

COUNTERINSURGENCY FROM VIETNAM TO IRAQ

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War, as defined by Webster's dictionary is "the waging of armed conflict against an enemy". In two of the larger military campaigns in recent United States history, Vietnam and Iraq, the prolonging of the "armed conflict" was not the result of conventional warfare but of the back alley fighting tactics referred to as insurgencies. While the terrain may differ, insurgencies and countersinsurgencies causes and operations have shown to have the same roots throughout history. Especially when the cultural history of a nation is one of violence. The United States must start using this knowledge of a countries history of conflict and struggle in a more proactive plan before the first shots are fired, instead of the reacting force that seems to dominate the overall battle plan at the conclusion of conventional conflict. The cultural differences of Vietnam and Iraq are like the difference between water and sand, yet there is one fabric that binds both countries together, they have both known conflict and struggle for decades. It is our abilities to understand this history and plan accordingly that will shape the battle space of the future.

In 1954 the country of Vietnam was partitioned into the pro-independence, communist sponsored Democratic Republic of Vietnam to the north and to the south the US sponsored Republic of Vietnam. Elections were due to be held the

following year on reunification but attempts were repeatedly thwarted by the south to prevent the inevitable Communist victory. American forces were already in country acting as advisors to the south forces and more importantly to keep a watchful eye out on the north. In 1957 the United States suffered its first military casualties when thirteen Americans were wounded by three different guerilla bombings in Saigon. The insurgency had begun. Through the course of 1957 and all the way into 1960 insurgent activities reached an estimated thirty incidents per year ranging from assassinations to kidnapping. This may not seem like much but the US was not even committed to the fight yet. Through all of this the US military stayed on the proverbial sideline preferring to just act as advisors and not committing to fieldwork. Meanwhile the Communist North, knowing that major conflict was inevitable was building up support of the indigenous locals, a lot of it by force and threats, to wage a major front that had no battle lines. Operations were conducted within the local populace so as not to identify themselves as hostiles all the while not committing their regular forces hence, their country into major conflict. It would take the United States almost 3 years to mount a counterinsurgent plan against these tactics.

In 1961 the United States countered the insurgent objectives of the NVA by emplacing teams of US Advisors (Special Forces) in the field to co-inhabit with the local villages. The Advisors were to train the local villages in guerilla warfare, defense of their villages and most importantly to establish a trusting relationship

with the local populace and South Vietnamese Army that would serve the United States and their interests. The Advisors lived the lives of the local populace day and night, earning their trust and confidence by enduring the same hardships that confronted them. The mission was one of intelligence gathering and a defensive posture, to defend the villages and not to allow them to fall to the communist north. Should the United States have used this initiative to further their cause beyond the local villages and maybe forge the trust of a nation and all her people instead of isolated groups? Instead of developing an insurgency plan of their own to counter the plan of the NVA that would take the fight to the enemy in their own surroundings, the United States plan in its most simple form was to not give ground. This allowed the NVA to circumvent areas that were under U.S. control and to plant more seeds of insurgency well behind the US lines. By 1963 the U.S. Advisors were submitting reports from the field, that the inflow of Communist supplied NVA Regular Army Troops, combined with local strength insurgents (Viet Cong) were creating a situation, which they may not be able to successfully deal with, without the intervention of regular United States combat troops. These reports had been building each year up through 1964, culminating into a decision to counter communist threats with conventional "U.S. Force". In August of 1964 the United States Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, authorizing deployment of large U.S. combat forces in South Vietnam. The U.S. Marines were land in 1965. The United States battle plan, upon the arrival of forces, was to establish base camps (fire bases) outside and away from local populated

areas and to conduct reconnaissance patrols from these bases to “hold ground” and curb the spread of communism. At the same time they pulled the US Advisors from their mission in the local villages to bring them back into the fold of the “Big Army” picture. This was a huge mistake in the counterinsurgency operations, because it left the locals feeling isolated from the U.S. Forces and not wanting to share vital information that would have been crucial for the counterinsurgency. It also sowed discontent with locals that may have been neutral, at worst, causing them to join the ranks of the insurgent north. It was not long before the NVA was taking ground that the Advisors and locals had held. With this policy you have the foundation for my reason of being a reactive counterinsurgent force instead of a pro-active one. By removing ourselves from the everyday lives of the local friendly’s we allowed the insurgency of the Viet Cong to gain foothold in areas that were far removed from the battlefield, and in non-conventional warfare, where there is no discernible features to distinguish the difference between friendly's and enemy combatants all you can do is react to what ever the insurgency throws your way. Had the United States immersed its conventional forces with US Advisors and the local populace in their environment, the villages and parishes of South Vietnam, giving the local the feeling of protection and partnership, the counter to the insurgency would not have allowed the Viet Cong to operate with such freedom and impunity. Instead our counter to insurgent activities became one of overwhelming force and fire

power, sometimes at the cost of friendlies, which further embedded the seeds of discontent and isolationism, which furthered the cause of the insurgency.

March 19th 2003 the United States launched air strikes, for ever known as “Shock and Awe” against the Iraqi Presidential Palace. The air strikes preceded the invasion of Iraq by conventional forces the following day. Operation Iraqi Freedom had begun.

