had some very interesting conferences, games, and discussions dealing directly with such questions. By the time this goes to print, Robert Kaplan will have spoken to us about his view of the future. Kaplan has sailed with Navy folks and written widely about his experiences.⁴

Though we are very conscious of the dangers of trying to predict the future, all these articles are highly relevant and related to work we’re doing here in Newport. Discussion of naval issues like these will soon become important to our leadership as it attempts not only to understand but to explain the importance and relevance of the U.S. Navy and sea power to the American people in the post-Iraq and -Afghanistan future.

In his recent guidance to the service, the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Gary Roughead, has put his finger right on the pulse: “I see continued disorder in the global security environment, a slow economic recovery, and increasing demand on our Navy.”⁵ To me, as I look out from Newport, the global security environment seems as unsettled as I’ve ever seen it. That has driven us here to a very interesting series of games, workshops, and conferences to try to capture a sense of the complexity of issues that will face the Navy and our nation in the future.

Speaking of complexity and history, I am frequently asked, “Admiral, what are you reading?” Just now, my faculty has me reading *A Distant Mirror*, by Barbara Tuchman, and *Before European Hegemony*, by Janet Abu-Lughod.⁶ Both books concern the era leading up to a major “decompression” in the fourteenth-century Europe. I have learned a lesson from these important works, which focus on the life of that time. It is a lesson (it may sound like Yogi Berra) reinforced during my discussions with the faculty here—that is, what we know happened, happened. It is history. We have been here before. It is not speculation.

In the case of medieval Europe, there may be differences in interpretation, but there is very little disagreement on the facts—there was no *deus ex machina* but a combination of factors that led to major problems. Professor Abu-Lughod says, “In the case of the decline of Bruges and Ghent[, for example, there were] natural, epidemic, political, and economic [factors,] and it is hard to see how ‘policy’ could have averted any of them.”⁷ That is the “lesson of Flanders,” that no one thing but a combination of things led to the decline—bank failures, wars, twenty-five million deaths from the plague, and finally the silting up of the port of Bruges.

I would contend there are major forces like that at work today and that, to use the words of Mark Twain, though history doesn’t necessarily repeat itself, it does rhyme. In an unpublished brief I saw in June 2009, a professor at the Swedish National Defense College, Tomas Ries, made the point this way. Sixty-five percent of the world’s population, he argues, finds itself today in a “Zone of Misery,” trapped by history, culture, climate, and resources; 19 percent is in the “Global Business Elite/Flow World” of “elite transnational corporations, globalized democracies, and societies in rapid transition,” which would likely fight each other only if flows were disrupted; the rest of the world’s population lives on the borderline between them, in the “Zone of Revolution,” with potential for positive transition—but then again, maybe not. Some similar ideas have been advanced by the American commentator, historian, and activist Mike Davis.⁸ Dr. Mike Vlahos of the Naval War College is asking a series of questions about weather events, the health of the oceans, freshwater, networks and networked systems (think oil or utilities distribution networks), and panics, and whether crisis

encourages competition and conflict or cooperation.⁹ He asks whether mind-altering events (say, a pandemic or some other devastating world event) shock us into new things. Is there a civilizational tipping point, when we can only say, "It's all over now, we must look to ourselves"? What would a serious pandemic do to our understanding of civilization? Can we mobilize before it's too late? Think about it. The Spanish flu pandemic in 1918 resulted in over twenty million deaths, and that was before today's extensive land, sea, and air transportation network existed. This is one of the main reasons, in fact, that we asked Max Brooks, a writer of science fiction, recently of *World War Z*, to visit us here.¹⁰

I am a serving Navy flag officer, so I will stick to what I know. I'm no pessimist, but as President of the Naval War College, I get paid to look at these hard questions. We try here to get our minds around big events, to make sense of what might happen in the future, and we can "game" such things—we've been doing that in Newport for over a hundred years. We conducted a large and extended game here back in 2006, in conjunction with the development of "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower" (CS21), which examined such issues. In that game, we found that almost all nations, including those in the "Zone of Revolution," have a stake in the effective functioning of the global system of commerce and security. This finding heavily influenced CS21 development, because it's clear that we in the United States are generally part of what Tomas Ries would call the "flow world" and therefore, as a nation, we (at least, many of us in the U.S. Navy) generally feel responsible for preserving this global system—along with other nations of the world and their navies, though each will also work toward what is in its own national interest.¹¹

