

Counterinsurgency Operations: Mission Impossible

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Much of the current debate on what went wrong in Iraq is focused on tactical errors, deficiencies in military force structure and training, and errors made by the "Coalition Provisional Authority." The Army has revised its COIN doctrine and has swung the pendulum back toward configuring the force for this kind of warfare. This is a mistake; the kinds of wars we have fought in Vietnam and Iraq cannot be won by U.S. combat forces.

The most recent strategy for "winning" Iraq is to "surge" military strength in key areas so that we can turn the "hold and build" function over to the Iraqi forces. This is reminiscent of the mid-60s plan to "pacify" Vietnam before turning the counterinsurgency effort over to the Vietnamese. This strategy was developed in the 1965 Army study "Pacification, Republic of Vietnam" (PROVN), which recommended that we deploy combat units to "pacify" the country and then turn it over to the Vietnamese. Recognizing that the central problem was political, the study emphasized nation-building as an essential component of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations.

General Harold K. Johnson, the Army Chief of Staff, ordered a series of staff studies and personnel actions to implement the recommendations of the PROVN study. Three major staff studies in 1967-68 had similar themes. They emphasized that these kinds of conflict were first and foremost political battles that competed for the loyalties of the people. A central goal of COIN operations was to shrink the human sea supportive of the insurgents. While security for the people is essential, military force must avoid over reaction that will alienate the people. The studies argued against the use of U.S. combat forces to conduct COIN. This was one of the few recommendations rejected by General Johnson. Rather, the studies said, emphasis should be on the use of highly skilled advisors knowledgeable of the culture and nation-building techniques. Military and police functions should be done by indigenous forces.

The first study, Psyop-Reason, called for a military cadre of "social engineers" who knew how to build institutions and a sense of nationhood among the people to give legitimacy to the government. The Army leadership initially rejected the recommendations for such personnel, stating that such activities should be left to U.S. civilian agencies such as State, AID, and USIA. After the two succeeding studies, the Secretary of the Army accepted the notion, but directed that the studies be kept within the Army to avoid a turf war with civilian agencies. The new Civil Affairs doctrine set forth in FM 41-10 (1967) warned our "nation-builders" to avoid trying to make other nations in our own image, either politically, economic, or social.

A new career field termed "Overseas Security Operations" (Later changed to "Military Advisor Officer Program," (MAOP)) was created to prepare officers as "experts" in COIN operations. This new career field rolled up the Foreign Area Specialist Training (FAST) program with nation-building skills so that these officers could provide the necessary skills as advisors to U.S. commanders and indigenous officials. Most of these officers were to be reservists, available to augment active forces depending on the area of operations. General Johnson had envisioned this program to have about 6,000 members, but this never reached fruition.

In spite of these measures to enhance the military's COIN capabilities, the Vietnam effort failed. While many factors went into this failure, the pattern of events has a remarkable resemblance to those occurring in Iraq. We were unable to form an indigenous government to our satisfaction, the indigenous forces lacked the motivation to "stand up," and tactical victories failed to change the strategic goal of forming a "free and stable government." Some argue that we lost only because we lost our political will and suspended funding for Vietnam. Most reject that conclusion.

There were numerous historical examples to warn against this venture. The French had failed in their effort to maintain their Indo-China colonial empire and later failed in Algeria. The British faced insurgencies in their colonies and resolved most of them through diplomacy. The COIN war in Malaysia is often cited as a success, but most analysts recognize a basic difference in this case study when applied to the American intervention in Vietnam. The British were well established in Malaysia, most of the COIN forces were indigenous, and the insurgents were an ethnic minority.

The bitter experience in Iraq has once again opened the debate about the wisdom of the post-Vietnam policy of configuring and training forces for conventional warfare at the expense of a COIN capability. Critics of that "conventional war" emphasis argue that military strategy, and force structure and training to execute that strategy, should emphasize the most likely employment of force in the 21st century-counterinsurgency. Much of the criticism has focused on how the military has forgotten the "lessons" of Vietnam and other counterinsurgency operations of the

past in its conduct of the war in Iraq. The general consensus seems to be that the Iraq venture has failed because of the execution rather than national security strategy that led to the decision to go to war.

Contrary to the argument that the problems in Iraq are due to poor execution, the evidence is overwhelming that wars such as Vietnam and Iraq, where there is a broad-based, highly motivated indigenous insurgency, cannot be won by foreign military forces regardless of their structure, training, and size—due to several factors.

