Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife(1)

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Abstract:
The US armed forces should become more flexible in meeting the changing demands placed on them by the government and international events. Military educational institutions should restructure their cultures to encourage intellectual and innovative thinking so that new strategies can emerge. Threats to international security are no longer based on conventional combat, but on terrorism, insurgency and subversion, which require nonconventional responses.

Full Text:
BRITISH AND AMERICAN ARMY COUNTERINSURGENCY LEARNING DURING THE MALAYAN EMERGENCY AND THE VIETNAM WAR

From 1948 through 1960, the British army fought a counterinsurgency campaign in what was then called Malaya. Although its initial efforts were not particularly successful, the British army adapted over time, changing both its counterinsurgency doctrine and practice. In contrast, the American army was unable to change its counterinsurgency doctrine or practice during twenty-five years of fighting in Southeast Asia, from 1950 through 1975. I have argued elsewhere that it was the organizational culture of the British army that allowed it to learn counterinsurgency principles effectively during the Malayan emergency, whereas the organizational culture of the U.S. Army blocked organizational learning during--and after--the Vietnam War. In this article, I attempt to place these conclusions in the wider context of international relations as a discipline, evaluating the current literature on military innovation, examining the effectiveness of organizational learning theory as a tool with which to analyze organizational change, and discussing the impact of varying organizational cultures on the learning abilities of different organizations.(2) I will then discuss directions for future research into the impact of organizational culture on institutional learning and will conclude with a theoretical examination of how to make military forces adaptable in the light of changes in warfare. I will also look at the question of how to overcome institutional culture when necessary in building learning institutions.

IDEAS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

This article is a look inside the "black boxes" that represent "realism" and "game theory" models of state behavior to examine a factor that affects the ability of states to achieve their goals and preserve their positions in the state system. It also affects those states on which they exercise their power.(3) The organizational culture of military forces is a decisive determinant in the decisions of whether to apply and of how to apply force in international politics, but it is a factor that to date has not been adequately examined.

The ability of military organizations to adapt to change--whether that change occurs in military technology, in the structure of the international system, or in the nature of war itself (or of our understanding of the nature of war)--is not an unimportant component of a state's ability to guarantee its own security and that of its allies. In short, military institutions that are "learning institutions" add to the influence of their states in the international system, as was the case for the United Kingdom in the wake of the Malayan emergency. Military organizations that are unable to learn can substantially damage the ability of their states to influence the international system, as was the case for the United States during and after the Vietnam War. Understanding the organizational culture of military institutions, and the effects of that culture on their ability to learn, increases our ability to understand how states act and react in the international system.

EVALUATING THE LITERATURE ON MILITARY INNOVATION

Current literature on military innovation focuses on the question of whether forces internal to armed services can modify military doctrine to deal with changes in their external environment,(4) or whether civilian leadership external to the military must exert pressure to force innovation.(5) Some authors have found that civilian reformers and members of the military combine to create changes in doctrine, an integrative model of military innovation.(6) Most of that research has been done on military innovation in peacetime rather than while military forces are engaged in conflict. It is an acknowledged fact, however, that the processes of innovation and the necessity to innovate are markedly different in wartime. Rosen notes that military forces

exist in order to fight a foreign enemy, and do not execute this function every day. Most of the time, the countries they serve are at peace.... Instead of being routinely "in business" and learning from ongoing experience, they must anticipate wars that may or may not occur.(7)

There have been few studies on military innovation under the pressures of fighting in a war. One of the few is Timothy T. Lupfer's The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine During the First World War.(8) Although it examines only tactical level innovations, the study is nonetheless significant for its description identifying intervening steps, or cause-and-effect links, between them.(9)

Another examination of the civilian-military interface as an explanatory variable for military innovation in wartime is Deborah Avant's Political Institutions and Military Change: Lessons from Peripheral Wars.(10) Avant presents an integrative model of military innovation in her comparison of British army innovation during the Boer War and the Malayan emergency with American army innovation in Vietnam. Rather than focusing on the differences between the armies as the variable explaining the different patterns of innovation, Avant believes that the different political systems of the United States and Britain led the two nations' politicians to create different militaries:

