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The era of Great Power Competition does not translate into a period in which conventional warfare becomes the norm, while irregular war recedes. The reality is to the contrary. Specifically, Great Powers will continue to support insurgent organizations and even employ irregular warfare measures themselves to undermine the U.S. Therefore, the Army must strike a balance between preparation for both conventional and irregular warfare. It cannot take the risk of focusing on the former and making the U.S. more vulnerable to the latter.

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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

Irregular War in an Era of Great Power Competition: Why the U.S. Army Cannot Forget About Counterinsurgency

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OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: Irregular War in an Era of Great Power Competition: Why the Army Cannot Forget About Counterinsurgency

Author: Major Robert Coleman, U.S. Army

Thesis: The era of Great Power Competition does not translate into a period in which conventional warfare becomes the norm, while irregular war recedes. The reality is to the contrary. Specifically, Great Powers will continue to support insurgent organizations and even employ irregular warfare measures themselves to undermine the U.S. Therefore, the Army must strike a balance between preparation for both conventional and irregular warfare. It cannot take the risk of focusing on the former and making the U.S. more vulnerable to the latter.

Discussion: The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) refocused the joint force for Great Power Competition. The services, namely the Marine Corps and Army, have interpreted the NDS as a call to transform in terms of manning, posture, and focus for conventional warfare. However, in this era of Great Power Competition, the U.S. Army cannot view this as a time where preparing for conventional war erodes its competency and commitment to training for irregular warfare and counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. The Army has habitually been averse to institutionalizing competency for such operations, leading to tragic results on the battlefield.

Conclusion: The Army has valuable historical experience conducting irregular warfare. Unfortunately, it has often discarded its hard-earned lessons from these conflicts and been forced to adapt its forces only after they are at risk in new irregular operations. Because great power competition does not erase the prevalence and need to defend against irregular warfare, it is vital for the U.S. military to institutionalize its capacity for irregular warfare, just as it does for conventional warfare

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DISCLAIMER

THE OPINIONS AND CONCLUSIONS EXPRESSED HEREIN ARE THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT AUTHOR AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT THE VIEWS OF EITHER THE MARINE CORPS COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE OR ANY OTHER GOVERNMENTAL AGENCY. REFERENCES TO THIS STUDY SHOULD INCLUDE THE FOREGOING STATEMENT.

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List of Illustrations

1. **Figure 1 (Page 6)**- A chart from the Army's procurement strategy for its Fiscal Year 2020 budget. [The diagram is from the Assistant Secretary of Army for Financial Management and Comptroller \(ASA FMC\) brief to Army senior leaders on the approved FY20 budget.](#)
2. **Figure 2 (Page 9)**- The chart is a graphical depiction of the types of war from 1919-2015. It is from the 2015 RAND study [*Conflict Trends and Conflict Drivers: An Empirical Assessment of Historical Conflict Patterns and Future Conflict Projections.*](#)

Preface

I became passionate about the subject of Irregular War and Counterinsurgency (COIN) during my first deployment to Afghanistan in 2010. As a young platoon leader in the southern province of Kandahar, I was charged with bringing stability to two villages south of Kandahar City, while simultaneously partnering with the Afghan police. From the first few weeks I realized that the focus of my battalion and brigade leadership was off, as I was constantly being asked how many clearing operations I had completed and planned, and how many insurgents I captured. Our focus for 12 months was so heavily skewed on capturing insurgents that we angered the Afghan populace with continuously conducting clearing operations in the area. In other words, we as the counterinsurgent, were alienating the populace because of our obsession with finding the enemy. Upon redeployment, I made it my goal to train my unit and others to be better counterinsurgents. However, I never got the opportunity, because the moment I redeployed I was told to forget about COIN because we were now going to re-focus on decisive action operations (conventional warfare). Ironically, I ended up in Afghanistan a couple years later.

There were many hands that contributed to this study. In particular, Dr. Jorge Benitez, LTC Jeremy Glauber, and COL Matthew Neumeier provided honest and constructive feedback that led to the completion of this study. I also want to thank LtCol Donald Harlow and Dr. Matthew Flynn who both guided me through the writing and research process and continuously provided invaluable support and ideas.

Introduction

The 2014 publication of the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) marked the beginning of a concerted effort to fundamentally alter the trajectory of the U.S. military. The 2014 QDR directed a shift in focus from counterinsurgency and irregular warfare to more conventional threats that challenge the security of the U.S. on a broader scale. The review explicitly stated, “our forces will no longer be sized to conduct large-scale, prolonged stability operations.”¹ In other words, the military would not be postured to continue its then current mission set in Afghanistan. The document was a response to President Obama’s call to relocate resources and attention from the Middle East to the Pacific. The QDR noted, “U.S. interests remain inextricably linked to the peace and security of the Asia-Pacific region. The Department is committed to implementing the President’s objective of rebalancing U.S. engagement toward this critical region.”² This ambitious goal, however, was not fully realized under the Obama Administration. The U.S. continued to maintain upwards of one hundred thousand troops in Afghanistan due to a resurgent Taliban and was forced to redeploy troops to Iraq in response to the Islamic State (ISIS). President Obama tried but could not keep the U.S. from engagement in these irregular wars.

President Trump, similarly, has called upon the military to change course. In 2018, the Department of Defense published its National Defense Strategy, which unlike the 2014 QDR, specifically focuses on four adversary nations, in particular, China and Russia. The document acknowledges that the U.S. is in an era of great power competition and makes it clear that for the Trump administration “the central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition.*”³ The NDS additionally acknowledges that nearly 20 years of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations have created strategic

atrophy, in which adversary nations have been able to build up their conventional military capacities in line with the U.S. Thus, in order to be better prepared to deter and win a war with a peer competitor, the Department of Defense must profoundly change. This change is not only the realm of technology and budgetary considerations, but also in terms of training, doctrine, culture and most importantly focus. In particular, the focus of the Marine Corps and Army, who bore the brunt of recent irregular conflicts. Conflicts such as these are fundamentally different from more conventional wars. In simplistic terms, conventional conflicts are enemy centric, where the focus of each belligerent is to defeat the adversary's military. Unconventional or asymmetric wars are mainly population centric, where the belligerent's path to success is through securing the populace and defeating the insurgent only when it is possible. These are two entirely different forms of warfare that require fundamentally distinct methods of preparation.

Despite the switch in priorities in the 2018 NDS, the ability to operate against the guerrilla and insurgent in population centric environments is still essential to the success of the National Defense Strategy. U.S. adversaries will choose to counter the U.S. military through supporting insurgents, terrorists, and guerrillas, and even engage in asymmetric tactics themselves. This reality is parallel to the last era the U.S. was engaged in a great power competition during the Cold War, in which both the U.S. and Soviet Union prioritized limited and irregular war over major conventional conflict. The U.S. military cannot confuse the “undesirability of these mission with an actual ability to avoid them.”⁴

Thus, a period of great power competition cannot be confused as a security environment in which conventional warfare is the *only* form of warfare which great powers will use against one another. Great powers will use those forms of war, no matter their nature, that achieve their goals. While great powers have recently invested more in advanced weaponry (such as

hypersonic missiles, Artificial Intelligence, nuclear weapons, etc.) however, that does not indicate the employment of them will be the only means to counter the U.S. Great powers have historically and will continue to use a combination of conventional and unconventional tactics to undermine U.S. interests, with an emphasis on the latter in recent history.

