INFORMING COUNTERINSURGENCY: HOW HISTORY AND EXPERIENCE ARE SHAPING THE U.S. WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

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Introduction

The American war in Afghanistan is the most significant foreign policy challenge facing the Obama administration. If the invasion and subsequent war in Iraq defined George W. Bush’s presidency, the war in Afghanistan appears poised to do the same for his democratic successor. This is the war President Obama has referred to as a good war, a war that is “fundamental to the defense of our people… a war of necessity.”1 Far from distancing himself from the responsibility of handling and fighting this conflict, President Obama and his national security team have embraced the challenge of fighting what has become a counterinsurgency campaign, stating in his March 2009 White Paper, “Our counter-insurgency strategy must integrate population security with building effective local governance and economic development. We will establish the security needed to provide space and time for stabilization and reconstruction activities.”2

Producing stunning military victories with spectacular speed and efficiency will not be the source of President Obama’s challenge in South Asia. The American military has demonstrated this most recently in Afghanistan in 2001 and 2002 with the toppling of the Taliban and again in 2003 when the American-led coalition swept away Saddam

Hussein’s military defenses in a matter of weeks. The difficulty of fighting a counterinsurgency war is not new to the United States or to great powers throughout history. However, the United States has often failed to match its doctrine and strategy to meet the unique threats presented by an insurgent enemy or to learn the lessons of previous campaigns. This paper will attempt to establish a basic understanding of sound counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine, examine past American involvement in COIN operations and the lessons learned from those experiences, and finally identify if those lessons have been learned by the current generation’s military and, if so, how those lessons apply to the ongoing war in Afghanistan.

Since the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq were begun, and particularly since General David Petraeus’s successful counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq that began in 2007, volumes have been written on counterinsurgency. From military officers and practitioners recounting their first-hand experiences of combat to academics producing and debating theory, insights continue to be produced at a record pace. Professional academic journals, such as the U.S. Marine Corps’ Marine Corps Gazette and the Army War College’s Parameters, produce short, concise, well-written articles meant to be read and absorbed by peers who are serving in the same or similar operating environment. In addition, volumes have been written on the trajectory of international foreign policy, the long war on terror, the development of warfare over the centuries, and the affect these

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tectonic shifts have had on global diplomacy. Superb examples of such sweeping works include Parag Khana’s historical survey of the trajectory of international diplomacy in the twenty-first century, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, or Thomas X. Hammes’ overview of the development of warfare from the Napoleonic era to the streets of Iraq in *The Sling and the Stone: On Warfare in the 21st Century*.

However, in this author’s view, too little has been written on the direct connection between the specific history of counterinsurgency, and particularly America’s role in that history, and how that bears on the current situation in Afghanistan. Instead of rehashing history and blindly regurgitating past lessons learned that may or may not be relevant, this paper seeks to utilize history as a tool to pick out the applicable lessons of experience and study so that these prescient ideas are not obscured or lost in a sea of true, but irrelevant theories and observations.

To continue setting the context for this work, the war in Afghanistan has become one of our nation’s longest wars, with no end presently in sight. This remote and landlocked country is situated in some of the most forbidding terrain on earth. Its population is comprised of widely dispersed and isolated family and tribal units that may remain in the same valley their entire lives, with little or not interactions with the outside world. Any form of centralized government in this territory has proven elusive since the time of Alexander the Great, a trend consistent with the existing government of Afghanistan poor performance, ranked 172 out of 180 countries in the world in corruption
and ineffectiveness.\textsuperscript{4} Illiteracy is the norm.\textsuperscript{5} Outsiders are distrusted.\textsuperscript{6} Afghanistan has proven to be an almost perfect incubator for the insurgency that has been growing since America’s focus shifted to Iraq in the spring of 2003 from the focused and successful ousting of the Taliban regime following the attacks of September 11, 2001.\textsuperscript{7} The Taliban’s politically and ideologically motivated campaign of violence and coercion executed in pursuit of a fundamental shift in the political system of the country is the very definition of an insurgency, and the nature of this insurgent threat will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

As if fighting a committed insurgency that provides shelter and assistance to Al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremists wasn’t difficult enough, the majority of those insurgents that America and her NATO allies are fighting, particularly the organization’s leadership, reside across the border in Pakistan where coalition forces are prohibited from pursuing. Some estimates have ninety percent of the total Taliban and al-Qaeda contingent residing across the border in Pakistan.\textsuperscript{8} This presence of Islamist extremists in an unstable country that possesses nuclear weapons produces yet another layer of difficulty and complexity for America’s mission there.