The naval services, like a control system (in the technological sense), work silently, and most of the time invisibly, to keep things moving safely around the world and to intervene when there is flow disruption. We are seeing such disruptions now in the Gulf of Aden, we have seen them previously in the area of the Strait of Malacca, and we could see them in the South China Sea, for example, or potentially in any number of other areas.

During three conferences here in Newport over the past eighteen months we listened to people whose names you'd recognize talk about "irregular warfare"—in Afghanistan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Chechnya, for example. Many of our readers are certainly familiar with these operations and have been in these places or know people who have. This kind of warfare is what we're doing now, today, and could be doing for the foreseeable future. But one of the conference participants asked me, "Admiral, are you gaming climate change"? I pressed him as to what he had in mind. What if, he asked, the oceans were to rise and flood a country entirely? Who would help the people? And if their neighbors didn't want

them, “What do you do with them?” he asked. What indeed? And *who* would do it? Finding the answer is not rocket science; the countries with this level of capability make a pretty short list.

About a year ago, in the fall of 2009, we cosponsored with Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution a conference called “Arctic Security in an Age of Climate Change.” As Admiral Thad Allen (who retired in May 2010 as Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard) likes to say, no matter what you think about global warming, there is now water in places where before there was ice, and the Navy and Coast Guard have to deal with that. We had government officials and academics from China visit here to talk about military activities in the exclusive economic zone in 2009, and earlier this year we hosted such a group to discuss nontraditional security challenges for the maritime domain. We had a conference in December 2009 to discuss the science of climate change, civilizational evolution, energy and raw materials, and what they mean to the Navy. We’re thinking a lot about how these complex issues might evolve over time.

Lieutenant General Bill Caldwell showed us, when he recently visited here, a popular Web video in which speakers say, “We live in exponential times.”¹² I think there is a lot of truth in that. The video ends with the question, “What does it all mean?” They might well ask. One of the speakers at our Current Strategy Forum in June 2009 told us that we have historically been very bad at trying to predict the future. In fact, we have almost always gotten it wrong, and so we should expect to be surprised, expect the unexpected. Here in Newport we’re simply trying to anticipate, to stay ahead—simply put, to get the feel of the national zeitgeist.

Yet none of this alters the fact that over my thirty-three years of service as a destroyer officer, the geopolitical environment has slowly but surely been changing, for a multitude of reasons. Rear Admiral Bradley Fiske wrote in 1916 with an almost mathematical precision about how fleets work, trying to engineer war with some kind of precision.¹³ However, even Fiske realized that there was still as much art as science in military operations. Think about the recent conflict in Sri Lanka. It might be an easy leap to say, here is what things will be like in future “conventional war”: it’s still about getting ordnance on target, though the narrative in that case, so important in all insurgencies, meant that Sri Lanka’s fight was not a pure “Leyte Gulf–style” slugfest, force on force—in the *old style*.

OK, Admiral, you might ask, so what?

In the U.S. Navy, we like to think our skill level is very high; the fact is, however, that we cannot be complacent. The Navy has essentially not been challenged at sea since 1945. The last time its ships fired missiles at other warships was in 1988, during Operation PRAYING MANTIS.¹⁴ In DESERT STORM, I was