This study agrees that conventional conflict between great powers deserves to be a U.S. priority because it is the most dangerous contingency. But irregular conflict in an era of great power competition also deserves priority because it will be the most likely form of conflict between the great powers and their partners. Last year, a National Defense University (NDU) report explained this important distinction. “A conventional war between the two nuclear powers is unlikely, so it is more likely that conflict will be in the form of irregular warfare in regions where there is instability and where one or both countries have a strategic interest.”⁵ While discussing the NDS, former Secretary of Defense James Mattis also argued that the U.S. military “cannot adopt a single preclusive form of warfare,” as it has traditionally done.⁶

Therefore, in order to balance proficiency in counterinsurgency operations with preparing for great power competition the Army should ensure it institutionalizes its manning, training, and equipping for proficiency at irregular warfare. This analysis will primarily emphasize recommendations for the U.S. Army as opposed to a DoD wide because of the central role of the Army in U.S. irregular warfare, and its previous experiences in conflicts such as Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. This study will provide recommendations for how the Army can prepare for the country’s next asymmetric fight in this new era of great power competition.

How the Army and Marine Corps Responded to the National Defense Strategy
“Our primary focus, priority No. 1, is preparing for high-intensity conflict.”⁷
Then Secretary of the Army Mark Esper in 2018

While this study will focus on recommendations for the U.S. Army, it is important to first note how both the Marine Corps and Army leadership responded to the 2018 NDS. Specifically, both services published guidance that mirrored language in the NDS through the *Army Vision 2028* and the *Commandant’s Planning Guidance (CPG)*.⁸ Upon reading each of these publications it is clear that both services have called for significant changes to better prepare for and deter war with competing great powers. The Marines are moving toward deep structural shifts across all areas to be better suited for operations against near peer threats such as China.⁹ Secondly, the *CPG* makes no reference to counterinsurgency and stability operations outside of aligning 7th Marines to CENTCOM, an already existing relationship.

The *Army Vision 2028* aligns the service with President Trump’s national security priorities and calls for a major philosophic departure from the previous decade’s focus on counterinsurgency (COIN).¹⁰ Additionally, the then Secretary of the Army Mark Esper noted that the service’s heavy emphasis on irregular and asymmetric warfare created an environment where adversary nations have been able to close the military technological gap with the U.S. Furthermore, in response to this new world reality and to adhere to the NDS, Army leaders shifted budget priorities to reposition and supply the force for a high-end conflict with a great power. In terms of modernization and procurement, the 2018 Army budget prioritized the following in order of importance: long range precision fires, next generation combat vehicle, future vertical lift, network, assured positioning, navigation, and timing, air and missile defense, soldier lethality and synthetic training environment.¹¹ The above modernization priorities are in direct response to changing Chinese and Russian military capabilities. Most importantly, these

priorities are incredibly costly, so costly that they subsume over 80 percent of the Army's research and development budgets.¹² The remainder of the budget similarly allocates resources to technologically advancing army capabilities for a conventional conflict such as investing in the development of the 155mm Self-Propelled Howitzer, the Land-Based Hypersonic missile, Turbine Engine program, and an indirect fire protection capability.

The tradeoff for such steep investments in conventional military research and procurement is decreased investments in preparations for irregular warfare, and in fact Secretary Esper acknowledged that there is a level of "risk management" when it comes to irregular warfare.¹³ In reality, the Army started the process of shifting resources away from irregular warfare since the publication of the 2014 QDR. In 2015 the Army ceased to operate the Army Irregular Warfare Center (AIWC) that trained units who were set to deploy to the Middle East on COIN.¹⁴ The center was vital for providing education to leaders on the intricacies of insurgent warfare. The Army's commitment to irregular warfare, and the organizations that took on its responsibility, are also confronting significant reductions and disbandment.¹⁵

Unlike the *CPG*, the *Army Vision 2028* does make specific mention of irregular warfare, albeit in a small section. The document notes "the Army will continue to conduct irregular warfare, whether it is counterterrorism, counterinsurgency."¹⁶ Furthermore, one of the Army's lines of effort is to strengthen alliance and partnerships, and as aspect to this is host nation security force assistance. This is key because a line of effort of counterinsurgency operations in FM 3-24 is host nation military and police assistance.¹⁷ Therefore, built into the Army's strategic vision is the foundation for building a force that maintains proficiency at executing COIN and irregular warfare as the DoD enters this new phase. The Army vision, nevertheless, does not make mention as to how the force will do this, because it is clear the priority of the

Army is modernizing the service to better suited for a conflict with Russia or China. Simply mentioning irregular warfare is not sufficient to ensure the force will be properly prepared for such operations. It is imperative that the Army balance its focus on high intensity conflict with irregular warfare. The Army’s evident aversion to these operations from Vietnam to the present has created undesirable situations where individual units, while deployed, are forced to improvise in the absence of doctrine, training, and intuitional guidance.

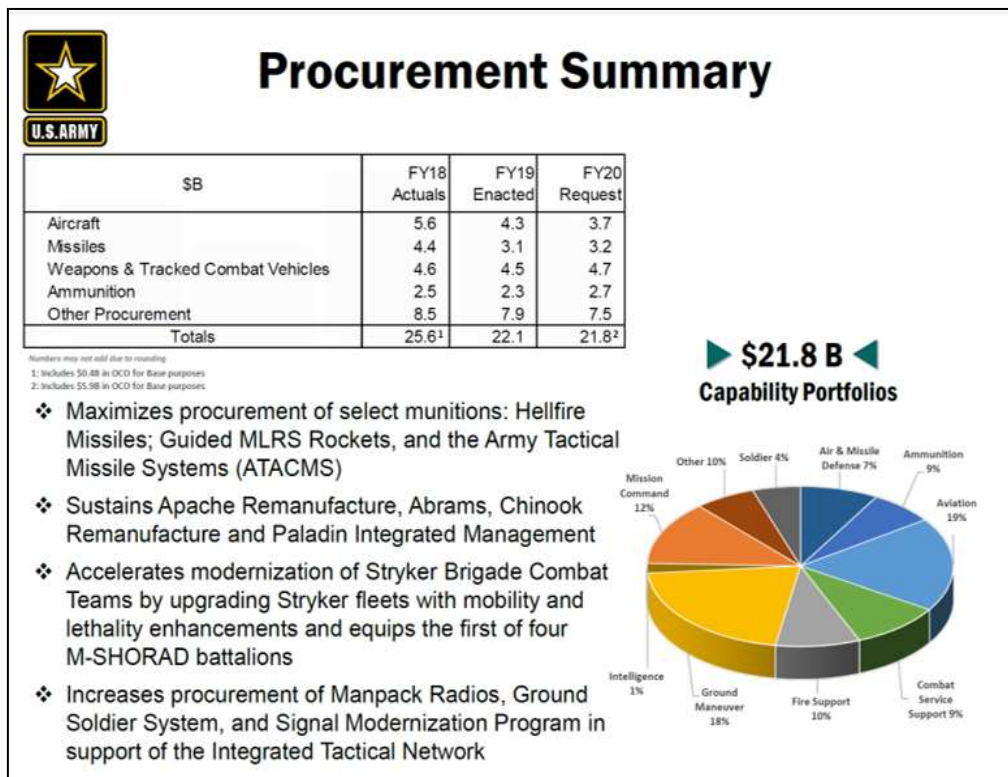


FIGURE 1

Depicted is the FY 2020 US Army procurement summary from the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Financial Management and Comptroller (ASA FM&C). This budget is approved by Army Senior Leaders to include the Chief of Staff and Secretary of the Army

