Time to face the changing face of war
Debating what it means when wars are no longer between nations.

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SOUTH BEND -- Your eyes hunt for the enemy amid the ascension of dust, watching the crescendo of artillery fire and spotting the distinguishable face of the adversary.

But your enemy no longer has to wear military combat fatigues in his attempt to seize the battlefield against you.

Today's foe could don jeans and a T-shirt at the corner gas station, or sport a doctor's coat at the city hospital. And his artillery firepower may have morphed into a small "dirty bomb" that could kill thousands who never even considered themselves to be at the center of war.

As Americans last week pondered the sixth anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the reality was that the tragedies of that day also swept us into a new kind of ongoing conflict, one that is more difficult to define than traditional warfare.

The nature of war, and its role in our future, was the subject of a two-day conference that ended Saturday at the University of Notre Dame. Chris Luciani, a Vietnam War veteran and commander of Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1167 in South Bend, was not a participant in this weekend's conference, but he remembers when war was more nationalistic. Now, war is driven more by ideology, religion, insurgents and guerrilla warfare tactics by individual groups, he said.

In fact, the "United States versus Vietnam" or the World War II "Axis powers versus Allies" mentality prevailed decades ago. Yet, many 1990s conflicts were regarded as local and ethnic, said conference panelist Peter Wallensteen, the Richard G. Starmann research professor of peace studies at the University of Notre Dame's Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies.

These more internal battles were manageable through negotiation and the aid of third parties. And in fact, this helped to decrease the number of armed conflicts from roughly 50 at the start of the decade to about 30 just before the turn of the century, Wallensteen said.
But then 2001 came. Since then, conflicts have been regarded more as part of the war on terror, requiring a much larger commitment from the international community, Wallensteen said. In addition, parties win not through reliance on huge military equipment but by employing the political element of drawing popular support to their side, he said.

The 2008 general election will be crucial in determining the way the United States looks at the world when President Bush leaves the Oval Office, Wallensteen said. "Military actions have to be possible to defend in terms of moral values (and) human rights because credibility is important," he said.

Another change in today's war is America's sophisticated technology, which once could identify and disable targets -- "fix and destroy" them -- in a conventional war. They don't work so well when battling today's more covert enemy, said another conference panelist, Gen. Sir Michael Rose, who retired from the United Kingdom Army in 1997 and recently wrote a book to be published next year about the Revolutionary War.

"In conventional war," Rose said, "you try to achieve quick and decisive victory, and that's not possible in this type of conflict."

In many cases today, the parties in war also are unequal in their capabilities. For example, what armies represent in many third-world-country wars remains a blur, and many of these internal wars are filled with child soldiers and lack a clear political agenda, said Richard Herrmann, conference panelist and professor of political science at Ohio State University.

Also, consider how the United States -- with its organized military power and economic resources -- calls its disorganized or weaker Middle Eastern enemies "fanatics" or insurgents as a way to discredit them in a way, Herrmann said. The real motive behind terrorists' plows against the West is the West has occupied their part of the world, and terrorists thus have turned to religion for strength in their time of weakness, he said. With the control of land, oil and state governments at stake, today's War on Terror is as much a political power struggle among nations -- as it has been in past eras -- as it is a religious fight, he said.

"The war is in their home, not ours," Herrmann said. "They're determined not to let us take them over, and they think we already have."

But in today's world, the United States isn't as invincible as some might like to think, experts say.

Criticism of the war hurts the war effort, Luciani said. And today's demand for individual rights, which sparked a firestorm over Bush's use of domestic wiretaps, keeps soldiers "fighting with one hand behind our back," he added, saying wiretaps were common during World War II.

Add the United States' open border to the mix, and it's clear that America is walking on eggshells as far as war is concerned, he added. "There's thousands and thousands of illegal aliens ... that come across the Mexican border, and they could have all kinds of dirty bombs and stuff, and we don't know where they are," Luciani said.
"We're going to get hit. I don't know when or how, but we're very vulnerable."

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