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# Transformation pioneer dies at 63

## Cebrowski called a 'visionary' for early network-centric ideas

By Christopher P. Cavas  
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Naval War College president Vice Adm. Arthur Cebrowski and professor Thomas Barnett were among a group gathered around a large U-shaped table at the school in Newport, R.I., in the late 1990s, discussing the future of warfare.

"At one point," Barnett recalled, "someone said, 'Well, what Art would say is ...' and for the next 45 minutes there was a discussion about what Art would say and what his comments would be. And Art was at the table — so it was like they were discussing him almost as if he wasn't there. And he just sat back in his chair and smiled softly to himself.

"I went up to him afterward and said, 'That must have been kind of weird, huh?' And he said, 'When you get the conversation to that point, you don't have to say anything more.'"

Moving the debate to the point where it would advance on its own merits was a hallmark goal for Cebrowski, who died of cancer Nov. 12 at age 63. A combat-decorated carrier pilot who commanded an aircraft carrier and its battle group, he made his biggest mark as the chief proponent of military trans-

formation and network-centric warfare long before those became common catchphrases.

Net-centric warfare — the idea that improving the flow of information could create a quantum leap in the ability to apply military power quickly, precisely and more efficiently — was still revolutionary in the fall of 1997, when Cebrowski and John Garstka, a strategic analyst on the Joint Staff, looked at how businesses used information technology.

"At the time, nobody felt comfortable connecting the dots between what was happening in technology and the commercial sector and then saying this is what could happen in warfare," Garstka said.

### A landmark article

Together, Cebrowski and Garstka wrote an article for the January 1998 issue of the U.S. Naval Institute's Proceedings magazine that launched their ideas into the mainstream of military debate. They pointed to industry's embrace of the possibilities offered by powerful computers and communications networks, and urged the Navy to shift its focus from platforms such as ships and aircraft and look at "how we train, how we organize,

and how we allocate our resources" based on network-centric principles.

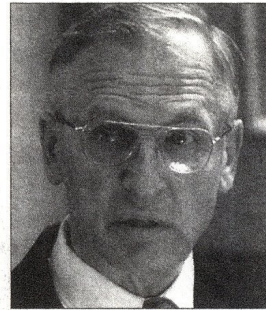
Although the Pentagon was eagerly buying new technology, Garstka said, it wasn't working to harness the fundamental changes made possible by the ability to quickly gather, distribute and process so much data.

"You had to be willing to look at organization and process changes to fully exploit information technology," he said. "Today, we call that 'transformation.'"

The ideas grabbed the attention of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who used Cebrowski's writings and speeches to push the Pentagon to think differently about everything when he took office in early 2001.

That fall, Rumsfeld appointed Cebrowski, who had just retired from a 37-year Navy career, to lead a new Office of Force Transformation intended to spark technological and conceptual development. OFT reached out across the military services to attract bright young officers willing to think outside the box that was the Pentagon, all the while preaching the gospel of net-centric warfare and transformation.

An OFT mantra is "the small, the fast, the many" — the idea that eschews big ships and major weapons for a diffuse, ever-changing and adaptable military force that



ROB CURTIS, TIMES STAFF

**Retired Vice Adm. Arthur Cebrowski began pushing for better use of communications networks in the late 1990s and was the first leader of the Office of Force Transformation.**

shares real-time information.

But as much as Cebrowski is associated with net-centric warfare and transformation, his greatest legacy might be his willingness to say things people weren't quite ready for.

"You had to be willing to hang out ideas before the data came," said Barnett, now a private consultant and author of "The Pentagon's New Map: War and Peace in the 21st Century."

Cebrowski "would make bold leaps ahead in how he defined key concepts and ideas," Barnett said. "And having done that, the data

would come to him, sometimes from sources unexpected, and sometimes over time, because it took some period of time to catch up with his enunciation of the way ahead.

"That was a huge lesson for me personally," Barnett said. "If you want to be a visionary, you can't just wait for things. You have to get out there and take some risks with your ideas, and he was a master at that."

Yet many who knew Cebrowski say he never pretended to know all the answers. The important thing was to throw out ideas, give people tools and experiment to see what happened.

"Most people want definite answers and directions, and he wouldn't give them that," Gaffney said. "He wanted everybody else to go find solutions."

With Cebrowski's passing, "lots of people are trying to put his legacy into some tangible thing like net-centric warfare and Streetfighter," said Terry Pudas, who served under Cebrowski at the war college and now is the acting director of OFT. "But I think when it's really understood, his legacy will be his ability to get people to think in alternative ways and look at events through different lenses ... teaching people how to think differently.

"He challenged the conventional wisdom and he did it the way he saw things — and always as a gentleman." □

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