The roots of the variations lie in the way civilian leaders chose to set up and oversee the armies.... [C]ivilian leaders chose to oversee military organizations in a way that enhanced their ability to maintain domestic power. The difference in electoral rules between the two countries, then, was an important issue in the development of different military biases.(11)

Avant concludes her examination of British and American army innovation:

[C]ivilian leaders in Britain, who had institutional incentives to act as a unit, had an easier time agreeing on both policy goals and oversight options to ensure that the Army followed these goals. Under these conditions, the British army reacted more flexibly to changes in civilian leaders' goals. Conversely, civilian leaders in the United States, who had institutional incentives to act separately, found it harder to agree on policy goals and often chose more complex oversight mechanisms, which did not always induce the U.S. Army to respond easily to change.(12)

According to this view, British army officers responded directly to their political masters in the Cabinet, creating a more flexible military than the American model, in which the military had the ability to "trade off" demands made by the Congress against the president, or vice versa. There are wider implications: "Differences in institutional structures that affect ensuing differences in the growth of parties, the issue-focus of voters, the interpretation of the international system, and the terms of delegation will lead to differences in the preferences of military organizations and civilian leaders. These variations explain the deviations in policy."(13)

This study comes to different conclusions, arguing along with Barry Watts and Williamson Murray that "[a]s a corollary to the importance of bureaucratic acceptance among senior military leaders, the dynamics evident in the case studies suggest that the potential for civilian or outside leadership to impose a new vision of future war on a reluctant military service whose heart remains committed to existing ways of fighting is, at best, limited."(14) The critical independent variable is not the nature of national government, which in most cases has little impact on which policies the military chooses to adopt; it is instead the organizational culture of the military institution that determines whether innovation succeeds or fails.

EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LEARNING THEORY AS A TOOL FOR ANALYZING MILITARY INNOVATION

Given the lack of a consensus in the literature on causes of military innovation, I have attempted elsewhere to explain why one military force successfully adapted to change and another failed to do so by tracing the process of organizational learning through case studies of the British army in the Malayan emergency and the American army in the Vietnam War. Using a theory of organizational learning first developed from observations of business management, the study focused on the process through which change developed or failed to develop. I found that the organizational culture--the "persistent, patterned way of thinking about the central tasks of, and the human relationships within, an organization"(15)--played a key role in allowing an organization to create a consensus either in favor of or in opposition to proposals for change. Changes that conflict with the ideas of the dominant group in the organization about the best roles and missions for the organization--the essence of the organization--will not be adopted; leaders of the organization, conditioned by the culture that they have absorbed through years of service in it will prevent changes in the core mission and roles. The key variable explaining when militaries will adapt to changes in warfare is the creation of a consensus among the organization leaders that such innovation is in the long-term interests of the organization itself.(16) This study thus supports Richard Downie's conclusion, developed after examining peacetime changes in U.S. Army Low-Intensity Conflict Doctrine, that

doctrine is not likely to change, despite the presence of external pressures, until the military institution is able to identify and achieve consensus on both the problems that made its past performance unsuccessful, and appropriate solutions to those problems, or the new ones. Conversely, case study findings highlight that doctrine will change when the military institution's level of learning permits an appropriate organizational response to these external influences.(17)

Unfortunately, organizational learning theory is not a succinct explanation for why some military forces innovate while others do not. Because it uses the technique of process tracing, learning theory demands in-depth study of individual cases of innovation or failure to innovate, often requiring internal organization decision papers that may remain classified or unavailable to the researcher for years. Its emphasis on organizational culture and protection of the "essence of the organization" by elite decision makers within the organization similarly demands a high degree of familiarity with the organization under examination, as neither the identities of the dominant members of an organization nor their views on its core roles and missions are always immediately apparent. If "a remembered past has always more or less constricted both action in the present and thinking about the future,"(18) then understanding that past--and understanding how it is remembered by those who direct an organization's present and future--is essential to understanding how the organization will adapt to changes in its environment. U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel Jay Parker concurs:

> In brief, information is processed from the top down based on preconceived theories structured to organize and explain the world rather than the harsh realities of new data. In the face of barriers change is slow and incremental at best. Individuals may go so far as to shut down the evaluation process and come to premature mental "closure" rather than contend with complex decisions.(19)

To understand how and why an organization will change, examine its past successes and failure--and those of the individuals who control the institution.(20)

THE IMPACT OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ON ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

The organizational culture of the British army, developed over many years of service in colonial wars--and just as important, in preventing colonial wars through sound administration in conjunction with British police forces and colonial administrators--reflected experiences in more than merely conventional conflict on the continent of Europe. The leadership of the British army shared a common conception that the essence of the organization included colonial policing and administration. When conventional tactics and strategy failed in Malaya, the British army had few problems creating an internal consensus that change was needed, and that political rather than purely military solutions were well within its purview. An innovative and varied past created a culture amenable to the changes required to defeat a complex opponent in a new kind of war.

The organizational culture of the American army, conversely, allowed no doubt in that army's leadership about the essence of the organization; its core competence was defeating conventional enemy armies in frontal combat. The organization never developed a consensus that change in its procedures--and in fact, in its definition of its responsibilities--was required by the nature of the revolutionary war it confronted in Vietnam. An unshakable belief in the essence of the organization precluded organizational learning and has continued to preclude consensus on the "lessons of Vietnam" and on required changes in the organization through the present day. Words recently applied to the Soviet system also describe the U.S. army of the time: "The person at the head of the hierarchical system was given great power--but he was given that power only so long as he did not use it in a way which threatened the continuation of the system."(21)

Even under the pressures for change presented by ongoing military conflict, a strong organizational culture can prohibit learning the lessons of the present and can even prevent the organization from acknowledging that current policies are not completely successful:

> Most people so restrict their frame of reference, or context, for the problem they are facing that little change can occur. They get into such a routine with their work that they view virtually all problems in a similar way--back to all problems looking like nails when all you have is a hammer. Consequently, when asked to change matters, they tend to operate in a confined "single loop" of learning on which they can only do "more of" or `less of' the same thing because of the given context.(22)

The "get a bigger hammer" approach to making organizations more effective has implications not only when armies are engaged in a conflict but when that conflict is over if the lessons of the past war have not been noted and internalized. As Carl H. Builder noted:

> How the services perceive the next major war they must fight is an important determinant of the types of forces they try to acquire, the doctrine they develop, and the training they follow for the use of those forces in combat.(23)

How the services perceive themselves, their roles, and missions--their essence--helps to determine not only how they will prepare for the next war, but how flexible they will be in responding to unexpected situations when that war occurs. Chief of the British army's General Staff, General Sir Charles Guthrie, recently paraphrased Michael Howard to the effect that "in structuring and preparing an Army for war you can be clear that you will not get it precisely right, but the important thing to ensure is that it is not too far wrong, so that you can put it right quickly."(24) The culture of the British army encourages such an attitude and such responses to changed situations; the culture of the American army does not, unless the changed situation falls within the parameters of the kind of war it has defined as its primary mission.

The demands of conventional and unconventional warfare differ so greatly that an organization optimized to succeed in one will have great difficulty in fighting the other and in adapting itself to meet changing requirements in the course of the conflict. In fact, the very organizational culture that makes an institution effective in one area may blind it to the possibility that its strengths in that field are crippling deficiencies in a different situation--the more debilitating for being so deeply rooted in the culture that they are never even recognized, much less questioned.

