

America's History of Counterinsurgency

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Brookings Counterinsurgency and Pakistan Paper Series, No. 4

The United States military is arguably the best counterinsurgency force in the world today. But if that is true, it is extremely unusual in historical context. For most of its history, the United States has been mediocre in such activities—if not actively hostile to the idea that it should even bother worrying about them. There were perhaps some exceptions in the early 20th century. But most U.S. history including the Indian wars of the 19th century as well as the Vietnam and post-Vietnam experiences of more recent times—to say nothing of the first 4 years of the Iraq war and first 4 or 5 years of the Afghanistan conflict—have demonstrated American inefficiency and incompetence in this realm of warfare. Thankfully, the U.S. armed forces have become a learning organization, and they adjusted to near-defeat in Iraq with a turnaround in counterinsurgency operations that will hopefully now also help salvage the situation in Afghanistan. But even in Iraq, it was a close call, as most members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were skeptical about or hostile to the so-called surge in Iraq even as it began to deliver good results. There are rich lessons here about the difficulties of military reform, but also about the feasibility of rapid improvement in such missions once a nation truly commits to conducting them successfully.

This brief essay reviews, very briefly, America's experience in counterinsurgency including some observations about recent improvements.

The Indian Wars of the 17th-19th Centuries

It is of course unfair and misleading to summarize three centuries of history in a few paragraphs. But for present purposes, it is necessary to make the attempt.

Overall America's wars against its native populations were little short of a humanitarian travesty. It is hard to characterize them as "population protection missions" or any other of the classic depictions of well-done counterinsurgencies. To be sure, there were occasional, humane leaders fighting for colonialists, for the British crown, and later the United States against native Americans. But the general historical record was one of fairly brutal combat. The only mitigating factors were the huge expanses of American land, which allowed native American/Indian forces often to undertake tactical retreats rather than fight to the finish, and the relatively modest numbers of native Americans present in North America in the first place. In addition, the promises of the "white man" to allow native Americans reasonably large tracts of land under various peace accords helped provide a compromise solution of sorts in many cases—even if in the end most such promises were later willfully violated.

For a country based on principles of democracy and human rights, the long history of ongoing warfare against native Americans together with the frequency of broken promises is a major historical blot on the United States. In fact, Americans' early efforts to defeat native American

populations should probably not really be viewed as counterinsurgency operations, since in overall effect at least they were in fact closer to ethnic cleansing missions in the modern vernacular.

The “Wars of Peace”

Generally not a major colonial power, at least not beyond its own borders, the United States did indulge in a period of colonialism and quasi-colonialism starting at the end of the 19th century and continuing for several decades. During this period, it conducted counterinsurgency campaigns, most notably in the Philippines and Central America, as it sought to control, pacify, and in some cases treat humanely its subject populations.

Its performance in these wars was mixed. That is to say, in effect, that it was good by comparison with most other periods in its history. By most accounts, for example, the Philippines campaign at the turn of the 20th century employed a number of proper counterinsurgency concepts such as emphasis on protection of the population, and was conducted with restraint and reasonable precision in the application of force. It also was concluded fairly successfully. Most U.S. campaigns in Central America in later years were a bit more brutal and a bit less successful, but still maintained partial commitment to the precepts of counterinsurgency. The best aspects of the prevailing ideas of the time were captured in the well-known book of doctrine published by the U.S. Marine Corps just before World War II, *The Small Wars Manual*.

Vietnam

The classic case of poor U.S. performance in counterinsurgency operations was in the Vietnam War. By almost any account, the United States and its allies lost this war, and fought it fairly badly—with untold human costs incurred along the way.

Admittedly, the United States had good company; the French had been defeated there before too. Admittedly, the Viet Cong were extraordinarily well organized fighters with a proximate and committed external supplier of materiel. Admittedly, Southeast Asia was not—and could not have been—the country’s main combat theater or even its main priority at the time, given ongoing worries in Europe, Korea, and elsewhere about Soviet and Communist expansionism.