\textsuperscript{7} Rumsfeld, \textit{Foreign Affairs}, 21.

\textsuperscript{8} David Kilcullen, \textit{The Accidental Guerilla} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 47.
Given this difficult and infinitely complex situation, the debate over how to
dismantle and combat the Taliban in Afghanistan, along with their associated extremist
associates in Afghanistan and Pakistan, continues even today. Some, like Richard Haass,
Gian Gentile, and Vice President Joseph Biden, assert that the best way to degrade the
Taliban is by killing and capturing extremist leaders in Afghanistan with small
contingents of special forces and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) while focusing
financial and political aid to the government of Pakistan. Colonel Gian Gentile, an active
duty Army officer asserts that “perhaps the way ahead in Afghanistan, at least the
immediate way ahead to stabilize the situation is to not focus on hearts and minds but in
killing the enemy.” This position certainly holds merit, particularly in the eyes of
politicians and policy makers who must not only convince themselves of the efficacy of
combating the Taliban and al-Qaeda half a world away, but must also make the case to a
war-weary public, a public whose patience in Afghanistan is growing increasingly short,
especially in light of the significant troop reductions in Iraq.

On the other side of the debate stand the majority of the nation’s top military
officers and various policy advisors, including Admiral Michael G. Mullen, the Chairman
of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General David Petraeus, Commander of U.S. Central
Command, and General Stanley A. McChrystal, Commander of NATO’s International

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10 Gian Gentile, “Gaining the Initiative in Afghanistan,” Small Wars Journal, September 2, 2009,

As the President and his national security team debate the course to chart in Afghanistan at the writing of this paper, it is essential to understand the nature of insurgency and what is necessary to combat this threat in the likely event that America chooses to take that path. The following section will examine counterinsurgency and the doctrine developed by various nation states for defeating such an enemy. The theoretical and practical applications of COIN doctrine are drawn from analyses of multiple conflicts, involving various nations operating in different cultures at various times. As such, not all lessons learned or theories developed will be applicable in all situations, particularly for Afghanistan today. For this reason, the second section of the paper will focus more specifically on the lessons learned by the United States and her allies in wars

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of counterinsurgency. Examples of mistakes in this type of war are prevalent with successes in shorter supply, but both victories and defeats offer insight for future generations. Finally, having examined COIN in its proper perspective in a short passage of history, and examining the United States’s place in that history, I will examine where those lessons leave the United States today as it executes a complex but vital war amongst the people of Afghanistan.

Section 1: Insurgency Doctrine from a Historical Perspective

You cannot fight former Saddamists and Islamic extremists the same way you would have fought the Viet Cong or the Tupamaros; the application of principles and fundamentals to deal with each varies considerably. Nonetheless, all insurgencies, even today’s highly adaptable strains, remain wars amongst the people. They use variations of standard themes and adhere to elements of a recognizable revolutionary campaign plan.\(^\text{13}\)

\[\text{~ Lieutenant General David H. Petraeus, USA, and Lieutenant General James F. Amos, USMC, from the preface to The U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual}\]

Various sources have differing definitions of what an insurgency is and is not. As Generals Petraeus and Amos note in the passage above, no matter what the particular variation of insurgent threat, these groups operate on basic themes and modes of operation that have remained constant over a long period of time. While the differences and nuances will be addressed in more depth in the following sections, understanding

these “standard themes and… elements” is the focus of the current section. As Dr. Bruce Hoffman of Georgetown University notes, there is considerable overlap between such categories as “guerilla warfare,” “irregular warfare,” “terrorism,” and “insurgency,” making definition by distinction the best way to explicate a concept as amorphous as insurgency.14