The implications are dramatic. If it is in fact impossible for the same organization to perform effectively two very disparate tasks because the organizational culture that makes it effective in achieving one is counterproductive in accomplishing the other.(25) then organizations should focus on achieving only one critical mission. Those that attempt to perform a mission for which they are unprepared and unsuitable by organization, training, doctrine, leadership style, organizational infrastructure, and equipment--all of which both contribute to and flow from organizational culture--will face grave difficulties in adapting to the new challenges they face. The U.S. Army in Vietnam is a classic example, but fairness demands that the very evident weaknesses of the British and French armies in meeting the demands of high-technology combined arms conventional conflict in the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91 also be noted.(26)

Arguably, then, the United States Army should devote itself exclusively to preparing for mid-intensity combined arms warfare, giving the low-intensity conflict mission to the United States Marine Corps, which has an organizational culture better suited to meeting the demands of unconventional war and which has seen the need for its more recent organizational raison d'etre, amphibious assault, diminishing since the Korean War.(27) A former U.S. marine made the argument to Field Marshal Sir Gerald Templer in 1968:

> The sad part of this whole Viet Nam business, pacification and all, is that the States, namely my old Corps, the Marines, has had ample experience and historical background in handling matters of this nature. In Haiti, Santo Domingo and in Nicaragua the Corps ran the whole show--if not officially in control, exercising actual de facto control, of both the government and military forces. The pattern being that selected officers and NCOs of the Marines would actually be

seconded to and commissioned in the country's army/constabulary type of force and would command units directly as well as the districts occupied by these units.(28)

Surprisingly, one of the primary architects of the U.S. Army's strategy in Vietnam agrees. General William DePuy noted in retrospect, "I have always felt that regular US Army troop units are peculiarly ill suited for the purpose of `securing' operations where they must be in close contact with the people. They can, of course, conduct `clearing' operations, and are perfectly suited for `Search and Destroy.' The closer one moves toward the political and psychological end of the spectrum, the more inappropriate is the use of foreign troops who don't speak the language, and who may well have a negative effect on pacification efforts."(29)

The British army, with its tradition of colonial policing, arguably should focus itself on the peacekeeping and other types of low-intensity conflict for which its history and strategic and organizational culture render it far more capable.(30)

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study presents no overarching explanation for why some military forces are better at adapting to the demands of change in warfare than are others, but does provide a framework for tracing the process of military innovation and highlights one variable within the organizational culture, and particularly within the concept of the essence of the organization that appears to explain variations in learning outcomes. The evidence suggests that other cases of military innovation or failures to innovate could profit from study along the same lines, focusing on the organizational culture while tracing the organizational learning process. The response of the French army to insurgency in Indochina and Algeria is one such case;(31) there are many others, responses to conventional tactical and operational changes as well as to those in revolutionary warfare. The technique could also be applied to other questions of why states behave as they do, helping to explain both why states alter their policies in response to changes in the international system and, often even more interesting, why they do not.(32) International organizations such as the United Nations could also profitably be studied in terms of the impact of organizational cultures on propagating or preventing changes to procedures such as the creation and employment of peacekeeping forces.

BUILDING LEARNING INSTITUTIONS: MAKING MILITARY FORCES ADAPTABLE IN LIGHT OF EVOLVING CHANGES IN WARFARE

"Building learning organizations entails profound cultural shifts."(33) The British army's organizational culture, developed over many years of colonial policing, not only encouraged but actively expected innovation. For years, informally developed "doctrine" was disseminated by word of mouth and through the unofficial writing of participants in the campaigns; the fact that it is now official and prescribed from the new Doctrine and Training Directorate in Wiltshire may be the first step toward discouraging innovation in the British army. Organizational culture is hard to change, however; General Sir Frank Kitson's belief that "No one would read it if they did write it down"(34) may yet preserve the institutional flexibility that played such an important role in defeating the communist insurgency in Malaya. As the assistant under secretary (programmes) recently said to the Defence Committee in the House of Commons, "We have structured our forces precisely to deal with the unexpected."(35)

Is it possible for the U.S. Army to develop such a culture? Williamson Murray suggests that some improvements can be made, given efforts to "push cultural changes to encourage rather than discourage the process of innovation." Chief among these is a new "approach to military education that encourages changes in cultural values and fosters intellectual curiousity" in order to "foster a military culture where those promoted to the highest ranks possess the imagination and intellectual framework to support innovation."(36)