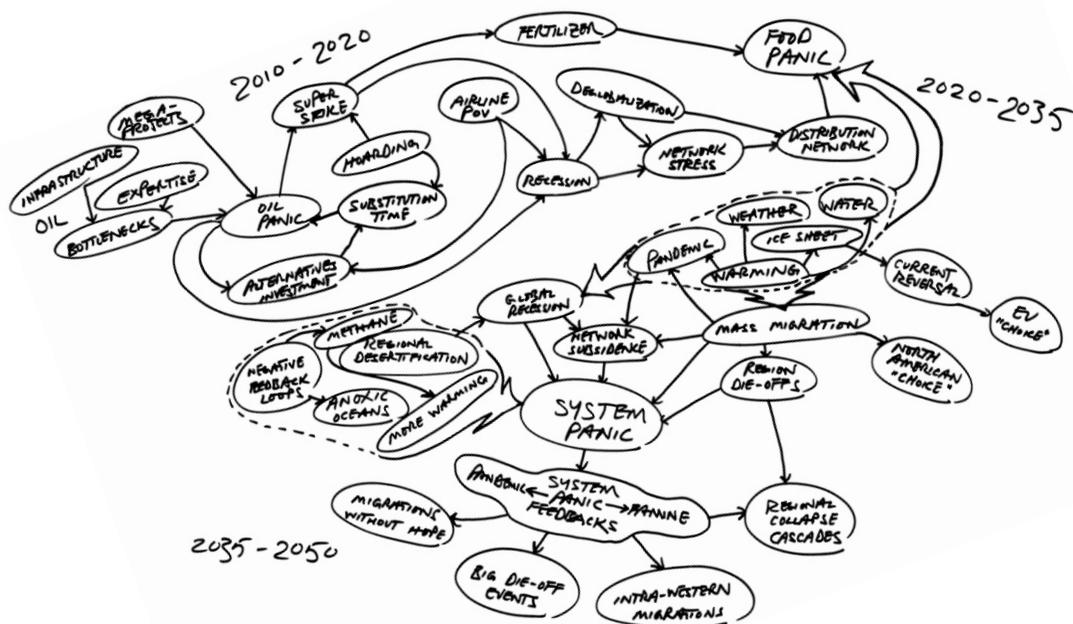
executive officer of a cruiser, USS *Valley Forge* (CG 50), and I know we were ready. We operated in the minefields of the northern Gulf as our air controllers vectored dozens of aircraft onto what became known as the “highway of death.” At sea, however, there were only minor patrol-boat actions, which were handled primarily by armed strike-reconnaissance aircraft and Royal Navy armed helicopters.

That said, as for what we would in the Navy call “conventional war”—power projection, massive fleet action—could it happen again? Any naval officer serving in the western Pacific within the past few years will tell you we’d be fools to assume it couldn’t. We certainly are thinking about it, and others in the Asian neighborhood are too. It’s part of the daily decision calculus, both in the U.S. Navy and in the capitals of potential adversaries. We’re not complacent. But as my gamers tell me, not having been tested for the past twenty years or more does not equal dominance, as the Royal Navy found out at Jutland in the First World War, over a hundred years after its last real fleet action, at Trafalgar. Neither, however, is any particular outcome preordained.

If you don’t think that Clausewitz had it right when he postulated that war is “more than a chameleon,” just ask the master of M/V *Maersk Alabama* or, perhaps, the master of USNS *Impeccable*. Is piracy in the Gulf of Aden a form of war? It may, for now, look more like crime and lawlessness, but if you do nothing, you get the “broken-window effect” we saw applied in New York City (which supposed that unless you repair each broken window, people will get the wrong signal and things will get worse, that criminals left to go about their business unchecked tend to get bolder and more brazen). What about war on networks? When does a denial of Internet service become an act of war? It seems to me that a serious global depression could lead to conflicts in new arenas, some of them unlikely areas that would be surprising to many Americans. How do we more precisely understand the complex synergy of feedback loops as we monitor the world’s environment? (Think Greenland, where Woods Hole is doing very good work.)¹⁵ Do we understand triggers and tipping points and their synergy?

Think about countries:

- Without energy or freshwater (desertification) as distribution networks are disrupted and prices shoot through the roof
- Without food, as production and distribution networks are disrupted
- Without proper medical care, as millions die from a global pandemic
- Without governance, resources, or trade in a prolonged economic crisis
- Failed states without alternatives, in low-lying areas at the mercy of weather, as temperatures and the level of the ocean rise.¹⁶



Dr. Vlahos has made a sketch that vividly suggests the complexity of all this.¹⁷

What will be asked of naval forces in such a future?

