

THE MILITARY INDUCTIVIST COMPLEX: \*  
CRITICAL RATIONALISM VERSUS INDUCTIVISM  
IN CONTEMPORARY MILITARY THEORY

R. E. Giffin  
Canadian Forces  
National Defence Headquarters  
101 Colonel By Avenue  
OTTAWA Canada K1A 0K2  
e-mail: giffin.re@forces.gc.ca

It has been said by some of his critics that Karl Popper attacked a position no one actually held. Those who are sympathetic to this view are invited to consider the discipline of military art and science. To the extent that sense can be made of it, this body of thought is has always been an uninterrupted variation on the themes of naive inductivism and historicism, elevated to the status of binding article of faith by the military profession. Moreover, the implications go beyond merely practical, all the way to poignant: our young service members can pay a tragic price on the battlefield for the muddleheaded methodology of their leaders. This paper describes how inductivism manifests itself in military thought in general and especially in the two most influential theories in contemporary military culture, known in the trade as Network Centric Warfare and Effects-based Operations. These two “revolutionary new theories of war”, as they are touted, are actually tired old military inductivism, dressed up in technological trappings. They fail for precisely that reason. The paper will illustrate the adverse practical implications of military inductivism with reference to military decision theory, operational planning for the recent conflict in Iraq, and recent behaviour in military capital budgeting as regards the acquisition and exploitation of information and communication technology. It will then make the case that critical rationalism provides the basis for the first significant step forward in military thought in over two centuries. To those for whom war is a distasteful endeavour this may seem a dubious opportunity, but would Karl Popper object to the attempted refutation of real threats to human liberty?

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\* I am indebted to David Miller for suggesting this turn of phrase in personal correspondence. Moreover, I am compelled to state that the views expressed in this abstract and in the associated paper are personal views, and do not reflect the official position of any organization with which I am associated.