A group of insurgents screech out of a dusty alleyway in an old pickup truck on a typical sweltering day in Iraq and begin lobbing mortars towards one of Baghdad’s primary power stations. Coalition forces are quickly deployed to quell the attack, but in the firefight that ensues, a number of civilians get stuck in the neighborhood’s crowded streets and are wounded. How will the residents of the area react to these civilian casualties - will an angry crowd gather to condemn the US occupation and attack any troops remaining in the area, or will the soldiers’ effort to protect the city’s power supply elicit sympathy from a population that struggles to cope with frequent power outages? What impact might this conflict have in other neighborhoods in Baghdad, on the country as a whole, and on the entire Middle East region? Urban Resolve 2015, the largest computer modeling and simulation exercise every undertaken by the Department of Defense (DOD), played out this and hundreds of other scenarios similar to the power station attack in a series of virtual war games conducted by Joint Forces Command (JFCOM) during the summer and autumn of 2006.¹ Urban Resolve is perhaps the US military’s most frank admission that the mega-cities of the global South are likely to be the predominant loci of future warfare. Indeed, JFCOM’s description of the exercise acknowledges the increasing primacy of urban combat:

The explosive growth of the world’s major urban centers, changes in enemy strategies, and the global war on terror have made the urban battlespace potentially decisive and virtually unavoidable. Some of our most advanced
military systems do not work as well in urban areas as they do in open terrain. Therefore, joint and coalition forces should expect that future opponents will choose to operate in urban environments to try to level the huge disparity between our military and technological capabilities and theirs.⁵

Yet if Urban Resolve somewhat belatedly acknowledges the growing strategic importance of cities, it does not focus exclusively on urban combat, since, as Dave Ozolek, executive director of the DOD’s Joint Urban Operations office puts it, “the security problems we are facing are so complex that they can’t be solved with military power alone.”³ In an attempt to understand the complex political, economic, and social factors behind urban warfare, DOD wargamers used the Simulex Corporation’s Synthetic Environment for Analysis and Simulation (SEAS), an advanced computer program that uses data from military incidents to extrapolate the reactions of community leaders, local media, and the general population in urban areas such as Baghdad to particular conflicts. Alok Chaturvedi, director of Purdue University’s Homeland Security Institute and founder of Simulex, describes SEAS as about “behavior anticipation and shaping,” a digital version of the classic counter-insurgency strategy of winning hearts and minds.⁴

JFCOM’s Joint Futures Laboratory deployed SEAS in the Urban Resolve war game to model the behavior of Baghdad’s inhabitants, from mundane daily routines such as prayer rituals to bloody counter-insurgent battles, in a cyber-city that included accurate three-dimensional digital reproductions of every building in the city as well as over two million individual entities such as people and cars. Participating in this virtual urban battle zone were team members in nineteen distinct networked sites throughout the US, from Fort Benning, Georgia to the Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command in
San Diego, all involved in the quest to create what retired Admiral James Winnefeld, director of JFCOM’s Joint Experimentation Directorate, called “a toxic environment for extremist ideologies.”

Yet for all the millions of dollars and billions of mega-bytes expended in modeling the behavior of the residents of Baghdad, Urban Resolve had a curiously hermetic feel to it. While Admiral Winnefeld underlined that Americans of Iraqi descent were involved in the exercise to heighten its verisimilitude, almost all of the people sitting underneath the impressively detailed 3-D digital projection of Baghdad that hovered on the wall of the JFCOM situation room were balding white men with handlebar moustaches, the same blend of superannuated spooks and worn-out Special Forces hot shots who have been running the real occupation of Iraq to such disastrous effect since 2003. Moreover, SEAS’s canny focus on the cultural components of urban counterinsurgency operations is vitiated by the fact that the Illinois-based team mined their data on Baghdad from Web sites, public opinion surveys, policy research organizations, and economic data compilations, sources whose information on what drives the insurgency is likely to be even less accurate than that which has guided the imperial proconsuls in Baghdad’s “Green Zone” over the last few years.