The Popular Fallacies About Irregular War

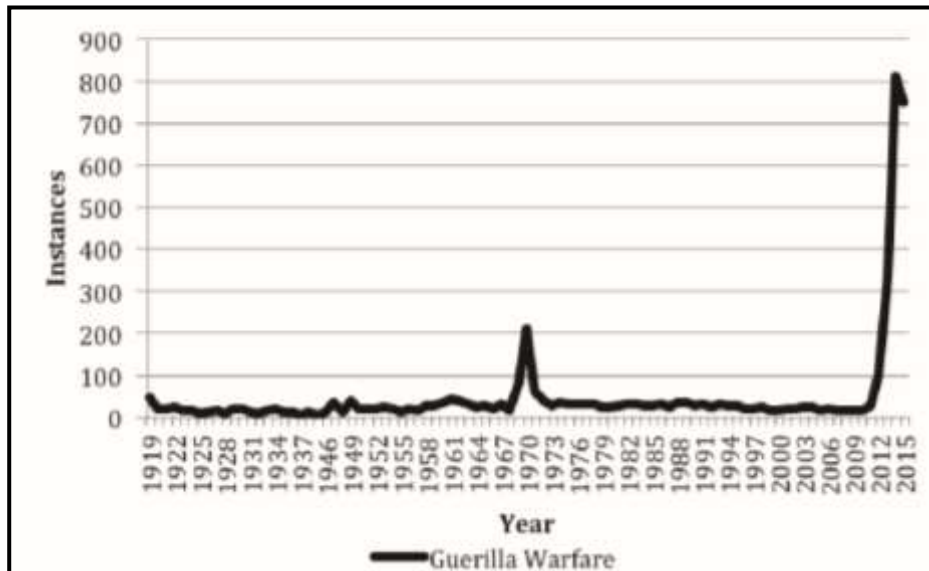
“An army that saw its raison d’etre as winning wars through the application of firepower and maneuver to annihilate enemy forces simply could not conceive of another kind of war in which its weapons, technology, and organization not only could not destroy the enemy, but usually could not even find or identify him.”¹⁹

John Nagl. Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife

The Department of Defense defines all forms of warfare that do not fit the linear conventional construct of battle as *Irregular Warfare*. DoD specifically defines irregular warfare “as a violent struggle among state and nonstate actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches.”²⁰ The doctrine goes on to state that IW is “inherently a protracted struggle that will test the resolve of our Nation.”²¹ This description however does not align with a characterization of war that is *irregular* or uncommon in reality. In fact, a review of military conflicts dating back over a thousand years would suggest that irregular warfare is in actuality the most likely or “most dominant form of warfare.”²² An examination of U.S. history and its military endeavors clearly illuminates that the American military ends up in these irregular wars far more so than the conventional type. The question then must be asked, why does the U.S. military then define this form of war as irregular? Perhaps the reason for such terminology is a reflection of U.S. military culture and desire as opposed to clearly defined reality. The following question then must be asked: does the military’s use of the term irregular war contribute to its lack of emphasis and thus poor performance in such conflicts?

Dr. John Nagl explored the concept of organizational culture in *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*. He specifically compared the British counterinsurgency mission in Malaya to the American military counterinsurgency operation in Vietnam. Nagl concluded that the organizational culture of the British, due in large part to its colonial security requirements,

fostered an environment that allowed it to learn and develop successful COIN strategy. The American military, however, developed a culture that emphasized allegiance to conventional war doctrine, and thus was slow to adapt in the face of an insurgent force.²³ He specifically notes “the history of the U.S. Army in Vietnam can be seen as the history of individuals attempting to implement changes in counterinsurgency doctrine but failing to overcome a very strong organizational culture predisposed to a conventional attrition-based doctrine.”²⁴ This American military culture that Nagl describes is directly reflected in the development of the term *irregular war*. The American military’s ideal forms of war, conventional and linear, are in reality the most uncommon and ‘irregular’ forms of conflict. This mindset was not only detrimental in Vietnam, but also in the most recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. The military has a habitual problem of grasping the limits of firepower. Today’s Army is not as insular and myopic as the Army of Vietnam, or the early years of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; nevertheless, the focus of the service is quite clear with the publication of the *Army Vision 2028*. The document emphatically states the Army’s priority is to “remain the most lethal ground combat force in history, capable of dominating any adversary on any battlefield.”²⁵ This priority, although important for the conventional battlefield, will not lead to success in a counterinsurgency operation.



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FIGUER 2

Depicted above is a chart from a Rand study on trends in warfare. The trends clearly indicate that guerilla warfare has been on a sharp rise worldwide and continues to increase since 2009. Despite this reality, the US Army's focus has shifted to preparedness for conventional warfare. The statistics, however, suggest that the Army should be more balanced if it is to be ready for conflict.

The Army's Foundational Aversion to Irregular War

The educational foundation for U.S. Army officers since the mid-19th century has its roots in the Napoleonic way of war. This largely comes from the writings of Napoleon's philosophic apostles, Carl Von Clausewitz and Antoine-Henri Jomini. Both individuals wrote following the Napoleonic campaigns, and essentially marveled at Napoleon's battlefield performances. Clausewitz's and Jomini's publications, however, were not historical accounts of battles, they were rather attempting to describe war in and of itself. In other words, they wrote about war as if its nature was a constant, in which enduring principles could be applied to force

the desirable outcome. War, according to the Napoleonic idea, could be only won be through decisive battle that results in “an overwhelming tactical decision.”²⁷ Jomini’s work, more so than Clausewitz, provided formulas for success, and the formulas were enemy focused. The formulas were specifically a framework for destroying an adversary. In fact, the Army’s principles of war were taken from an interpretation of Jomini’s work.²⁸ These works would later accompany American officers onto the battlefield, especially in the Civil War. Robert E. Lee was very much a philosophical disciple of Napoleon and Jomini, and this was never more prevalent than his attempts to seek a decisive battle with the Union army. Lee believed that the path to success was achieving a tactical victory on a battlefield away from a public.²⁹ In other words, it did not matter if the battle was an isolated event, it just needed to be successful. As Nagle and others argue, this thought process continued to dominate West Point and other Army education centers for years to come.

There is some mention of irregular war in the works of both Clausewitz and Jomini, although the exact term is not used. Clausewitz classified this form of conflict as “People’s War,” and it is quite clear that he did not prefer this method of warfare noting that “like a slow, gradual fire, it destroys the foundation of the enemy’s army.”³⁰ Jomini detested people’s war even more, writing that they were “dangerous and deplorable.”³¹ He furthermore noted that “as a soldier” he favored “loyal and chivalrous warfare to organized assassination.”³²

The attitudes of these two theorists toward insurgent warfare was formed largely through the French army’s experience during the Napoleonic Wars in Spain during the six year Peninsular campaign where the term “guerilla” would become coined.³³ In 1808, at the peak of Napoleon’s power, military leaders throughout Europe marveled at Napoleon’s brilliance for fundamentally transforming how militaries form, train, and fight. It essentially appeared as if he

developed an unbeatable military force. However, from 1809-1814, his highly trained and seasoned army would be brought to embarrassment at the hands of an army that was neither uniformed nor trained. Napoleon's forces were trained to fight and conquer armies similar to themselves, and not an insurgency. The French army was crippled and had little doctrine to reference. As opposed to attempting to win over the population, the French employed violent tactics against Spanish civilians which "only sharpened their hatred of" Napoleon's forces.³⁴ The ultimate result of the Spanish campaign was devastating to the French, and was a significant catalyst to Napoleon's downfall. Napoleon's experience in an irregular war left him and his intellectual disciples with a simple response: avoid them. The American army adopted a similar attitude towards these wars. The dislike traces back to its two most significant intellectual pillars, Clausewitz and Jomini.