All that said, those who have examined this conflict in detail are typically struck by how poorly aligned the Army’s strategy and tactics were with battlefield realities (the Marines were arguably somewhat better on balance, through their combined action platoon or CAP efforts, which took an “ink spot” approach to counterinsurgency). And the Air Force was no better than the Army. Excessive firepower was employed, from the air and from artillery on the ground; troops were not well trained in infantry or counterinsurgency tactics; soldiers were rotated in and out, meaning that the United States did not fight a nine-year war so much as it “fought a one-year war nine times” according to the famous adage. While it was bound to be a difficult struggle by any measure, insufficient attention was also given to reforming South Vietnamese institutions or military forces.

The Aftermath of Vietnam

For decades Americans have debated the lessons of Vietnam—even as they have been relieved to see that it did not cause huge numbers of dominoes to fall to Communism in Asia or presage defeat in the Cold War, as was feared at the time. For some, the lesson was about poor counterinsurgency tactics and the need to improve them, as argued above. For others, it was about the impossibility of

fighting a protracted war with a conscription military, a divided public, and half-measures of national commitment (see the resulting Weinberger Doctrine, attached below). Some thought that Washington's micromanagement of target sets was the problem, or that its unwillingness to escalate further against North Vietnam led to defeat.

But for the U.S. armed forces, in retrospect it can be argued that one lesson probably trumped all others—these kinds of counterinsurgencies were not what the American military wanted to engage in, and should not be repeated, or even prepared for. After the Vietnam War, during the Reagan military buildup of the 1980s and beyond, the Army in particular went back to its preferred focus on Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union and a possible high-end armored battle in the Fulda Gap of Germany. Its equipment purchases, its force structure decisions, its approaches to training, and its institutional ethos and culture remained focused almost entirely on classic maneuver warfare. Operation Desert Storm in 1991 seemed to vindicate this approach; even when war occurred in a different theater than expected, the U.S. military was ready for heavy air-ground battle. But then again, Iraq's army was built on the Soviet model (except that it was smaller and less proficient, of course). And desert combat, despite the obvious differences, wound up resembling battle on the plains of Europe more than it resembled what was to come. So Desert Storm was a misleading apparent vindication of prevailing doctrine and strategic thought.

Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan and Beyond

The United States military performed well in the invasions of Grenada and Panama in the 1980s, and also in the bombing of Libya in 1986. But meanwhile, it was continuing to demonstrate its problems with counterinsurgency and related types of operations—often due in large part to wavering or unsteady political leadership, to be sure, and not only its own mistakes. In Lebanon in 1983, in Somalia in 1993, in the non-intervention in Rwanda in 1994, and in the long-range standoff attacks against al Qaeda assets in Afghanistan in 1998 and at other times, the nation's armed forces were rather ineffective against irregular threats.

But of course, the campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq in the first half of the current decade were the most consequential demonstrations of U.S. military weakness in these areas of all. Through 2006, both operations were essentially failing, despite initial impressive successes that seemed to square with visions of a military revolution held by Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld and others. Although the callous use of firepower that characterized Vietnam was never repeated (just as it had been avoided in the Balkans air campaigns of the mid-late 1990s), American forces did not do what it took to win. They succeeded brilliantly in overthrowing the governments of the Taliban and of Saddam Hussein but then faced enormous challenges against resistance movements in each place. The U.S. and allied emphasis was not on population protection, or on care in the use of force, or on effective mentoring of indigenous security forces (even though it was attempted more seriously starting in 2004)—that is, until the surge in Iraq in 2007 followed by the review of Afghanistan strategy shortly thereafter. Many individuals in the military knew how to pursue such operations properly even before 2007, to be sure. But their political leadership did not—and on balance, most of their fellow commanders and other military personnel did not either.

A Brief Aside: The Nation's History in Insurgency

Has the United States ever conducted effective insurgent operations, in contrast to counterinsurgency operations? Hypothetically, such military missions could have been attempted in

a range of situations, including in occupied Europe during World War II, and in places like Stalin's Soviet Union thereafter.