More importantly, perhaps, Urban Resolve was predicated an unwillingness to confront the fact that it is the US occupation itself that is creating a toxic environment in Baghdad and the rest of Iraq. Military operations to win over Iraqi hearts and minds are futile in the face of a rapacious occupation guided by the most extreme nostrums of neo-liberal economic dogma. Urban Resolve thus seems symptomatic of the combination of blindness and insight currently afflicting the US military, which has registered the
increasing prominence of urban combat zones but is constitutively unable to
acknowledge the underlying economic and political forces that are driving urbanization
in the mega-cities of the global South. If cities are the Achilles heel of military power,
US war-makers are increasingly forced to disavow awareness of the role played by
empire in unleashing forces of unsustainable urbanization that they are called on to quell.

It wasn’t supposed to be this way. In the late 1980s, Pentagon theorists began
discussing a so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) that would endow the US
with unparalleled “full spectrum dominance.”7 Using cutting edge networked
information technology, the US, it was argued, would vault beyond all potential military
antagonists in the same manner that the Germans’ use of coordinated air- and armored-
assault had handed them primacy in the blitzkrieg against continental Europe at the onset
of World War II. As James Del Derian has remarked, the ferocious destructive potential
of US military technology as it developed in the 1990s had the paradoxical effect of
strengthening the belief in virtuous warfare by allowing civilian and military leaders to
threaten and, if necessary, unleash violence from a distance and by remote control – with
few to no American casualties.8 Indeed, to the extent that the big techno stick sanitized
the gory side of warfare through its pixellated displays of precision destruction, it
threatened to absolve those who wielded it from moral responsibility for their acts.9 The
promise held out by techno-war for sanitized “surgical strikes” actively solicited foreign
conflicts, in the same way that Samuel Huntingdon’s thesis concerning a “clash of
civilizations” anticipated and even catalyzed conflict through its Manichean
representation of relations between the West and Islamic nations.10 The Revolution in
Military Affairs was thus an immense boon and alibi for chicken hawks like Dick Cheney
and Donald Rumsfeld, since bellicose doctrines of theirs such as the US right to
“preemptive defense” relied on visions of war as bloodless and hygienic in order to
garner the support of a public averse to seeing their children sent home from the front in
body bags.

There were always skeptical “mud soldiers,” battle-scarred veterans of bloody
conflicts such as Vietnam, who questioned the starry-eyed, technophilic discourse
associated with the RMA.\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, for those who knew something about the “fog of
war,” Clausewitz’s famous dictum concerning the confusion created by warfare should
have been more timely than ever given the RMA’s propensity to proliferate and intensify
rather than to streamline information flows. Such contrarian perspectives gained little
traction after the swift and decisive rout of Iraqi’s army in Operation Desert Storm and,
after 9/11, RMA doctrines seemed once again to be vindicated in the successful battle to
roust the Taliban from Afghanistan and in the lightening-quick initial victory of
Operation Iraqi Freedom. Of course, the protracted occupation of an increasingly
unhinged and violent Iraq made the hubris of RMA doctrines dramatically apparent.
While US and “coalition” forces quickly destroyed Saddam’s ragtag army, Sunni and
Shia insurgents soon began to sabotage the occupation from their bases in the slums of
cities such as Baghdad, Fallujah, and Basra.\textsuperscript{12} For all their technological savvy, US
forces were quickly reminded of the primal, pre-modern character of urban warfare.
Military theorists tempered their zealous embrace of RMA doctrine, with its fetishization
of technology and airborne firepower, and opened a new line of inquiry into what is
known as Military Operations in Urbanized Terrain (a.k.a. MOUT).
Of course, there had been warnings that urban settings would diminish if not destroy the decisive advantage conferred on US military forces by networked technology. In 1993, an elite force of Army Rangers and Delta Force special operators sustained 60% casualty rates while battling rag-tag Somali clan militias during the UN’s humanitarian intervention in Mogadishu. Later that decade, Russian troops were severely mauled by Chechen separatist forces, who lured federal armored columns into the center of the capital city Groszny only to pop up out of the sewers to incinerate the Russian vehicles using rocket propelled grenades. These premonitory episodes went largely unheeded, however, so that when former Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Charles Krulak coined the term “three-block war” in 2004 to describe the combined humanitarian, peace-keeping, and combat missions in urban settings that characterize the overwhelming majority of US military engagements today, his analysis was hailed as a visionary warning rather than a severely belated acknowledgement. Military historians suddenly recalled that, despite the media primacy enjoyed by the assaults on Iraq over the last decade, twenty-one of the last twenty six conflicts in which US forces have been engaged involved urban settings, and, of these, ten were fought exclusively in cities.