When the Army Is Not Prepared

"The officer corps of the 1960s was trained to fight Russians. They envisioned massive tank and mechanized infantry battles. Forces versus force. In Vietnam every American officer dreamed of the day when the little beggars would come out and fight, but they never did." - **Charles Krohan, Army Intelligence Officer in Vietnam**³⁵

In previous U.S. wars, the Army, whether through unwillingness or ignorance, failed to provide service wide or theater wide guidance on executing COIN operations. The absence of guidance had a significant impact on the success of U.S. forces in irregular conflict such as Vietnam and Iraq. In few cases, some commander who had studied insurgencies, developed unique and successful COIN strategies. The norm, however, was commanders creating a conventional and enemy centric approach which, in many cases, exacerbated an already difficult situation. Below are examples of the of Army and theatre leadership failing to develop sound COIN strategies and the corresponding results in Vietnam and Iraq. The first example is from

General Westmoreland's tenure as commander of the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). The second and third examples are from U.S. Army operations in Iraq. These examples in Iraq review two commanders who, in the absence of guidance, develop two drastically different approaches to fighting an insurgency. The experiences of these three commanders illuminates the necessity for the Army to educate its leaders on insurgency and counterinsurgency.

Vietnam

General William Westmoreland, like the majority of his general officer peers, took part in conventional warfare in Western Europe during WWII or on the Korean peninsula in the 1950s. During WWII, Westmoreland commanded an artillery battalion in North Africa and Italy. During the Korean conflict, he commanded an infantry regiment on the peninsula against North Korean and Chinese conventional forces. Westmoreland's career, through and after these wars, was by Army standards, incredibly successful. So successful in fact that Westmoreland was the youngest to ever pin on the rank of brigadier general. He was the ideal Army officer and effectively being groomed for the highest of commands. It was this success that ultimately led to his appointment to commander of MACV in 1964.³⁶

Westmoreland's experience in WWII and Korea, where destruction of the enemy was the key to victory, led him to devise a similar strategic approach to Vietnam. Furthermore, prior to his arrival, Westmoreland never received any formal military education on irregular or insurgent warfare dating back to his time at WestPoint. The absence of education on this form of warfare is entirely an Army cultural issue, because, at this point in the 20th century, the Army was completely devoted to winning battles, largely against communists, through overwhelming power. However, what makes the military's approach, so dumbfounding is that the insurgency

in Vietnam was not a new phenomenon that began with the arrival of American troops. Arguably, communist insurgents were active and gaining strength since the 1940s, yet, the military failed to prepare its leaders and forces to counter them. Nevertheless, because a conventional enemy was present with the North Vietnamese military, Westmoreland essentially devised his plan around defeating this type of adversary.

When speaking of the military's approach, Westmoreland stated, "it is always the basic objective of military operations to seek and destroy the enemy and his military resources."³⁷ In terms of the civilian populace Westmoreland, "tended to regard the Vietnamese people more as an impediment than as a prize," which is the exact approach a military should take in attempting to defeat an insurgency.³⁸ Westmoreland's four years as the MACV commander were disastrous as he essentially fought a war of attrition and gauged success through the number of Vietnamese dead. Moreover, during his tenure, he continued to believe that the main adversary was the North Vietnamese army and not the insurgency. Because Westmoreland failed to realize the strength of the insurgency, there was never a concerted effort to develop a competent enough South Vietnamese security force to counter it which is a primary tenant of COIN operations. Westmoreland's experience in Vietnam is a lesson to the Army that an exclusive conventional approach coupled with a lack of education will result in almost certain catastrophe in this form of warfare.

Westmoreland's tenure is not an indictment of every army officer during that period, it is more a criticism of the institution for failing to educate its leaders. There were some intelligent and well-read officers who understood that the insurgency and thus the civilian populace were vital the military's success. For instance, Marine Major General Lee Walt developed the concept of the Combined Action Platoon (CAP) in 1965 during Westmoreland's command.³⁹ The CAP

was focused on securing the populace in local villages to degrade the influence of the insurgents. Secondly, Westmoreland's successor, General Creighton Abrams implemented a country wide COIN strategy that was population centric as opposed to the former approach. The overall issue, however, was the unwillingness of Army leadership to acknowledge that the insurgency was the primary adversary and to thus force the institution to change how it trained and fought. The examples above demonstrated that the Army was tactically proficient, yet, led by generals with little to no preparation for irregular warfare.

Iraq

From 2003 to 2006 Multinational Forces-Iraq (MNF-I), the command that oversaw U.S. and coalition military operations in Iraq, did not provide a coherent theater wide COIN strategy. Much like the war in Vietnam, the general officers in Iraq had "a major gap in their educations" and had little idea how to fight an insurgency.⁴⁰ This first commander of MNF-I, Lt Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, a career infantry officer who was not adept at the intricacies of COIN, failed to provide a basic strategy to the various units scattered throughout the country. The result of this was "radically different approaches taken by different Army divisions in the war. Observers moving from one part of Iraq to another often were struck by how each division was fighting its own war."⁴¹ Gen John Casey, the second commander, tried to force some change and implement COIN training in Iraq through standing up the COIN academy, a two week long crash course in Iraqi culture that proved to be ineffectual because the Army did not institutionally support such training. Furthermore, like Sanchez, Casey's overall military strategy did not coordinate success because it allowed individual commanders to devise their own approach.

When commanders, down to the brigade level, are left without doctrine and corresponding guidance they tend to do what they know how to do best, and that was fight a

conventional battle. One such example is Col Michael Steele from the 101st Airborne Division whose brigade operated in Ramadi Iraq in 2006. Col Steele's approach was enemy centric and developed the corresponding unit motto, "we give the enemy the maximum opportunity to give his life for his country."⁴² Even prior to deploying his unit, Steele emphasized violence and killing and paid no attention to learning the Iraqi culture and Arabic language. The unit seemingly had no clue or desire to focus on the populace. Upon arriving in Iraq, Steele's subordinate units began using "kill boards," harkening back to the body counts of Vietnam, which tracked the number of insurgents the Soldiers killed, and it became a competition across the brigade. Tragically, a few short months into the deployment several of his Soldiers murdered eight unarmed Iraqi men during a major operation. Although Steele was not held responsible for the murders, his overt emphasis on killing as opposed to protecting the populace revealed his overall obliviousness "to the political realities of a counterinsurgency."⁴³ One of Steele's commanders at the time, Gen Michael Oates, later said that "the story of Colonel Steele and Operation Iron Triangle is about a fundamental difference of opinion about how to prosecute the war in Iraq."⁴⁴ In other words, in the absence of strategic guidance, commander's will often resort to what they know and have been trained in.