In fact, as with its poor performance in counterinsurgency, the United States has not shown much interest or expertise in insurgent operations either. The notable exception is the Revolutionary War, when it defeated British forces partly by retreating into the countryside whenever unable to hold ground, and by harassing British forces and complicating their efforts at securing major cities and transportation lines to the point where the crown ultimately decided it was no longer worth the effort or expense to try to hold onto the American colonies. The Revolutionary War featured more large-scale battles verging on traditional warfare than have most modern insurgencies (except when the latter have reached the so-called "Phase III" of operations, advancing to the point where they could openly challenge the ruling regime). That said, the colonies' campaign was by most definitions an insurgency. It utilized elusive tactics, harassment techniques, camouflaging of combatants among civilian populations and within complex terrain, and a strategy of patience rather than pursuit of classic battlefield victory at most times.

More generally, however, the Revolutionary War was the exception that proves the rule: throughout the vast preponderance of its history, United States has not liked either insurgency or counterinsurgency warfare. Perhaps the most striking case of its disdain for insurgent methods was demonstrated by General Robert E. Lee during the U.S. Civil War. Although he is widely regarded as a clever battlefield leader, better than most of his Union opponents, Lee's historical reputation might not be so strong if modern insurgent leaders were doing the grading. In fact, Lee operated out of a substantial population base (half the size of the Union population), had tremendous amounts of strategic depth, had a very friendly population on his side, had considerable supplies from Europe and elsewhere—and still lost the war when he insisted on continuing to fight open-field battles. Some historians have commended Lee for not tearing apart the Union when he might have turned the war into an open-ended quagmire by resorting to such insurgent methods. One might retort, however, that if Lee was such a patriot bent on preserving the Union, he had a better choice—not to lead the southern fight in the first place. In fact, it is at least arguable that he simply fit into the strong American tradition of displaying contempt for insurgent as well as counterinsurgent combat—not out of tactical or strategic considerations, but out of instinct and a warrior ethos that saw such forms of battle as beneath what a proper soldier should countenance.

Conclusion: Two Good Years (or Maybe 10) out of 235

Although commanders such as HR McMaster had conducted effective counterinsurgency operations in parts of Iraq prior to the decision to surge forces in 2007, it was only at that latter point that the military turned its attention and devoted its resources to a proper population protection mission. Until then, under the guidance of Secretary Rumsfeld but with the acquiescence of many U.S. officers including General George Casey, the emphasis had been on pursuing a relatively rapid departure strategy from Iraq—and on avoiding population protection operations in the first place.

No detailed assessment of the surge is needed here, but it is worth simply repeating that its premise was that the Iraqi population was the "center of gravity" that required protection. This was necessary in order to prevent an escalating cycle of sectarian combat, and also to elicit support from the population so that it would not provide large numbers of additional recruits to the insurgencies and so that it would provide intelligence and other cooperation to government/coalition forces.

Other key features of the 2007-present strategy in Iraq included creation of joint security stations in Iraq's cities and a resulting emphasis on foot patrols carried out by teams of Iraqi and American security personnel working together; greater efforts to improve the quality of leadership of Iraqi security forces; negotiation of ceasefires with "reconcilables;" formalization of cooperation agreements with the Sons of Iraq; greater restraint in the use of force by security personnel; and greater emphasis on prompt, local economic recovery efforts in the aftermath of combat operations. Much of this strategy was well encapsulated in the phrase "clear, hold, and build." Within two years, violence levels had dropped more than 80 percent, and they continued to drop even as American force levels dropped back to previous totals and below.

So the United States has had two successful years of counterinsurgency to go along with its otherwise rather bad history of trying to conduct such missions. That makes some 2 good years out of 235—or, if one wishes to be a bit more generous, perhaps 10 good years out of 235, given the partial successes of the early 20th century in the Philippines and Latin America.

A similar strategy focused on population protection, and on building up indigenous institutions, is now being attempted in Afghanistan. With luck, working with the Afghan government, Pakistan, NATO allies, and others, the United States will soon have had 12 or 14 good years out of 237 or 239. We need it desperately.