The conclusion draw by most theorists was not, however, that war is inherently or even tendentiously urban, but rather that insurgent forces around the world, having witnessed the annihilation of Saddam’s troops in the open desert by US “smart bombs,” had realized that their only chance of survival lay in fighting future wars in the urban jungles of the underdeveloped world. One hears the echo of this logic in JFCOM’s argument that insurgents will try to “level” the technological playing field by operating in cities like Baghdad. Urban combat, as one RAND Corporation-sponsored white paper
had it, is complex: the dense, three-dimensional structure of cities slows down occupying forces, inhibits advanced communication systems, and allows guerrillas to hide within buildings and behind civilian populations.\textsuperscript{17} Fighting in cities, US forces are forced back into what theorists described as a “pre-modern” mode of warfare in which experience and cunning count for far more than Global Positioning System technology and aerial firepower. For military theorists, then, the turn of insurgent forces to urban-based “asymmetrical” guerrilla warfare was a direct consequence of the US’s unparalleled domination over land, sea, and air, a kind of dastardly plot to foil the hegemony conferred by the RMA.

Yet in their analysis of the rise of urban warfare, MOUT theorists tend to ignore the structural economic and cultural forces that propel urbanization in the global South. While many studies begin with a seemingly obligatory nod to UN statistics that suggest that 70\% of humanity will live in cities by 2020, few pursue the causes of urban-based conflicts to their roots. As Stephen Graham emphasizes, there are multiple factors driving the urbanization of war, including “the unleashing of previously constrained ethnic hatreds since the end of the Cold War bipolar system; the proliferation of fundamentalist religious and political groups; the militarization of gangs, drug cartels, militia, corrupt political regimes, and law enforcement agencies; the failure of many national and local states; the urbanization of populations and terrain; the growing accessibility of heavy weapons; the crisis of increasing social polarization at all geographical scales; and the growing scarcity of many essential resources.”\textsuperscript{18} Underlying these disparate epiphenomena, however, is the massive transfer of wealth to a handful of corporations and individuals in the developed world as a result of the debt crisis of the
1980s and the subsequent International Monetary Fund- and World Bank-administered structural adjustment programs over the last three decades. During the era of the Washington Consensus, peasants pushed off their land by agricultural deregulation and chronic civil wars flocked by the millions to cities largely devoid of economic development. As Mike Davis argues, the unprecedented growth of mega-cities throughout the global South in a context of structural adjustment, currency devaluation, and state retrenchment has been “an inevitable recipe for the mass production of slums.”