HR McMaster was another brigade commander during the years before Gen. David Petraeus arrived. McMaster, like Steele, operated without specific guidance on how to execute a successful COIN operation. However, unlike Steele, he was educated in the history of insurgency and counterinsurgency campaigns and therefore understood the nature of his environment. He also understood the importance of educating his subordinates, and even "drew up a Counterinsurgency reading list for his officers that included T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*."⁴⁵ McMaster devised a population centric approach to the insurgent stronghold of

Tal Afar, Iraq. During his major effort, Operation Restoring Rights, McMaster had his Soldiers move into the population centers to ensure insurgents could not regain territory and influence the populace.⁴⁶ This operation later became the blueprint for future Army units once Gen. Petraeus assumed command of MNF-I. The key to McMaster's success was education, which gave him the intellectual capacity to understand a complex environment better than his fellow and superior commanders. However, at the time of McMaster's tenure in Tal Afar, his strategy was far from the norm, and just like Vietnam, this reality is an indictment on the institution for failing to provide doctrine and training for this form of warfare.

Great Power Competition Leads to Irregular Warfare

"An inability to counter U.S. military superiority has led China, Russia, and major regional powers to employ unconventional warfare to achieve their national security objectives."⁴⁷

Mike Fowler, Professor of Strategic Studies at the U.S. Air Force Academy 2019

The U.S. military will not have the luxury to avoid irregular warfare in the future. Great powers have supported and controlled insurgent groups to avoid a high-end conflict with the U.S. while simultaneously undermining its security interests. The great power adversaries of the United States will seek to counter the U.S. and achieve their goals not solely through conventional means, but rather through mostly unconventional methods. Consequently, great power competition is not an era where the U.S. can expect irregular war to be the aberration and conventional conflicts become the norm. The reality is the opposite, the frequency of irregular warfare will increase as great powers such as Russia, China, and Iran employ indirect strategies to avoid U.S. military strength.

Great Power Support to Insurgencies

Irregular warfare is an overlooked but common element in great power competition. The historical evidence shows that 70 percent of insurgencies since WWII received the backing of a

great power.⁴⁸ Furthermore, 70 percent of insurgent organizations who received state support between 1800-2005 were ultimately victorious.⁴⁹ The role great powers play goes far beyond just resource support. Great powers can provide support for a longer period than indigenous groups and can in many cases provide weapon systems that shift the nature of a war.

Furthermore, what separates the great power support from the other forms of support is the rationale. Specifically, the reasons great powers support insurgencies are geo-political and strategic in nature. Thus, great powers can be selective on which groups they support, as opposed to being compelled to support exclusively because of ethnic, religious, or ideological connections. This also allows great powers to perform actions below the threshold of direct armed conflict, while simultaneously weakening the adversary through draining their treasury and overextending their militaries. From the perspective of U.S. adversaries, who seek to avoid a conventional conflict, irregular warfare is a cost effective and lower risk form of warfare.

The Last Great Power Competition

Great powers have used insurgent organizations to achieve strategic ends throughout the world to undermine and drain their adversaries. One important example of this is the Soviet Union and U.S. rivalry during the Cold War. It is significant to analyze this period because the U.S. and Russia have once again renewed the competition between them.

Arguably the last period of great power competition for the U.S. was the Cold War, as the Soviet Union and U.S. countered power and influence across the globe. During this period, the Soviet Union was a major outside contributor to both insurgents and terrorist organizations. The Soviet's support of insurgents and other groups was "deliberate and a matter of foreign policy."⁵⁰ The Soviet Union understood the danger in engaging the U.S. military directly because of the risk and fear of nuclear war. The path, therefore, to simultaneously undermine the U.S. and

support regimes aligned with Moscow abroad was through this method of support. Support could range from the form of simple finances and training, to even complete control, and generally the motivations were geo-political in nature, and focused toward undermining and agitating the U.S. Soviet involvement in Latin American, for example, allowed them to support socialist insurgents in close proximity to the U.S., and thus bring a destabilizing scenario at the doorstep of America.

Outside of the Cold War, there are several other examples of state support to insurgencies; however, given the current day geo-political tensions between Russia and the West it is apt to study Soviet activity and apply it today. Moreover, reminiscent of the Cold War, the U.S. is making significant investments in preparation for conventional war; yet due to the threat of a nuclear war, the prospect of conventional warfare continues to be low in comparison to smaller irregular conflicts.

Russian and Chinese Behavior Today

Both China and Russia largely stayed out of the war on terror, yet “were able to sit back, watch, and innovate in a more conscious manner” as the U.S. found itself in long protracted conflicts in central Asia and the Middle East.⁵¹ Specifically, insurgent and terrorist organizations exploited a significant vulnerability of the U.S. military, its lack of preparation to fight non-uniformed guerrillas who possessed inferior firepower and technology. The most powerful conventional military in the world could not achieve its desired decisive victory. Although the U.S. military later adapted and found some success in the arena of irregular warfare, it still became a blueprint for the U.S. adversaries. Moreover, the U.S.’s great power adversaries understand that a direct conventional approach to the U.S. military would be unwise; therefore, “neither China nor Russia is pursuing a purely conventional or a solely nonconventional path;

rather, each is following both simultaneously.”⁵² In other words, Russia and China are attempting to keep the U.S. from achieving a significant advantage in any form of warfare.

In 2012, General Valery Gerasimov described a Russian strategy to undermine the West, in what is known as the Gerasimov Doctrine.⁵³ The doctrine calls for an expansion on the concept of war outside of a strictly military sense, stating “the very “rules of war” have changed. The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness.”⁵⁴ The significance of this statement is a tacit acknowledgement of Russia’s desire to avoid limiting itself to challenging the U.S. only through conventional means. The Gerasimov Doctrine is far more expansive and goes well beyond irregular war into the realm of cyber, politics, and the economy. According to Gerasimov, Russia’s fundamental objective is to foment “chaos and dissent within a disenfranchised population...while simultaneously avoiding the challenges of competing directly with the United States...[thus requiring] the development of cost-effective alternatives to...conventional military operations.”⁵⁵

There is little mystery as to how Russia will behave both diplomatically and militarily in the future given its recent conduct outside its borders. Russia’s post-Cold War behavior clearly illustrates how it plans to expand its influence through creating chaos and upheaval in the west. Its intervention in South Ossetia and the Crimea are key instances in which Russia employed a combination of irregular and conventional warfare tactics to confuse and overwhelm far weaker militaries. Additionally, in both cases, Russia backed separatists’ movements that lobbied for independence and created political upheaval in their respective countries. The Russian government subsequently used the existence of these separatist groups to justify the use of

conventional military operations. In this new era of great power competition, Russia has and will behave as it did in the Cold War.

In terms of the other great power country identified in the *NDS*, China, it has likewise displayed the propensity to avoid engaging the U.S. and its allies in conventional military tactics, and based on the behavior of Russia, it is expected that it will also strive to disrupt and degrade U.S. influence through asymmetric means. For instance, China's employment of non-uniformed militia posing as fishermen is a foreshadow to its future behavior if it encounters U.S. forces on the battlefield.⁵⁶ Furthermore, China, it is safe to assume, is not an irrational actor on the international stage and will continue to operate to ensure its survival and economic growth. This means that engaging the U.S. through conventional means is likely not a top choice of Xi Jinping.