The nature of modern insurgencies presents various obstacles for successful COIN conducted by foreign combat units. Whether the combat be in rural or urban areas, insurgents operate by embedding themselves in the "human sea." It is impossible to use force without some "collateral damage" to innocent people, including women and children. Such damage is not easily swept aside by explanations of good intentions. The extensive use of artillery, bombs, and other high tech weapons increases the collateral damage.

In addition to the unintentional collateral damage, there will be atrocities regardless of how well the troops are trained and led. The frustration from seeing one's comrades led into ambushes or passively allowing such can eat at discipline. Such events have been well-documented for Vietnam and Iraq. There were hundreds of convictions of U.S. military personnel in the Vietnam War and this does not include the assassinations under the Phoenix program and the uncounted number of innocents killed in "free fire zones." I am not placing a moral judgment on the military who commit the latter atrocities because they are sanctioned by policy. As noted below, however, they will become known throughout the world.

In all the various Army studies of the Vietnam era cited above, the use of torture was condemned. It occurred in Vietnam, but it was against doctrine. The revelation of widespread torture of prisoners in Cuba, Iraq, and Afghanistan justifiably shocked the world community, including the American people. The stark photos of the degradation of the prisoners left little need for words to convey the implications for world opinion. The damage to our moral standing in the world—and support for our "war against terrorism"—was profound. Evidence that the policy was approved in the White House has exacerbated the damage.

An essential condition for fighting wars is the support of the American public. Support is difficult to obtain for the long term unless there is a "clear and present danger." The original rationale for the Vietnam war was that it was necessary to halt the spread of Communism; there would be a domino effect if we did not draw the line in Vietnam. This rather vague threat was enhanced by the "Tonkin Gulf" incident. Evidence shows that this was a ruse, but it was used successfully to get a congressional resolution to send in combat units. The scare tactics of the WMD ("mushroom clouds over Manhattan") and Al Qaeda ties were similarly used by President Bush to rally support for the Iraq War. When wars are prolonged and costly, it is difficult to maintain public support, particularly if the stated threat appears to be bogus.

Historically, criticism of foreign policy, especially during wartime, was supposed to stop at the water's edge. Support of foreign policy by members of Congress was a patriotic duty once a decision had been made through the interaction of Congress and the Executive Branch. We also expected the media to support policy when it involved war. Public criticism by senior military officers, active or retired, was taboo. For these conditions to hold, the administration conducting the war must have credibility; the Bush administration has lost that credibility.

Modern communication techniques assure that collateral damage, atrocities, and torture will be known throughout the world, undermining our moral stature, one of the most unappreciated components of national power. One can rail against the media for exposing these acts; this is a moot point—the media will publicize them! A democracy can function only if the public is informed.

COIN operations have little chance of success if the U.S. role is perceived to be to further imperial hegemony (Colonialism Lite?). While it is natural to expect that we will support regimes that further our national interests, our current national security strategy invites skepticism about the purity of our motives. Underlying this strategy is the assumption that we have universal economic and political values that the world wants, and that we have a moral obligation to remake the world in our image. This does not provide a sound basis for COIN operations in many parts of the world.

In the final analysis, success in these kinds of military operations must be measured by their impact on the overall security of the United States. Both the Vietnam and Iraqi Wars have been counterproductive to our national interests. There is almost unanimous agreement that the Iraq war has seriously damaged our war on terrorism and has eroded our stature in international affairs. The near universal sympathy after 9-11 quickly dissipated after our invasion of Iraq. Along with the perception by most of the world of our one-sided support of Israel, the Iraq War is cited as the principal reasons for animosity to the U.S. role in international affairs.

The world-wide network of terrorists, like the insurgents fighting COIN forces, depends on a friendly sea of supporters. We cannot win that war unless we shrink that sea. In this war of ideas, we are losing badly. The Iraq War has flooded that sea, pushing millions into the support base of the terrorists as well as furnishing recruits for their ranks. "Winning" cannot be defined solely by what happens inside Iraq; it must include the broader context of national security.

The central lesson for the American people and our military leaders is: don't let our political leaders put our military forces in this kind of situation again. If there are circumstance where genuine national interests dictate that we help a country put down an insurgency, then do it with advisory teams of highly skilled advisors. The Pentagon leadership needs to avoid swinging the pendulum back too far in configuring our forces to perform a constabulary function.