In the rapidly changing world of the post-cold war era, such flexibility is critical to the ability of military forces to meet the security demands that their governments will place on them. The Persian Gulf War of 1990-91 may well have been an aberration, the last of the conventional industrial age conflicts; it was certainly a lesson to the states and nonstate actors of the developing world not to confront the West in conventional combat. There are many other ways to use force to achieve political goals: terrorism, subversion, insurgency. The much-heralded revolution in military affairs(37) will not alter this fact:

Just as nuclear weapons did not render conventional power obsolete, this revolution will not render guerrilla tactics, terrorism, or weapons of mass destruction obsolete. Indeed, the reverse may be true: where unconventional bypasses to conventional military power exist, any country confronting the United States will seek them out.(38)

The vast majority of armed conflict today occurs inside states rather than between them. "For many countries in the world simmering internal war is a permanent condition."(39) Martin van Creveld predicts that "[a]s war between states exits through one side of history's revolving door, low-intensity conflicts among different organizations will enter through the other."(40) Sharing this view, one American army officer recently demanded, "To meet future challenges, America's Army must turn from the warm and well-deserved glow of its Persian Gulf victory and embrace, once more, the real business of regulars, the stinking gray shadow world of `savage wars of peace,' as Rudyard Kipling called them."(41)

In this new climate of dirty, difficult wars, in which political and military tasks intertwine and the objective is more often "nation-building" than the destruction of an enemy army, the ability to learn quickly during operations, to create an organizational consensus on new ways of waging war (or of waging peace), and then to implement those changes may be of more importance for modern military institutions than ever before. It then behooves military institutions to accept as an integral part of their organizational culture the need to function in this new conflict environment at all times as "learning institutions."

NOTES

(1.) "To make war upon rebellion is messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife." T. E. Lawrence, Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 132.

(2.) See Theo Farrell, "Figuring Out Fighting Organisations: The New Organisational Analysis in Strategic Studies," Journal of Strategic Studies 19 (March 1996): 122-35.

(3.) See Charles Powell, James Dyson, and Helen Purkitt, "Opening the `Black Box': Cognitive Processing and Optimal Choice in Foreign Policy Decision Making," in New Directions in the Study of Foreign Policy, Charles Herman, Charles Kegley, and James Rosenau, eds. (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987), 203-20.

(4.) See Stephen P. Rosen, Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

(5.) See Barry R. Posen, The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984).

(6.) Kimberly Martin Zisk, Engaging the Enemy: Organization Theory and Soviet Military Innovation, 1955-1991 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

(7.) Rosen, Winning the Next War, 8. Rosen discusses wartime innovation on 22-24.

(8.) (Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute, 1981).

(9.) Alexander George, "Case Studies and Theory Development: The Method of Structured, Focused Comparison," in Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, and Policy, Paul Gordon Lauren, ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1979), 40.

(10.) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

(11.) Avant, Political Institutions and Military Change, 21.

(12.) Ibid., 130-31.

(13.) Ibid., 139.

(14.) Barry Watts and Williamson Murray, "Innovation in Peacetime," in Military Innovation in the Interwar Period, Murray and Alan R. Millett, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 410.

(15.) James Q. Wilson, Bureaucracy (New York: Basic Books, 1989), 91.

(16.) "I'm not going to destroy the traditions and doctrine of the United States Army just to win this lousy war." An anonymous army officer quoted in Brian M. Jenkins, The Unchangeable War. (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1972), 3; in Guenter Lewy, America in Vietnam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 138.

(17.) Richard Downie, "Military Doctrine and the Learning Institution: Case Studies in LI," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Southern California, 1995, 354.

(18.) John Shy, "The American Military Experience: History and Learning," Journal of Interdisciplinary History 1 (Winter 1971): 210.

(19.) Jay M. Parker, "Change and the Operational Commander," Joint Forces Quarterly (Winter 1995/96): 92.

(20.) These results parallel those of Richard E. Neustadt and Earnest R. May in Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decisionmakers (New York: The Free Press, 1986), especially Chapter 9, "Placing Strangers," and Chapter 12, "Placing Organizations." For more insight into how early experiences condition cognition in decision makers, see Yuen Foong Khong, Analogies at War: Korea, Munich, Dien Bien Phu, and the Vietnam Decisions of 1965 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

(21.) Professor Archie Brown, on Mikhail Gorbachev, Oxford, 28 October 1996.