The existence of nuclear weapons helped keep the U.S. and Soviet Union out of a direct war during the Cold War; yet deterrence also created an environment from which the U.S. became vulnerable to irregular warfare. It appears as if history is repeating itself in the modern day as both China and Russia seek an alternative means to counter the U.S.

Iran and Proxy Warfare

Perhaps no other country employs proxies to carry out its foreign policy more so than Iran. The regime has shown “that irregular warfare—including support to non-state partners—is a critical element to competing with the United States in the region.”⁵⁷ Iran's strongest military arm, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard-Quds Force (IRGC-QF), “has its roots in irregular warfare,” in which it deploys throughout the region to combat the Ayatollah's enemies as well as enhance Iranian influence and power. The IRGC-QF are particularly active in war-torn countries such as Lebanon, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq through bolstering the military capabilities of non-state

military organizations. In other words, Iran is assisting insurgents and guerillas gain conventional capabilities. In Iraq for example, where U.S. troops are currently deployed, “Iran has helped Shia militia forces in Iraq build their missile production capabilities,” creating a deadlier obstacle for U.S. forces. Iran, like other U.S. adversaries, has avoided directed military conflict with U.S. forces choosing to rather increase the lethality of irregular forces to combat them.

The Dangers of Failing to Prepare for Irregular War

“In the end, they didn’t, they couldn’t, change—at least in the way they intended to change—the American way of war.”⁵⁸

Fred Kaplan. *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*

Because great power competition does not erase the prevalence and need to defend against irregular warfare, it is vital for the U.S. military to institutionalize its capacity for irregular warfare, just as it does for conventional warfare. This will require a deliberate balancing of the education, training, and focus of U.S. military leaders for both conventional and irregular warfare. There are some who argue that the U.S. military should simply focus on the existential threat, which is the conventional threat from a nuclear power, because “civilian leaders shouldn’t expect their militaries to be “jack of all trades” organizations.”⁵⁹ This line of thinking erroneously presumes the U.S. can decide which type of conflict it wants to enter. This type of reasoning is also dangerous and ignores U.S. history as well as the realities of global dynamics. Therefore, the U.S. can no longer assume that proficiency in the former will be “good enough” for success in the latter. Professional military education (PME) must adapt and properly teach the different skills necessary to avoid defeat in irregular warfare.

In *The American Way of War*, military historian Russell Weigley contends that the U.S. military, due in large part to history and culture, has two distinct method of waging warfare,

annihilation and attrition. He notes that a strategy of annihilation “seeks to overthrow the enemy’s military power” through overwhelming firepower.⁶⁰ Wiegley went on to state that if the military, by circumstance, cannot annihilate the enemy then it must attrite it through eroding the enemy’s ability to fight. What’s common in both methods, annihilation and attrition, is the singular focus on the adversary. Thus, U.S. conventional warfare, is enemy centric in which commanders mass firepower upon the adversary to attain the desired outcome.

The primary focus of a counterinsurgency operation, however, is profoundly different from that of a conventional conflict, where the destruction of the adversary is not the principle objective. *The Counterinsurgency Field Manual FM 3-24* states, “the field manual direct U.S. forces to make securing the civilian rather than destroying the enemy their top priority.”⁶¹ The very notion that protection rather than destruction is the aim of a military is a significant departure from common U.S. military doctrine. This is not to say that killing or capturing the enemy is not important in this form of warfare, but it is not the commander’s focus. In terms of the COIN lines of effort, the enemy is only encompassing one line, where the population and host nation security forces make up the other lines.

Therefore, given these two forms of warfare and their completely different focal points, the U.S. military cannot expect that the doctrine and training for one will also lead to proficiency in the other. Each requires its own expertise. In fact, the COIN field manual specifically points to the fallacy of this notion stating, “conventional success ... may be of limited utility or even counterproductive in COIN operations.”⁶² The disastrous consequence of entering a war with the wrong tactics and strategy does not have to be imagined. The U.S. military experience in Vietnam and Iraq illustrate just how badly a campaign can awry when the force is not postured, structured, educated, and prepared to fight an insurgency.

Recommendations to the Army

“The Army of today resembles the Army of the 1970s, which turned away from Vietnam and refocused on conventional warfare skills. The problem with this, of course, is that it is more likely to be dispatched to fight messy small wars than conventional state-on-state battles featuring tanks and fighter aircraft.”⁶³

Tom Ricks. *The Generals*

The Army should be better postured for COIN operations through institutionalizing competency at irregular warfare across the force. The idea of institutionalizing means the Army investing time and resources in how its manned, trained, and equipped to gain and maintain competency at this form of conflict, as opposed to only doing so when the Army finds itself in such a war. Although irregular warfare is considered a core capability of the Special Operations Forces (SOF) community, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations recently noted “successful irregular warfare in competition short of armed conflict and against high-threat violent extremist organizations will continue to require support across the entire Joint Force.”⁶⁴ This statement should be of no surprise in light of the heavy COIN burden placed upon non SOF units in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Special operations units are the military’s foremost experts on COIN and other IW missions such as counterterrorism. They provide a fantastic capability for the combatant commanders in their ability to operate in austere and contested environments with a minimal footprint. For example, special operations were profoundly important to the U.S. mission in Syria to identify, train, and equip anti-ISIS fighters in a complex and fragile setting.⁶⁵ These units can also provide non-SOF units with important instruction on COIN and advising to include contributions to doctrine and training exercises. Nevertheless, special operations, while a vital asset, cannot be the main arm for large scale IW and COIN operations. For example, Congressman James Langevin stated in House Armed Services Committee hearing on

institutionalizing IW, “we have learned, or rather relearned, the hard way that these conflicts are not just for Special Operations Forces, but really require the entire General Purpose Force working jointly with the interagency if we are to be successful.”⁶⁶ Therefore, the Army cannot simply assign all IW mission sets to its Special Forces units, but it can leverage these units for their expertise to ensure the remainder of the service is proficient.

Improving Army Talent, Education and Training for Irregular War

The first recommendation concerns the Army’s Security Force Assistance Brigade’s (SFAB) and maximizing their effectiveness through investments in training and top talent. The second recommendation concerns professional military education (PME) and particularly ensuring leaders are well read in the history of insurgencies and counterinsurgency campaigns. As noted in a previous section, Army leaders have been habitually ill prepared for irregular and insurgent warfare due in large part to a lack of institutional education and emphasis. This should include adding other key works on irregular warfare to the Army Chief of Staff’s Professional Reading List. Another recommendation is to establish an irregular warfare training center like the now defunct Army Irregular Warfare Center (AIWC), yet more robust. The final proposal concerns Army Combat Training Center (CTCs), and to specifically balance the training scenarios between conventional and irregular warfare.

