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Repetitive Military History

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Abstract

Knowledge of history is essential in the professional development and growth of military leaders. Past historical conflicts afford a multitude of examples for military leaders to sharpen and develop their critical thinking skills essential to success on the battlefield. An understanding of the enemy, terrain, local populace, and basic military tactics often determines the outcome of battles. A historical knowledge of past conflicts can potentially minimize the possibility of leaders repeating the same decisions that led to US political and military failures of the past. This paper presents three instances of counterinsurgency operations which demonstrate the repetitive nature of historical armed conflicts and illustrates the need for military leaders to study history.

Repetition in Military History

There is very little new in the art and mechanics of ground warfare, save the advances made in weapons technology. However, because war is a human endeavor, the predictability of human behavior makes the study of past conflicts worthwhile and to military leaders, more than for most other professional career fields. Disaster in battle comes from modern military leaders using failed tactics of the past under similar modern conditions while expecting different results. Therefore, the failure of military leaders to study or learn from the past impacts the soldiers that fight these battles.

Counterinsurgency operations offer informative examples to demonstrate the importance of history to military leaders in recognizing and confronting insurgency operations. Certain key factors, by their very nature, are prominent in motivating and sustaining insurgency operations: political philosophy, nationalism, indigenous culture, and climate-terrain (Asprey, 1975). Once recognized, these factors can be countervailed. This paper chronologically reviews three insurgency operations and how military leaders responded to the earlier and comparable, “repetitive” later events.

Historically Repetitive Insurgency Operations

American Indian Skirmishes and Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan)

Unless creative measures are implemented to battle insurgent forces, physical obstacles like terrain and climate together along with an elusive insurgency makes for a protracted counterinsurgency operation. The U.S. Cavalry excursion against Southwestern Indian tribes following the Civil War is a good example of a military force adapting to insurgency operations. Initially, the U.S. Cavalry was partially unsuccessful,

due to a lack of understanding by military leaders on Native American battle tactics (Utley, 1973). The American Indian's familiarity with their terrain, their use of hit-and-run guerilla tactics, as well as the liberal use of ambushes took a heavy toll physically and psychologically on the U.S. cavalry units, and negated the superior Cavalry firepower (Utley, 1973). To creatively neutralize this advantage, the U.S. military used its superior logistics operations to start conducting extensive winter campaigns against Indians confined to their static winter lodges (Utley, 1973). General James H. Carleton was one of the first to successfully implement this strategy when he sent Kit Carson's regiment against the Navajo during the winter of 1863-1864 (Utley, 1967). The U.S. Cavalry's determination to subject itself to extreme conditions to subdue the Indian insurgency proved a profitable tactic with fewer U.S. military casualties.

The earlier ambushes of Apache tribes against the U.S. Cavalry parallel the successful Mujihadeen tactics used against the Soviets from 1979 to 1989 (Rashid, 2000). The Taliban and al-Qa'eda (Anti-Coalition Militia, or ACM) used ambush tactics against the U.S. military that had originated with the Mujihadeen against the Soviet military (Jalali and Grau, 1995; NGIC, 2003). The ACM, much like the American Indians, used the natural mountain terrain in hit and run tactics that offered greater success against the more technologically advanced U.S. Forces (Moore, 2003; NGIC, 2003). Like the Indians in the American West, ACM offensive operations throughout Afghanistan decreased during winter (NGIC, 2003). Winter insurgency activity never completely ceased, but closed mountain passes and valleys together with inclement weather made movement through the mountains difficult (DoDIPP, 2003). The winter operations, by the US Army in Afghanistan, parallel the winter campaigns used against

the American Indians. US Forces utilized their airlift and mobility advantages to move against the ACM winter bases as evident during the Mountain Blizzard and Mountain Storm campaigns in the winter of 2004.

French Indochina and the US Vietnam Wars

The insurgency operations of Ho Chi Minh appealed to a strong nationalistic sentiment to combat the counterinsurgency operations of the Japanese, French, and United States over three decades (Fitzgerald, 1972). Insurgency activities by the Viet Minh against the French from 1946 to 1954 followed a three-step military strategy originally advocated by Mao Tse-Tung and implemented by General Vo Nguyen Giap: 1) developing control of the indigenous population while conducting terrorist operations and guerilla activities and maintaining a defensive posture; 2) establishing a regular military force, increasing guerilla attacks on government forces in small combative engagements; and 3) gaining complete control of the local population which then rebels against and overthrows the government and its military units (Lanning and Cragg, 1992).

The French, on retaking Vietnam in 1946, consolidated their control on the major cities and ports. However, General Giap concentrated his military efforts on guerilla tactics in jungle warfare against French forces, negating the French advantages of mechanized and superior military forces (Smith et al, 1967). Even though the French knew of the Viet Minh's three-point military strategy by 1952, the French armed forces could not overcome Viet Minh tactics (Smith et al, 1967). The inability of the conventional French military forces to adapt to and confront the Viet Minh in guerilla

warfare, together with limited support in France and decreased financing, ended the eight year conflict with a humiliating at Dien Bien Phu (Asprey, 1975; Harclerode, 2001).