Urban-based conflicts such as those catalogued by Stephen Graham are, then, a product of the geo-political creation of a teeming surplus humanity, for whom the slums of mega-cities such as Lagos, Cairo, and Rio are a final desperate refuge and a point of entry into the violent subcultures of globe-spanning criminality and warfare. To argue, as do most MOUT theorists, that the urbanization of warfare is a calculated strategic ploy on the part of antagonists to US power is to ignore the fundamental causes for a trend that will inevitably become more prominent given the failure of global elites to broach, let alone answer, the question of how to integrate the surplus humanity of the South into the global economy. It is also to substitute military repression that is likely to spark a bloody cycle of blowback for economic and political policies that might deal with this root cause. The resort to military force is thus, as David Harvey has suggested, an index of the waning hegemony of US imperial power rather than a sign of the empire’s invincible might. As the urban battles of Iraq have amply demonstrated, “behavior anticipation and shaping” efforts undertaken by the military under these inimical structural conditions are likely to catalyze increasing conflict rather than to conquer hearts and minds.
Notwithstanding their acknowledgement that urban warfare is “combat in hell,” MOUT theorists have worked diligently to elaborate doctrines for such fighting through a series of conferences sponsored by the likes of the RAND Corporation think-tank, armed forces publications such as *Parameters*, and Joint Forces war games such as the San Francisco-based Urban Warrior exercise and its successor, Urban Resolve. MOUT theorists seek to overcome the advantage conferred to insurgents by the urban terrain through a series of interlocking tactics. Most importantly, theorists argue, steps must be taken to prevent buildings, sewers, and other parts of the urban environment from offering refuge for enemy combatants. New technologies of surveillance and reconnaissance called for by MOUT advocates promise to turn cities inside out and, by revealing their entrails, deny insurgents the advantages offered by the architectural edifices of the city. In addition, tactics are to be developed that limit access of both combatants and non-combatants to particular urban areas using non-lethal obstacles such as vehicle barriers and quick-hardening foams. Extending such measures to a wider ambit, what the RAND book *Coralling the Trojan Horse* calls nodal operations are designed to cut off and control particular zones or nodes of the city. In tandem with such steps to limit physical mobility within cities, the RAND report calls for psychological operations (PSYOP) such as media campaigns in order to win the “hearts and minds” of the civilian population as part of counter-insurgency operations. Should these localized strategies fail, Major General Robert Scales has suggested an “indirect” approach through which US forces establish a cordon or siege line around a city, allowing them to strike at enemy forces within the urban perimeter at will – a strategy that for all intents and purposes turns cities into giant concentration camps. All of these
tactics have been in evidence in the Iraq occupation, although in cases such as Fallujah, US forces seem to be employing a strategy of destroying the city in order to save it that is all too reminiscent of the humanitarian and propaganda debacles of the Vietnam War.

In addition, rather than completely abandoning RMA doctrine, some enterprising MOUT theorists have found a way to reintroduce computer-based technology to urban combat, notwithstanding its supposedly low-tech character. In a recent article that seems oblivious to the dystopian messages of films such as Robocop and Terminator, two MOUT analysts call for the creation of an “urban warfighter system” that is equal parts man and machine in order to allow the military to win the coming urban wars of the next quarter century. The core of this system would be a body suit with “integral C4ISR\textsuperscript{25}, engagement, and active survivability systems” that would allow soldiers to communicate and “see through” walls, leap over tall buildings in a single bound, survive enemy gunfire unscathed, and unleash lethal hails of lead at will.\textsuperscript{26} Just as was true of air war-based RMA doctrine, the animating force for this hyperbolic “urban warfighter system” is the desire to avoid eroding domestic consent through the high death toll of city-based combat. Once again, then, the military is turning to a series of technological fixes for the intractable social problems generated by the spiraling inequalities of the neo-liberal world order. Urban Resolve offers the most advanced edge of this turn to technology to deal with urban combat, melding computerized battle systems such as the Army’s future warfare hardware with the cultural computations of SEAS, while successfully eliding broader strategic questions concerning the causes of urbanization.