You could make the case that the U.S. Navy has become a feature of the world-wide strategic environment and that a lot could be asked of it in such a world, if even only some of these points are ever in play. Think about “gaming climate change”—it could mean humanitarian evacuation under combat conditions or noncombatant evacuations in a desperate, violent environment like Somalia, or Lebanon of recent years. As an example, I lived in South Korea for two years recently, and it was clear to us in Seoul that the Seventh Fleet, along with the U.S. global logistics infrastructure is a part of the landscape, and “assumed.” The Seventh Fleet is both part of the decision calculus of potential adversaries (and thereby a deterrent, which is good) and a policy tool, to show support for our allies.

It has become clear to me since arriving in Newport that investment in the education of our commanders will be essential in the twenty-first century if they are to have the tools they will need to deal with these challenges.¹⁸ We can’t, and don’t, just assume that “conventional war” would be a repeat of World War II. The interesting thing is that this complexity and difficulty don’t necessarily imply any particular outcome in a conflict between great powers. Janet Abu-Lughod explicitly shows that none of the current “received wisdom” about how unified Europe has come to be today was preordained. The wheels could have

come off at any point, and sometimes they did and for a variety of reasons—twice in a big way in the twentieth century. It's our job here in Newport to make sure we can anticipate, and that the wheels stay on, as far as we can help it.

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NOTES

1. Steve Cohen, "Where Are the Carriers?" *Admissions* (blog), *Forbes*, blogs.forbes.com/. This is certainly not a new issue. Dr. Mike Vlahos was writing about the viability of "capital ships" as early as 1979; see Michael Vlahos, "A Crack in the Shield," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 2, no. 1 (May 1979), pp. 47–82.
2. Jim Bencivenga, "Will US Naval Power Sink?" (opinion), *Christian Science Monitor*, 25 October 2010, www.csmonitor.com/. Bencivenga addresses what he calls the "sleeper issue of the midterm election."
3. Hew Strachan, "Strategy or Alibi? Obama, McChrystal and the Operational Level of War," *Survival* 52, no. 5 (October 2010), pp. 157–82, available at www.informaworld.com.
4. See Robert D. Kaplan, *Hog Pilots, Blue Water Grunts: The American Military in the Air, at Sea, and on the Ground* (New York: Random House, 2007). Kaplan's newest book is *Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the Future of American Power* (New York: Random House, 2010).
5. U.S. Navy Dept., *CNO Guidance for 2011: Executing the Maritime Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: October 2010), p. 1, available at www.navy.mil/.
6. Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1987); Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991).
7. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, p. 95.
8. Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Verso, 2007).
9. Discussions with Dr. Vlahos, January 2009.
10. Max Brooks, *World War Z* (New York: Random House, 2006).
11. J. T. Conway, G. Roughead, and T. W. Allen, "A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower," October 2007, available at www.navy.mil/; repr. *Naval War College Review* 61, no. 1 (Winter 2008), p. 15, available at www.usnwc.edu/press/.
12. Scott MacLeod, "Did You Know 3.0," video, 2008 latest edition, www.metacafe.com. Lt. Gen. William B. Caldwell IV, U.S. Army, is Commander, NATO Training Mission Afghanistan, and Commanding General, Combined Security Transition Command Afghanistan.
13. Bradley A. Fiske, *The Navy as a Fighting Machine* (New York: Scribner's, 1916).
14. See Craig L. Symonds, *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles That Shaped American History* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005). This book is the only source I know, except for official reports, where the story can be found.
15. "Getting to the Bottom of the Greenland Ice Sheet," *Oceanus* 47, no. 2 (October 2009), pp. 24–29.
16. Michael Vlahos, unpublished paper, May 2010.

17. The graphic describes a notional crisis of globalization as it might develop over the next forty years. It is not intended to be a model. Rather it tells a story: it is a scenario. A better explanation of this drawing is expected soon in U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*.
18. U.S. House of Representatives, *Testimony, Williamson Murray, Subcommittee on Professional Military Education*, 111th Cong., 1st sess., 10 September 2009, available at armedservices.house.gov/.