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APPENDIX I: THE WEINBERGER DOCTRINE

(From a November 28, 1984 speech at the National Press Club in Washington, "The Uses of Military Power,")

1. The United States should not commit forces to combat unless the vital national interests of the United States or its allies are involved.
2. U.S. troops should only be committed wholeheartedly and with the clear intention of winning. Otherwise, troops should not be committed.
3. U.S. combat troops should be committed only with clearly defined political and military objectives and with the capacity to accomplish those objectives.
4. The relationship between the objectives and the size and composition of the forces committed should be continually reassessed and adjusted if necessary.
5. U.S. troops should not be committed to battle without a "reasonable assurance" of the support of U.S. public opinion and Congress.
6. The commitment of U.S. troops should be considered only as a last resort.

APPENDIX II: GENERAL PETRAEUS'S COUNTERINSURGENCY GUIDANCE TO TROOPS

HEADQUARTERS, MULTI-NATIONAL FORCE – IRAQ BAGHDAD,
IRAQ APO AE 09342-1400, 21 June 2008

Multi-National Force-Iraq Commander's Counterinsurgency Guidance

Secure and serve the population. The Iraqi people are the decisive “terrain.” Together with our Iraqi partners, work to provide the people security, to give them respect, to gain their support, and to facilitate establishment of local governance, restoration of basic services, and revival of local economies.

Live among the people. You can't commute to this fight. Position Joint Security Stations, Combat Outposts, and Patrol Bases in the neighborhoods we intend to secure. Living among the people is essential to securing them and defeating the insurgents.

Hold areas that have been secured. Once we clear an area, we must retain it. Develop the plan for holding an area before starting to clear it. The people need to know that we and our Iraqi partners will not abandon their neighborhoods. When reducing forces and presence, gradually thin the line rather than handing off or withdrawing completely. Ensure situational awareness even after transfer of responsibility to Iraqi forces.

Pursue the enemy relentlessly. Identify and pursue AQI and other extremist elements tenaciously. Do not let them retain support areas or sanctuaries. Force the enemy to respond to us. Deny the enemy the ability to plan and conduct deliberate operations.

Generate unity of effort. Coordinate operations and initiatives with our embassy and interagency partners, our Iraqi counterparts, local governmental leaders, and non-governmental organizations to ensure all are working to achieve a common purpose.

Promote reconciliation. We cannot kill our way out of this endeavor. We and our Iraqi partners must identify and separate the “reconcilables” from the “irreconcilables” through engagement, population control measures, information operations, kinetic operations, and political activities. We must strive to make the reconcilables a part of the solution, even as we identify, pursue, and kill, capture, or drive out the irreconcilables.

Defeat the network, not just the attack. Defeat the insurgent networks to the “left” of the explosion. Focus intelligence assets to identify the network behind an attack, and go after its leaders, financiers, suppliers, and operators.

Foster Iraqi legitimacy. Encourage Iraqi leadership and initiative; recognize that their success is our success. Partner in all that we do and support local involvement in security, governance, economic revival, and provision of basic services. Find the right balance between Coalition Forces leading and the Iraqis exercising their leadership and initiative, and encourage the latter. Legitimacy in the eyes of the Iraqi people is essential to overall success.

Employ all assets to isolate and defeat the terrorists and insurgents. Counter-terrorist forces alone cannot defeat Al-Qaeda and the other extremists; success requires all forces and all means at

our disposal—non-kinetic as well as kinetic. Employ Coalition and Iraqi conventional and special operations forces, Sons of Iraq, and all other available multipliers.

Integrate civilian and military efforts to cement security gains. Resource and fight decentralized. Push assets down to those who most need them and can actually use them.