MOUT doctrine was developed with the dense slum-dominated mega-cities of the underdeveloped world in mind. US forces have, for instance, engaged in recent years in
joint operations with the Israeli Defense Force in order to draw on the latter’s long experience in hunting down fighters in Palestinian cities such as Nablus and Jenin. Indeed, Mike Davis calls MOUT “the highest stage of Orientalism” since it has been used to create a Manichean distinction between the besieged cities of the homeland and the volatile mega-slums abroad that harbor the “axis of evil.” This firm distinction between the inside and outside of the body politic breaks down quickly, however, as a result of the constant need for prophylaxis of internal threats. Indeed, MOUT theorists tend to construct stereotypical urban typologies whose geographical application is highly flexible. In “The Human Terrain of Urban Operations,” for example, Ralph Peters argues that cities may be classified, “for military purposes,” as hierarchical, multicultural, or tribal. Peters, who apparently has spent little time in chaotic, racially polarized cities such as New York and Rome, argues that the hierarchical cities of the developed Western world are characterized by orderly “chains-of-command” that operate within a broadly accepted rule of law. Multicultural cities, by contrast, are riven by conflict between overlapping and discordant ethnic groups whose failure to achieve a homogeneous cultural orientation threatens their polity with continual turmoil. Peters argues that Jerusalem is the prototypical dysfunctional multicultural city. Finally, tribal cities resemble multicultural cities, except they’re worse since conflict is along clan or tribal lines rather cultural ones. Peters inevitably points to Mogadishu as an example of his final category. Just as predictably, Peters’ typology conforms perfectly to the old Victorian racial hierarchies that helped legitimate imperial rule. As was true during the Victorian era, efforts to control the supposedly degenerate masses in the periphery have a
strong impact on measures developed to discipline the “dangerous classes” in the imperial metropolis.

It should not surprise us, then, to find that MOUT tactics are not being deployed in the imperial periphery alone. Even prior to 9/11, urban police forces in Europe and the US drew consciously on the military’s tactics for combating urban insurgency in order to shut down the large protests organized in cities by the Global Justice Movement (GJM) during summit meetings of the World Trade Organization and the G8. Bereft of any other way to make their voices heard inside the well-insulated conference rooms of such largely unaccountable global organizations, protesters took to the streets of cities such as Seattle and Genoa in order to register their discontent with the Washington Consensus. Using new consumer technology such as cell phones as well as tried and true direct action techniques, members of the GJM scored a “victory” when they shut down the WTO summit meeting in Seattle by blockading streets using an extremely flexible structure of cellular affinities groups. 31 Within a few years of the “Battle of Seattle,” however, peripatetic global elites had developed an answer to the protesters’ anti-hierarchical organizing tactics and rambunctious street demonstrations in the form of what Robert Warren calls “state-sponsored pop-up armies.” 32 As Warren argues, by the time of the G8 summit in Genoa during the summer of 2001, these pop-up armies, viewing citizens who attempted to exercise their democratic rights as de facto enemies, drew on MOUT doctrines to clamp down on popular mobilizations through the militarization of urban space. Authorities deployed paramilitary forces clad in riot gear to prevent protesters from gaining access to summit meeting sites through the zoning and barricading of parts of the city, required authorization for citizen movement about the
city, engaged in preemptive arrests, harassed independent media, allowed police and military forces to use massive non-lethal and even lethal force, and, perhaps most significantly, consistently conflated non-violent protesters with violent “terrorists” in order to garner broad public support for the imposition of martial law and the massive expenses involved in protecting a relatively small contingent of global elites. Since 9/11 the conflation of large gatherings of people in urban spaces with terrorism has proceeded apace. Pop-up armies now protect not just global summits, by almost all large public events, including second-tier summits, sporting events, and other entertainment events. Demonstrators are routinely limited to razor wire-ringed “free speech zones” miles away from political events. As a result of this militarization of urban space, cities such as New York have come to resemble armed encampments all of whose citizens have been rendered suspects in the boundless war on terror.