(22.) Bob Garratt, The Learning Organization (London: Harper Collins, 1994), 42-43.

(23.) Carl H. Builder, The Masks of War: American Military Styles in Strategy and Analysis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 128.

(24.) General Sir Charles Guthrie, "The British Army at the Turn of the Century," RUSI Journal 141 (June 1996): 6. The original citation is Michael Howard, "Military Science in the Age of Peace," RUSI Journal (March 1974): 3-4.

(25.) The "conventionalization" of U.S. Army Special Forces throughout their history by the much more pervasive organizational culture of the conventional army shows this process at work; see Thomas Adams, "Military Doctrine and the Organization Culture of the United States Army," Ph.D. thesis, Syracuse University, 1990.

(26.) Among the generally mutually and self-congratulatory literature on the war, see Rick Atkinson, Crusade (New York: Random House, 1992) for references to the training, planning, and especially logistical problems of these two armies in the war. Reports that a banner proclaiming "We only do deserts" appeared on the Pentagon the day of the cease-fire recognize the fact that the Gulf War was exactly the war the United States would have chosen to fight if it could have scripted the scenario: mid-intensity combined arms warfare on a battlefield generally free of civilians.

(27.) For proposals on restructuring U.S. ground forces, see Douglas A. Macgregor, Breaking the Phalanx: A New Design for Landpower in the 21st Century (Westport, CT: Praeger/CSIS, 1997).

(28.) Letter from Edward C. Noden, HQ KMAG (DCSPER), to Field Marshal Templer, 6 April 1968. Templer Papers, Box 30.

(29.) General William E. DePuy, in Romie L. Brownlee and William J. Mullen III, Changing an Army: an Oral History of General William DePuy, U.S. Army Retired, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), 133.

(30.) John Hillen, "Rethinking the Bosnia Bargain," Backgrounder No. 1096 (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 15 October 1996).

(31.) Christopher C. Harmon notes that the French "forgot all too well" their counterinsurgency successes of the nineteenth century in Indochina, but does not trace the learning process nor discuss the organizational culture of the French Army, in "Illustrations of 'Learning' in Counterinsurgency," Comparative Strategy 11 (January-March 1992): 30-33.

(32.) George W. Breslauer and Philip E. Tetlock, eds., Learning in U.S. and Soviet Foreign Policy (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991) adopt such a perspective without a definite focus on the importance of organizational culture as a key factor in influencing learning.

(33.) Peter M. Senge, The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization (New York: Doubleday, 1990), xv.

(34.) General Sir Frank Kitson, interview in Devon, 12 December 1995.

(35.) Session 1991-92, Third Report, question 1190, 16, quoted in Eric Grove, The Army and British Security After the Cold War: Defence Planning for a New Era (London: Strategic and Combat Studies Institute/HMSO, 1996), 10.

(36.) Murray, "Past and Future," in Military Innovation in the Interwar Period, 326-27.

(37.) The so-called "revolution in military affairs" results from the application of digitized information to warfighting theory and weaponry. For a good summary of the current state of thinking on the "RMA," see "The Future of Warfare," The Economist, 8 March 1997, 23-26.

(38.) Eliot Cohen, "A Revolution in Warfare," Foreign Affairs 75 (March/April 1996): 51.

(39.) Steven Metz, "Insurgency After the Cold War," Small Wars and Insurgencies 5 (Spring 1994): 63.

(40.) Martin van Creveld, The Transformation of War (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 224.

(41.) Daniel P. Bolger, "The Ghosts of Omdurman," Parameters (Autumn 1991): 31-32. The U.S. Army is resisting this call, as this study of its organizational culture would predict; there are proportionally more armored and mechanized divisions in the U.S. Army today (as compared to light infantry formations, more suitable for low-intensity conflicts) than there were during the cold war.

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