Security Force Assistance Brigade (SFAB) and Investing in Talent (Manning)

In 2017 the Army announced the creation of the SFAB, which was designed to reduce the burden of host nation security force advising on conventional forces.⁶⁷ This was a great step towards the Army institutionalizing a major line of effort for a Counterinsurgency operation, security force advising. As of mid-2020, the Army has deployed two SFABs to Afghanistan and

is preparing to send one to Africa to provide much needed training and advising to these respective security forces.⁶⁸ However, a recent Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report identified challenges that the SFABs face in terms of proper talent management. The report specifically noted, the “U.S. Army continues to struggle with staffing these units with the required number of skilled personnel, and with keeping personnel assigned to these units long enough to create enduring partnerships with a foreign force.”⁶⁹ The Army needs to properly resource these units and invest the time for the proper talent to optimize its employment for irregular warfare. One possible method is for the Army to provide an Additional Skill Identifier (ASI) to Soldiers who have previously advised host nation security forces. A Soldier with this ASI will be easily identified as service member who has trained, advised, and assisted foreign military and police, and can conduct the same mission in the future. Furthermore, these Soldiers will also be able to provide vital input and assistance when assigned to non-advisor units. In other words, they will be the subject matter experts on advising when operating in a conventional unit.

Additionally, the SFAB’s proficiency at this crucial COIN competency should continue to be a top priority of Army leaders; however, there are indicators that the mission set could change. A former SFAB commander stated, “the scope of what an SFAB does, will change as it aligns with the National Defense Strategy of near-peer competition.”⁷⁰ Although it is important for the SFABs to support the Army’s missions to counter great powers, it is likewise important that the units be a major component of the Army’s ability to balance proficiency at irregular warfare.

The Army should also consider the development of a Counterinsurgent ASI, that identifies Soldiers who have not only operated in COIN environments but led small and

large units in them.⁷¹ This will create a data base for the Army to identify personnel who understand the complexities of COIN and can provide a certain level of expertise for the Army's ongoing and next COIN missions. The Army will additionally be able to place these personnel in significant positions for future operations. This will also help prevent leaders, who do not have the proper experience, being elevated to positions for which they are not ready.

Education

*"Our military has traditionally relied on education in times of uncertainty to develop an understanding of the future security environment, lead adaptation and ensure readiness to face future, unknown challenges."*⁷²

Gen Martin Dempsey

The Army published its updated Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24) in 2006, right before Gen Petraeus introduced his new COIN strategy in Iraq. The publication of the manual was a significant moment for the Army and contributed to some successes during the surge period in Iraq. However, the COIN manual is not analogous to other army field manuals in that the complexities of insurgencies do not allow for timeless principles to be applied to each insurgency. In fact, HR McMaster, a contributor to the manual's production, noted "there can be no textbook on insurgency."⁷³ Thus "if a solution is successful in one counterinsurgency, it may be unsuccessful in another, possibly because of intervening variables."⁷⁴ In other words, there is no formula for a COIN operation, because populations, cultures, political dynamics and the fighters all vary in each operating environment. Hence, merely reading the COIN manual is not enough to prepare units for an insurgency, and the Army must ensure its leaders have the critical thinking skills along with the historical background to be best prepared for a COIN mission. While the publication of the 2006 COIN manual was a step forward for the U.S. Army's

understanding of irregular warfare, it is not sufficient preparation for new generations of Army leadership.

Based off the Army's priority to prepare for high intensity conflict, it cannot be expected that every unit conduct realistic COIN exercises to the level of conventional war training. As mentioned previously, there are significantly different competencies involved with each form of warfare that necessitate different methods of preparation. Budget constraints are a significant factor as well given the Army's heavy investments in procurements in conventional war weaponry and other technological systems. Because of this fiscal and political reality, the Army must rely on a different method to ensure its officers and non-commissioned officers are competent when faced with an insurgency.

Education may be the most cost-effective and valuable methods to prepare Army leaders for the next irregular conflict. In fact, Secretary of Defense Mattis testified to Congress that "it's mostly training and it's mostly education that allows us to keep counterinsurgency inside the great power competition force that we are composing."⁷⁵ Throughout recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, some senior leaders were ignorant of their cultural and historical surroundings, and how the populations, not the enemy, were the key component of the operations. These leaders desperately tried to employ conventional tactics on an unconventional enemy. This lack of knowledge led to squandered years and many needless deaths. The Army cannot do what it did after Vietnam in which "leaders attempted to erase it (COIN) from the institution's core doctrine by drastically reducing the relevant classes and courses".⁷⁶

To the Army's credit it did restructure much of its PME to include COIN during the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. However, it had to do so because the Army largely abandoned such training and education after it pivoted towards conventional war in the wake of

Vietnam. Although not completely stricken from the curriculum at many Army PME schools, COIN has since been superseded by preparation for conventional conflict. For example, at the Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC), the school has “adjusted its course to provide the Army with educated officers ready to shape, prevent, and prevail in large-scale ground combat.”⁷⁷ Furthermore, the school’s planning exercises have likewise “shifted to a decisive action training environment with a European focus.”⁷⁸ At other schools, such as the Army’s Military Police Captains Career Course, COIN is no longer in the curriculum as its efforts have shifted all to training for conventional conflict.⁷⁹

The Army needs to reform its education to better institutionalize its previous experience in irregular warfare and improve the preparation of its leaders for irregular conflicts in its future. Even in an era of great power competition, the Army needs to retain both its conventional and irregular warfare capabilities. Colin Gray agrees that,

The United States has a rich and extensive history of experience with irregular enemies. Moreover, that experience was by no means entirely negative. The trouble was and, until very recently, has remained, that such varied experience of irregular warfare was never embraced and adopted by the Army as the basis for the development of doctrine for a core competency. Rephrased, the Army improvised and waged irregular warfare, sometimes just regular war against irregulars, when it had to. But that task was always viewed officially as a regrettable diversion from preparation for “real war.” Real war, of course, meant war against regular peers, the kind of war that Europeans waged against each other.⁸⁰

Consequently, the Army must provide formal education to leaders down to the Lieutenant level at basic courses on insurgencies, that “must emphasize the “how” to think, to understand the differences and similarities between the two environments (conventional and irregular) and to apply the right approach in the right context at the right time.”⁸¹ The education should additionally place importance on how insurgencies begin and historical military campaigns against insurgencies. In an essay examining *Counterinsurgency and Professional Military Education*, Mark Moyar argued that, “successful COIN exercises and seminars demand selecting the right readings. Some theoretical and historical works stimulate much more thought and generate many more ideas than others.”⁸²

These readings at Army PME schools should be mandatory starting at the Basic Officer Leader Courses, where Lieutenants first come into the service, and then continued at each subsequent professional military course at the Captains Career Course, Command and General Staff College, and the War College. The academic rigor of the readings and lectures must expand with rank. For example, company grade officers should be required to read works such as John Nagl’s *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* and *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* by TE Lawrence, the famed British officer who helped foster Arab resistance against Turkey during the First World War. These pieces provide young leaders with strong tenets of insurgent warfare and provide historical accounts of where militaries failed and succeeded. Junior leaders should additionally receive instruction on U.S. Army operations in the American Indian Wars and focus specifically on commanders who developed more effective tactics in the face of an unconventional force. This will also reinforce the reality that irregular warfare is not a new phenomenon and has been the experience of the U.S. Army since the late 18th century.⁸³ These junior leaders should then be presented with irregular warfare-based field problems where they

must understand the cultural and societal intricacies within their area of operations in order to gain success. They must understand that people are an essential element of the battlefield.

Another educational improvement would be to revise the Army Chief of Staff's professional reading list. While the reading list is vast, totaling in over one hundred books, it would be strengthened with additional works about conventional militaries battling irregular forces. Given the high probability that the Army will once again enter such a conflict, I have recommended the following three books to be added to the list:

Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present by Max Boot: This book provides an extensive history of guerilla warfare and how conventional armies developed strategies to fight these forces. The book clearly shows that irregular warfare is the most common form of warfare as opposed to conventional conflicts.