United States involvement in Vietnam was based on the beliefs of Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy in a Domino Theory of Communist aggression and conquest of Asian nations (Fitzgerald, 1972). This belief resulted in the introduction of U.S. Special Forces into South Vietnam in 1956 as the French military withdrew (Stanton, 1985; Matloff, 1985). Like the French, the U.S. military was familiar with the original three-point military strategy of General Giap, and took a different approach to combating the North Vietnamese insurgency (Westmoreland, 1976). After the division of Vietnam by the United Nations, the Viet Minh (later known as Viet Cong) still exercised considerable influence in the South Vietnam countryside (Matloff, 1985). To counter the North Vietnamese strategy of rural control the U.S. Military placed Special Forces advisors into isolated fortified outposts with indigenous Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) forces (Strategic Hamlet program) in the early 60s (Matloff, 1985; Harclerode, 2001).

Though the U.S. military adapted its strategies to combat insurgency activity the lack of political and popular support paralleled the French experience. Even the ability of the U.S. military to take a lesson from the French defeat in 1954 did not ultimately result in a different outcome. A North Vietnamese insurgency in two wars managed to defeat two technologically advanced military forces by using simple guerilla tactics and wearing down the political will of its enemies.

Philippine Insurrection and the Iraq War

US military operations that encounter numerous indigenous cultural impediments or misunderstandings can re-ignite or escalate armed tensions by serving as the rallying point to form or expand insurgency operations, typically appealing to a commonality (nationalism, religious belief, or both) among the populace (Asprey, 1975). To combat the Philippine insurrection, Generals Adna Chaffee and Frederick Funston believed it necessary to completely subjugate or destroy the Moro insurgents, with little care of what motivated the Moros (Hoyt, 1987). The cohesive thread that allowed the various Moro communities to unite and develop a successful insurgency operation against the U.S. military in Mindanao was Islam. Generals Leonard Wood and John Pershing tried a more reasonable approach to understand the Moros, but certain cultural inclinations (slavery, polygamy) proved unacceptable to the U.S. (Byler, 2005). General Pershing's policy of Moro weapons confiscation intended to reduce armed violence, unintentionally extended the Moro insurgency until 1914 (DeToy, 2004). Unwittingly, the U.S. Army assumed the same counterinsurgency policy against the Moro as the Spanish before them, with the same less than successful outcome (Asprey, 1975).

The cultural misunderstandings that followed the initial victory of U.S. forces against Saddam Hussein developed into a multi-faceted insurgency with varied agendas more complex than the Moro insurgency of the Philippines (Hashim, 2006). The Sunnis, Kurds, and Shias, all initiated insurgency operations against one another, with the U.S. military caught in the middle. In addition, foreign al-Qa'eda fighters involved themselves in Iraq principally for the sake of battling U.S. forces and creating

an unstable political environment burdening the U.S. and any emerging Iraqi government (Hayden, 2006). The primary lapse of judgment for the U.S. military was not anticipating the adversarial relationship between Sunni and Shia religious groups. Saddam Hussein maintained an iron fist control on both groups, but typically supporting his Sunni minority against the larger Shia community. Iran and al-Qa'eda took advantage of religious animosity to foment militia activity against the "U.S. occupying" forces. An eventual U.S.-Iraqi military surge and parallel diplomatic appeal to Iraqi nationalism to quell Sunni-Shia tensions assisted in negating or marginalizing Iranian and al-Qa'eda influences, thereby decreasing violence nationwide (Peter, 2009).

Counter Arguments and Responses

History does not necessarily repeat itself, but most armed conflicts arguably have some similarities, which may or may not make them valuable to current military operations. Studying military history on the off-chance that a similar past conflict may present itself in a current operation seems a waste of time. Advances in technology make it unnecessary to study past armed conflicts (Jessup & Coakley, 1979). Conditions at the time of armed conflict dictate the professional decision making process of a leader, thereby relying on the reasoned intelligence of that leader.

Refutation of Counter-Arguments

Why did more successful General Officers (J.J. Pershing, G.S. Patton) place such emphasis on the study of military history, if they did not deem it important for future leaders (Jessup & Coakley, 1979)? Since human behavior is predictable, it follows that

military decisions during armed conflict, for better or worse will continuously be repeated. Admiral Farragut believed the study of man was essential for young officers (Jessup & Coakley, 1979). Technology, as demonstrated by the Vietnamese Wars does not always triumph over guerilla tactics. Knowledge of past conflicts and their outcomes, arms the military leader with a decision-making tool.

Conclusion

It could be said that the study of history is the study of armed conflicts throughout the whole of mankind's existence. Therefore, it should be no surprise that history has a tendency to repeat itself, since terrain, tactics, weapons, politics, and culture are always factors that enter into the military equations of armed conflict. Military leaders by studying past conflicts can expand their knowledge of possible future conflicts and in so doing, be able to recognize enemy tactics and develop counter scenarios to defeat the enemy. Counterinsurgency operations by their very nature have similarities that make it possible for military professionals to gain considerable insight into how such operations can be successfully conducted. Weapons, enemies, environments, and situations may not always be the same, but the knowledge of historical precedents offers military leaders the flexibility to devise tactical and strategic countermeasures to almost any enemy force.

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