- **Employ money as a weapon system.** Use a targeting board process to ensure the greatest effect for each “round” expended, and to ensure that each engagement using money contributes to the achievement of the unit’s overall objectives. Ensure contracting activities support the security effort, employing locals wherever possible. Employ a “matching fund” concept when feasible in order to ensure Iraqi involvement and commitment.
- **Fight for intelligence.** A nuanced understanding of the situation is everything. Analyze the intelligence that is gathered, share it, and fight for more. Every patrol should have tasks designed to augment understanding of the area of operations and the enemy. Operate on a “need to share” rather than a “need to know” basis; disseminate intelligence as soon as possible to all who can benefit from it.
- **Walk.** Move mounted, work dismounted. Stop by, don’t drive by. Patrol on foot and engage the population. Situational awareness can only be gained by interacting with the people face-to-face, not separated by ballistic glass.
- **Understand the neighborhood.** Map the human terrain and study it in detail. Understand local culture and history. Learn about the tribes, formal and informal leaders, governmental structures, and local security forces. Understand how local systems are supposed to work—including governance, basic services, maintenance of infrastructure, and the economy—and how they really work.
- **Build relationships.** Relationships are a critical component of counter-insurgency operations. Together with our Iraqi counterparts, strive to establish productive links with local leaders, tribal sheikhs, governmental officials, religious leaders, and interagency partners.
- **Look for Sustainable Solutions.** Build mechanisms by which the Iraqi Security Forces, Iraqi community leaders, and local Iraqis under the control of governmental institutions can continue to secure local areas and sustain governance and economic gains in their communities as the Coalition Force presence is reduced. Figure out the Iraqi systems and help Iraqis make them work.
- **Maintain continuity and tempo through transitions.** Start to build the information you’ll provide to your successors on the day you take over. Allow those who will follow you to virtually “look over your shoulder” while they’re still at home station by giving them access to your daily updates and other items on SIPRNET. Encourage extra time on the ground during transition periods, and strive to maintain operational tempo and local relationships to avoid giving the enemy respite.
- **Manage expectations.** Be cautious and measured in announcing progress. Note what has been accomplished, but also acknowledge what still needs to be done. Avoid premature declarations of success. Ensure our troopers and our partners are aware of our assessments and recognize that any counterinsurgency operation has innumerable challenges, that enemies get a vote, and that progress is likely to be slow.

- **Be first with the truth.** Get accurate information of significant activities to your chain of command, to Iraqi leaders, and to the press as soon as is possible. Beat the insurgents, extremists, and criminals to the headlines, and pre-empt rumors. Integrity is critical to this fight. Don't put lipstick on pigs. Acknowledge setbacks and failures, and then state what we've learned and how we'll respond. Hold the press (and ourselves) accountable for accuracy, characterization, and context. Avoid spin and let facts speak for themselves. Challenge enemy disinformation. Turn our enemies' bankrupt messages, extremist ideologies, oppressive practices, and indiscriminate violence against them.
- **Fight the information war relentlessly.** Realize that we are in a struggle for legitimacy that in the end will be won or lost in the perception of the Iraqi people. Every action taken by the enemy and United States has implications in the public arena. Develop and sustain a narrative that works and continually drive the themes home through all forms of media.
- **Live our values.** Do not hesitate to kill or capture the enemy, but stay true to the values we hold dear. This is what distinguishes us from our enemies. There is no tougher endeavor than the one in which we are engaged. It is often brutal, physically demanding, and frustrating. All of us experience moments of anger, but we can neither give in to dark impulses nor tolerate unacceptable actions by others.
- **Exercise initiative.** In the absence of guidance or orders, determine what they should be and execute aggressively. Higher level leaders will provide broad vision and paint "white lines on the road," but it will be up to those at tactical levels to turn "big ideas" into specific actions.
- **Prepare for and exploit opportunities.** "Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity" (Seneca the Younger). Develop concepts (such as that of "reconcilables" and "irreconcilables") in anticipation of possible opportunities, and be prepared to take risk as necessary to take advantage of them.
- **Learn and adapt.** Continually assess the situation and adjust tactics, policies, and programs as required. Share good ideas (none of us is smarter than all of us together). Avoid mental or physical complacency. Never forget that what works in an area today may not work there tomorrow, and may or may not be transferable to another part of Iraq.