All of these categories are united in their use of violence or the threat of violence in pursuit of political ends. Because they know they cannot confront their adversary in direct action, terrorists, guerillas, and insurgents “attempt to exhaust U.S. national will, aiming to win by undermining and outlasting public support,” in other words, a war of attrition of political will.15 Like guerillas, insurgents utilize groups of fighters organized into quasi-military units that attack the enemy, hold territory that is taken, and also exercise some form of control and sovereignty over that terrain, which is seized from the controlling authority. This may come in the form of a shadow government or institutional intimidation, as with the Viet Cong (VC) during the Vietnam War, religious factional militias during the Iraq War, and the Taliban today in Afghanistan. This component of holding and administering territory, if only ephemerally, is the key distinction between insurgents/guerillas and terrorists, who do not seek to seize or maintain control of a fixed territory.16 Hoffman goes on to note that “in addition to the irregular military tactics that characterize guerilla operations, insurgencies typically involve coordinated informational

15 Counterinsurgency Field Manual, li.
16 Hoffman, Inside Terrorism, 35.
(i.e. propaganda) and psychological warfare efforts designed to mobilize popular support in a struggle against an established national government, imperialist power, or foreign occupying force.”17 Building on this definition, the Central Intelligence Agency’s *Guide to Analysis of Insurgency* describes insurgency as a “protracted political-military activity directed toward completely or partially controlling the resources of a country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations.”18 In both of these definitions, and many others, one of the basic and fundamental truths of insurgencies is highlighted, the fact that insurgencies are inherently political organizations and movements. While insurgencies and irregular tactics can be traced to antiquity, a practical place to begin examining the development of modern insurgency is with Mao Tse-Tung’s “people’s war” of the 1940s.

Retired U.S. Marine Corps Colonel T.X. Hammes’s examination of insurgency, what he terms “fourth-generation warfare,” begins by examining Mao’s anti-imperialist campaign, first against Imperial Japan, and later against his Nationalist Chinese opponent:

As the first practitioner to define insurgency, Mao, like Clausewitz, understood that war is fundamentally a political undertaking. However, he went much further than Clausewitz in his definition, stating, “The problem of political mobilization of the army and the people is indeed of the utmost importance… political mobilization is the most fundamental condition for winning the war.”19

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17 Ibid.
Mao’s power in the Chinese Communist Party was solidified following the incredibly brutal “Long March” of 1934 from their Communist base in the south across central China to Yenan Province in north. The cadre of 5,000 remaining members of a journey that began with 86,000 became a fiercely loyal and dedicated band of insurgent fighters who bought into Mao’s three phases for the execution of a successful insurgency:

1) **Strategic Defensive**: Cultivation and growth of political strength, the insurgency seeks to survive while spreading its ideology, no form of offensive action is being taken at this time

2) **Strategic Stalemate**: Insurgents gain strength and consolidate control of small base areas, actively seeking to capture weapons and supplies from the enemy, gaining a force correlation of equilibrium with the government

3) **Strategic Offensive**: After carefully nurturing and consolidating strength to the point of equality with the enemy, both political and material, the insurgency transitions to conventional battle

Mao’s version of insurgency, with its “vast time and space factors,” was never intended to defeat imperialist Japan or the Nationalist Chinese Army. Rather, his three phases of insurgency were intended to conserve the communists’ strength while draining the Japanese/Nationalists’ strength to the point where conventional strength was held by the Communist party, in this case both a physical and political battle of attrition as described above. Mao was very clear on this point, saying, “we must neither assign (insurgency) the

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20 Information in list taken from Mao, Hammes, and Army/Marine Corps FM3-24.
primary position in our war strategy nor substitute it for mobile and positional warfare as
conducted by orthodox forces.”\textsuperscript{21} In the case of Communist China, insurgency was a vital
tool in the eventual conquest of their nationalist enemy. Though it would ultimately be
conventional battle that defeated the Chinese Nationalist Party, the insurgency that
incubated popular resentment against the ruling government and provided the “sea” in
which the communist insurgents could “swim” in order to prepare for that decisive
engagement was equally as important, and a pivotal example for the conduct of future
insurgencies around the world, notably in Malaya and Vietnam.