This is hardly the first time that tactics of military control deployed in the periphery have been brought back to the imperial homeland. According to Stephen Graham, the French General Bugeaud, who resorted to wholesale destruction of portions of the Algiers Casbah in his struggle against the insurgent nationalist forces of Abd El-Kader during the mid-19th century, was responsible for the first manual on urban warfare. Thirty years later, the exploits of Bugeaud had a strong influence on Baron Haussman when he set out to redesign Paris in order to tame the capital city’s notoriously explosive populace. Drawing on Bugeaud’s book *La guerre des rues et des maisons*, Haussman demolished wide swaths of the medieval city in order to make the city more permeable to military forces. Although Haussman’s elegant, café-encrusted boulevards may seem a boon to French civilization today, it is unlikely that the contemporary
citadelization of US cities is likely to result in such an architecturally felicitous and culturally conducive outcome.\textsuperscript{35}

The elaboration of MOUT doctrine in both domestic and foreign urban zones during the War on Terror, in other words, should not be seen as entirely exceptional. Once again, we are living out a cycle in which colonial discourse is used to map, contain, and control urban space and society. Notwithstanding the sweeping gentrification of US cities over the last several decades, urban zones remain riddled with anonymous non-places such as airports and freight terminals that are seen as prime spots for terrorist attacks and are also home to the putative fifth columnist potential of diasporic groups.\textsuperscript{36}

Longstanding traditions of spatial control exist that serve to legitimate contemporary MOUT doctrine as it is increasingly applied to domestic urban zones. In the case of the US, such traditions blur the boundaries of imperial periphery and “homeland.” Indeed, as Loic Wacquant, among others, has argued, racialized groups in the US such as African Americans have been subjected to a succession of systems of confinement that stretches from chattel slavery, through Jim Crow to the mass carceral apparatus of the present day.\textsuperscript{37} The status of certain quarters of the nation’s cities as dangerous zones of difference, foreign countries within domestic space, was made explicit during the Civil Rights era by activists such as Stokely Carmichael and the Black Panthers, who compared black ghettos to belligerently policed internal colonies. Similarly, in Britain, that most spied-upon of contemporary nations, urban surveillance systems are a direct product of the counterinsurgency campaign against the Irish Republican Army. MOUT technologies deployed by imperial military forces around the globe thus build on enduring practices of internal and external spatial apartheid and surveillance. While the
militarization of urban space in the developed world pales in comparison to the fate meted out to residents of contemporary Fallujah or Beirut, we would do well to remember that these seemingly disparate locations are intimately connected by logics of military domination whose costs are increasingly steep for civilian populations at home and abroad.
Endnotes:

1 Official information on Urban Resolve 2015 can be found at


4 Ibid.


7 The doyen of US military theorists, Andrew Marshall of the Pentagon’s Office of Net Assessment, notes that the Soviets were the first to begin speculating about the impact of information technology on warfare, although it was his legendary memorandum of 1993, “Some Thoughts on Military Revolutions,” that triggered the full blown discourse on a revolution in military affairs within the US. See James Der Derian, Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2001), 28.

8 Der Derian, xv.


This episode was described in Mark Bowden’s best-selling book, Black Hawk Down (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999), which was subsequently transformed into the patriotic gore of Ridley Scott’s movie of the same title.


For typical examples of this line of analysis, see Vincent Goulding, Jr., “Back to the Future with Asymmetrical Warfare,” Parameters 30.4 (2001), 21-30 and Thomas

17 Russell Glenn, *Urban Combat is Complex* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Arroyo Center, 2002).


21 For a discussion of “Urban Warrior,” see Der Derian, 124-151.


25 C4ISR is military jargon for command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

26 Hahn and Jezior, 79.

27 Davis, 205.

29 Peters, 5.

30 For a discussion of the racialized Victorian Great Chain of Being, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).


32 Warren, 221.

33 Warren, 222.

34 Stephen Graham, “Cities as Strategic Sites; Place Annihilation and Urban Geopolitics,” in Graham, 36.