Counterinsurgency Warfare by David Galula: The COIN field manual makes several references to Galula's experience and writings about his time as a French officer fighting Algerian guerrillas. Furthermore, most of the principles of FM 3-24 are garnered directly from this book. The COIN manual can only be understood if one reads Galula's publication first.

No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress In the Vietnam War by Gregory Daddis: The book describes how the Army, faced with a new kind of enemy and complex problem set, created a strategy ill fit for the war that only worsened the situation. It further goes on to describe the myriad of ways the Army tried to measure success but ultimately failed to develop a mechanism to measure effectiveness for a COIN operation.

Senior leaders should be mandated to read extensively on topics to include the British experience in the Malay such as *War of the Running Dogs: Malay, 1948-1969*, the *Pentagon*

Papers, accounts of Mao's movement, the French failures in Indochina and Algeria, and various other historical accounts of insurgencies as to better understand the failures at both the military and civilian levels. This will provide Army senior leaders with an extensive history of insurgent warfare and how militaries devised strategies to counter them. These senior leaders will be better postured to devise more effective strategies in complex population centric environments as they command at the operational and strategic levels. General Peter Bayer admitted to Congress, "in the Army, we still have work to do. One of our lessons learned is, to enable soldiers to effectively operate in the environments we have the last decade, which are center mass of the IW spectrum."⁸⁴

Army Irregular Warfare Training Center/Combat Training Center Re-balance

As noted earlier, the Army closed the Army Irregular Warfare Center (AIWC) in 2015 to refocus the Army on the high-end conventional fight as part of the shift to the Pacific. Although the Peace Keeping and Stability Operations Institute (PKSOI) at the Army War College provides some great research on humanitarian missions and IW, it does not offer the robust capability needed to support all Army units on preparing for the asymmetric fight, such as providing expert trainers through Mobile Training Teams (MTT) or assisting commanders with home station training on IW. The new Army Irregular Warfare Training Center should do just that, help train units. The trained units should not only include SFABs but other units scheduled to deploy to the Middle East and other unstable regions. To do this, the center should be staffed with officers and NCOs with exemplary records who participated in COIN operations in Iraq or Afghanistan to provide contemporary insight and assist future Army units as they train. Secondly, academia should also be heavily involved in both instruction, research, doctrine development, and cultural training. The inclusion of academia, like political scientists and historians, is key because they

will be able to provide crucial input on the trends of current insurgencies across the world as well as historic insurgent and counterinsurgent strategies. This institution should additionally participate in developing irregular warfare training scenarios for the Army Combat Training Centers (CTC) rotations at Fort Irwin, CA and Fort Polk, LA. These rotations are “the primary tools to build and sustain unit readiness.”⁸⁵

This leads directly into the next recommendation: make the CTC training scenarios more balanced between conventional and irregular warfare. These CTCs are the Army’s premier training events and give the service’s leaders insight into a unit’s capabilities and readiness. At the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the CTCs developed specific “COIN rotations,” based out of necessity and recognizing the reality that the Army was not prepared for type of conflict. To the Army’s credit, these rotations made great efforts to replicate the complex environments in Iraq and Afghanistan with cultural role players combined with realistic scenarios that challenged Soldiers who were set to operate on these intricate battlefields.⁸⁶

However, since 2014, the Army has been transitioning CTC’s away from irregular warfare. As a result of the Secretary of the Army’s guidance to prepare for high intensity conflict, the CTCs now focus primarily on preparing units to fight a near peer adversary, with limited irregular war training injects. These rotations are classified as “decisive action training environments,” where the training unit’s goal is to quickly defeat an adversary and depart.⁸⁷ The current NTC mission statement still includes its role in preparing Army units for “complex, hybrid threats,” but the Army’s Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) in Fort Polk, LA has already shifted its mission to training “brigade combat teams to conduct large scale combat operations on the decisive action battlefield against a near-peer threat.”⁸⁸ This suggests that the current construct of the CTCs leaves some units unprepared for the most likely conflict. Instead,

units are preparing for the least probable form of war, conventional warfare. Furthermore, if the Army continues this trend, it will again inevitably be forced to re-shape the CTCs for irregular warfare because its units were unprepared. In order to maintain effectiveness at IW, the Army should consider sending units to both decisive action and IW rotations. If cost constraints prevent this, then the CTC scenarios should have significant IW injects that challenge unit leaders. These unit leaders will therefore be able to apply their PME to the training areas, and then, if need be, to the battlefield.

The Importance of Deterring Near Peer Adversaries

This study is not arguing that the U.S. should avoid improving the conventional warfare capabilities of the U.S. On the contrary, it is important for the Army to follow the guidance from the NDS and address the growing conventional threats from China and Russia. In terms of China, it has grown increasingly more aggressive not only threatening U.S. allies and disrupting the freedom of navigation in the region, but also pursuing major advancements in defense, cyber, and AI to include weaponizing the other domains such as space “through the development of directed-energy weapons.”⁸⁹ Secretary of Defense Esper, while giving remarks at the 2020 Munich Defense Conference, stated the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) is “increasingly operating in theaters outside its borders, including Europe, and seeking advantage by any means, and at any cost.”⁹⁰

Russia, in a similar fashion, has threatened its European neighbors and “has proven it is willing to use military force to achieve its aims.”⁹¹ While testifying to Congress, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, Eurasia, Michael Carpenter, stated “if we do not check Russian aggression with more forceful measures now, we will end up dealing with

many more crises and conflicts, spending billions of dollars more on the defense of our European allies, and potentially seeing our vision of a Europe whole and free undermined.”⁹²

This study agrees with the need for more attention to great power competition, but it argues that while doing so, the U.S. should not abandon its hard-earned skills and experience in irregular warfare because they will continue to be needed in this era. If adversaries such as China and Russia are increasing their conventional warfare capabilities, while also expanding their use of irregular warfare against the U.S. and its allies and partners, the U.S. Army must also be skilled at doing both. Institutionalizing the Army’s understanding of irregular warfare is a cost-effective way to avoid being vulnerable to the most frequent form of warfare.

Conclusion

“American armed forces might once again find themselves in an insurgency war. It had happened at least once each generation, and rarely by design.”⁹³

Fred Kaplan. *The Insurgents: David Petraeus and the Plot to Change the American Way of War*

The Army cannot confuse the priorities of the NDS to mean that it no longer needs proficiency in irregular warfare. The new era of Great Power Competition can confuse policy makers into believing that the COIN lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan are not relevant, because the days of major conventional battles are back. This is the most dangerous course of action that deserves a high priority, but it is also less likely because Russia, China, Iran, and other adversaries, have all prioritized countering the U.S. through irregular and limited war. Thus, the Army needs to balance its preparation for both conventional and unconventional warfare. If the Army focuses solely on developing superior firepower and technology, it will again be unprepared for the irregular conflicts of the future. As Congressman Mac Thornberry warned, “the odds are that we are going to be involved in some form of irregular warfare in the future, just as we always have been in the past. We have learned or relearned much about it in the last

decade at a tremendous cost of blood and treasure. It would be incredibly shortsighted of us not to ensure that those lessons are taught, and ingrained, and applied going forward.”⁹⁴

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