The political nature of insurgency is confirmed and reaffirmed throughout the
literature pertaining to this type of warfare. As each new generation of military
practitioners and strategists encounters insurgencies, the analysis remains consistent:
insurgencies and wars among the people must be recognized and approached as primarily
political struggles and the tools of national power required to combat them must strike at
that political center of gravity. While governments and nation-states have accepted Carl
von Clausewitz’s dictum that “war is not merely an act of policy but a true political
instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means” for
centuries, only recently has the fact that the political nature of war is not dependent upon
the general mobilization a huge Western-style army.\textsuperscript{22} As Roger Trinquier, the noted
French COIN expert, wrote in 1964 about the French campaign against the (Algerian)

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\textsuperscript{22} Carl von Clausewitz, Translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, \textit{On War} (New
National Liberation Front (FLN), “…we are not actually grappling with an army organized along traditional lines, but with a few armed elements acting clandestinely within a population manipulated by a special organization.”

The fact that this movement was not ordered into action by an executive order or the proclamation from a legislative body did not make it any less a political movement. In what is commonly regarded as one of the seminal works of twentieth century on counterinsurgency, David Galula explains that in an insurgency,

> political action remains foremost throughout the war. It is not enough for the government to set political goals, to determine how much military force is applicable, to enter into alliances or to break them; politics becomes an instrument of operation. And so intricate is the interplay between the political and the military actions that they cannot be tidily separated; on the contrary, every military move has to be weighed with regard to its political effects, and vice versa.\(^{24}\)

Galula’s experience was derived mainly from his conventional operations in World War II and irregular wars in Greece, Indochina, and Algeria, but his words could easily be confused with his predecessor Mao, who said that “(the population) may be likened to water and (insurgents) to the fish who inhabit it… It is only undisciplined troops who make the people their enemies and who, like the fish out of its native element, cannot live.”\(^{25}\) Mao, like Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam and Mullah Omar in Afghanistan today, recognized that his technologically and numerically inferior force could only challenge


their militarily dominant opponent with the support or acquiescence of the local population. To that end, Mao strictly enforced a code of conduct to guide his troops in interacting with the population they encountered. This code, known as “The Three Rules and the Eight Remarks,” laid out the following guidelines: Rules: “1. All actions are subject to command. 2. Do not steal from the people. 3. Be neither selfish nor unjust.” His remarks maintained a similar theme admonishing his followers not to insult, inconvenience, or otherwise offend the population. Along with securing the population and closely related to that end is the collection and utilization of intelligence, which are placed in the canon of COIN doctrine because only through the collection and digestion of consistent and reliable intelligence can the counterinsurgent protect and ultimately win the support of the population, as various examples from history have amply demonstrated.

General Sir Gerald Templer and his operations as commander of British forces in Malaya from 1952-1957 exemplify the primacy of intelligence and winning popular support in COIN operations. John Nagl describes the rise and ultimate defeat of this Chinese-led insurgency in great detail, particularly the effect that General Templer’s dynamic and intellectually energetic leadership played. With an army full of officers who had recently participated in the Second World War, Great Britain initially fell back to its time honored and most comfortable course of action, treating the Communist rebel force as a military problem. The fact that the British Far East Force, which had accrued a

\[26\] Ibid, 92.
wealth of experience in jungle warfare and irregular tactics fighting the Japanese in the Pacific theater, had just been disbanded added to this institutional inertia towards a conventional approach even in the face of an irregular enemy.\textsuperscript{27} During his tenure, kinetic military operations were completely subordinated to political realities on the ground, and the supremely important collection, analysis, and dissemination of intelligence, ultimately resulting in the pacification of Malaya. Some assert that it was conventional British military force acting on the Malayan insurgents that led to their later destruction under Templer, that “the British in Malaya broke the back of the insurgency… by brute military force from 1951 to 1952, and not as is so commonly believed through the hearts and minds campaign conducted by General Templer from 1952-1954.”\textsuperscript{28} This view, however, seems to contradict insights from the British General Sir John Harding, Commander in Chief, Far East India Land Forces during the conflict, who asserted that after years of “prophylactic and will o’ the wisp patrolling and jungle bashing and on air bombardment,”\textsuperscript{29} with large battalion and regimental-sized operations proved totally ineffectual.