Leading up to the invasion the United States battle objective was the removal of President Hussein from power by force along with the submission of the Iraqi forces loyal to Hussein, the neutralization of the “reported” cache of WMD, all the while trying to preserve the countries infrastructure and way of life for quick recovery once the major conflict was over. The major conflict lasted a little over a month with the President of The United States officially declaring an end to major hostilities on May 1st, 2003. It was at this time that the United States probably realized that they were a little ill prepared for the task of restoration of a nation. The US had painstakingly taken efforts to keep the infrastructure of Iraq intact and trying to portray the image of liberators and not invaders, but we had failed to realize that a country under such disarray and abuse from a brutal regime would take large amounts of time and energy to restore it to some semblance of normalcy. The United States then made a grave error by abolishing the Iraqi Police Force and Military, which put thousands of young Iraqi males on the

streets, and unemployed. To the average Iraqi civilian this large amount of time for the basics of power, clean water, food and protection would become intolerable. Add in to the mix secular divisions among different tribes and ethnic groups and the seizing of the moment by outside foreign influence of extremism and the basis for an insurgency was already taken root.

The United States was a little overwhelmed, at the start of the post conflict operations, due in part to not having a good understanding of the state on the union in Iraq and not having a plan in place to counter this state. For these reason at the onset of counterinsurgency operation we were more in the reactive state than the pro-active. The United States tactics for counterinsurgency operations involved getting the troops up and close with local populace, having their base camps well within the cities and villages. A lesson learned from Vietnam? They also employed the local populace quickly to assist in the rebuilding efforts of their country. Some units even tried, successfully, the pay for peace policy. This is where they solicited the local tribe leaders that the US would pay them and their tribe to do work for the United States as long as there was peace in their region. It was met with varying affects. While it seemed on the surface that the United States had learned some lessons from Vietnam by not isolating the locals and living amongst them, with it came with new problems and lessons to learn. With the tight battle space of an urban environment the chance for collateral damage in defense to insurgent or by insurgent operations was

large. There was also the tactic used by the insurgency to inflict casualties on the civilian population to create discord with them in showing that the United States could not protect them. With keeping to the proverbial “win their hearts and minds” any collateral damage was too much. In 1986 General John Galvin, then Commander of United States Southern Command, which was supporting the counterinsurgency effort in El Salvador, described this challenge effectively: “The burden on the US Military is large. Not only must it subdue an armed adversary while attempting to provide security to the civilian population, it must also avoid furthering the insurgent’s cause. If, for example, the military’s actions in killing 50 insurgents cause 200 previously uncommitted citizens to join the insurgents cause, the use of force will have been counterproductive.” With this as the mindset the United States started leaning heavily on their counterinsurgency intelligence operations to hopefully avoid problems before they materialized on the city streets.

While the lessons learned from Iraq are still being developed as this essay is written, the United States Military has proven adept at quickly adjusting to change in tactics by an insurgent force. It remains to be seen whether we learn from these lessons in any future conflicts. In my opinion we were slow to react to insurgent operations for OIF and there was very little to no training provided to the troops in preparation for these types of operations. Yet US Forces do what they do best and adapt to an ever-changing battle space.

The question to pose for argument is did the leadership for the US Military not take into account the chance for insurgency operations and make sure that training was provided to the troops prior to boots on ground. In Vietnam, as stated before, the biggest mistake made was the pull out of US Forces embedded with local population creating isolationism. To me the lesson was learned going forward to Iraq but there was even more egregious mistakes made in the planning. How does a country with our wealth and technology not know that another nation has zero to no infrastructure in place? How come we did not realize prior to the invasion that there was going to be a period of occupation and train our soldiers on what was going to come to fruition, that being insurgent and counterinsurgent operations? The United States Armed Forces needs to start incorporating counterinsurgent operations into their training model down to basic skill level, even upon entry. Make it an annual refresher with task, condition and standards. Not something you prepare for in the event of mobilization. The Special Operations Command has a blue print for success for insurgent operations that should be passed along the rank and file for training. It involves the concept that I believe is the foundation for success in an insurgent campaign and that is the relationship building and trust of the local populace with earning their respect through equal actions on same footing. The old adage of brain over brawn rings a tone of sensibility. We should look at committing smaller groups of forces into areas before major conflict erupts and maybe with the help of locals start on our own insurgency to disrupt the enemy, maybe giving him pause and

avoiding major conflict all together. The American military machine should focus on the ever-changing battle space to defeat the enemy at any time, more so on the tactics that might prevent the fight in the first place.

Couterinsurgent/insurgent operations have to be an integral part of any campaign, even before the first shots are fired or boots on ground. Leaders should thoroughly understand the cultural bias and history of any foreign campaign and use this information to shape their battle plan.

General David Petraeus said it best in a military review wrote to the Joint Chiefs in Jan 2006 Titled: **Learning Counter Insurgency: observation from soldiering in Iraq**. “The insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan were not, in truth, the wars for which we were best prepared in 2001; however they are the wars we are fighting and they clearly are the wars we must master. America’s overwhelming conventional military superiority makes it unlikely that future enemies will confront us head on. Rather, they will attack us asymmetrically, avoiding our strengths—firepower, maneuver, technology—and come at us and our partners the way insurgents do in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is imperative, therefore, that we continue to learn from our experiences in those countries, both to succeed in those endeavors and to prepare for the future.

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