Gradually the (British) army learned that "shoulder-to-shoulder" sweeps were not productive but actually counterproductive; instead of massing troops, the army developed small patrols that used the skills of native trackers and intelligence provided by Surrendered Enemy Personnel or (British) Special Branch infiltrators into (guerilla) organizations to target selected terrorists with the minimum force required.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} Gentile, \textit{Small Wars Journal}.  
\textsuperscript{29} Anthony Short, \textit{The Communist Insurrection in Malaya, 1940-1960} (London: Frederick Muller, 1975) cited in Nagl, \textit{Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife}, 73.  
\textsuperscript{30} Nagl, \textit{Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife}, 105.
As former Director of Military Intelligence in the British War Office, Templer was fully aware that intelligence was vital to any military operation, but especially one so closely tied to the population, whose loyalty would ultimately decide victory or defeat. As Nagl points out, “the value of intelligence to Security Forces is difficult to overstate… Even where troops and police were deployed where there was a good chance of making contact… there was danger of a vicious circle developing: no intelligence meant no contacts and no contacts meant no intelligence.”

Robert Komer highlights the important relationship between the combatant, the population and intelligence saying “the Malayan (COIN) approach was not primarily military… (but rather) through a process of trial and error, the U.K./(Government of Malaya) came to put primary emphasis on breaking the guerillas’ links to their popular base,” which was accomplished by ensuring protection of the populace and then by exploiting intelligence gathered from them.

General Creighton Abrams, who took command of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) in 1969, stated concretely that America’s mission in Vietnam “is not to seek out and destroy the enemy. The mission is to provide protection for the people of Vietnam.” General Abrams understood that there was a definitive link between the insurgent war, the conventional war, and the psychological/political war for the support of the population in Vietnam, a concept he called the “one war” approach. In explaining this simple yet profound presupposition to Admiral John S. McCain, the Commander in

31 Ibid, 93.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid, 175.
Chief of the Pacific Fleet based in Hawaii, General Abrams said, “the one war concept puts equal emphasis on military operations, improvement of RVNAF [Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces] and pacification—all of which are interrelated so that the better we do in one, the more our chance of progress in the others.”\textsuperscript{35} The idea that one could conduct a military war and a separate political war, as the military had tried to do for years, proved a bankrupt military strategy.

General Abrams words here could also be confused with General Stanley McChrystal, who said in August of 2009, upon taking command of all NATO forces in Afghanistan, that NATO’s mission in Afghanistan is entirely dependent upon a change in strategy that focuses on “an integrated civilian-military counterinsurgency campaign that earns the support of the Afghan people and provides them with a secure environment… To execute the strategy, (NATO’s ISAF) must grow and improve the effectiveness of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and elevate the importance of governance.”\textsuperscript{36} The primacy of politics in insurgency and COIN is as clear today as it was during Mao’s “people’s revolutionary war.” Every political leader and military commander must keep that in mind, from the national strategic planning level down to the lance corporal walking a patrol on a dusty street, as Americans have learned and rediscovered for decades.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36} McChrystal, \textit{Assessment}, 1-1.
Section 2: America’s Past Experience in Counterinsurgency and Lessons Learned

In a major war, the mission assigned to the armed forces is usually unequivocal—the defeat and destruction of the hostile forces. This is seldom true in small wars. More often than not, the mission will be to establish and maintain law and order by supporting or replacing the civil government in countries or areas in which the interests of the United States have been placed in jeopardy...

~ U.S. Marine Corps’s Small Wars Manual

The preceding section outlined several of the fundamental themes and elements of counterinsurgency, themes that remain organic to COIN no matter the geographic region or historical setting. There are many more basic precepts of this type of warfare to be discussed and examined, far too many to explore here. However, keeping in mind the basic tenets described above, it is now useful to examine how the United States has carried out the unenviable task of COIN in its history and the lessons it has gleaned from these campaigns. Two of the most prominent and useful case studies are America’s war in Vietnam and the most recent campaign in Iraq. While there are other examples of COIN operations in America’s past, notably the campaigns against the Native Americans of the Great Plains and Southwest, the Philippine insurrection, and the Banana Wars in Central and South America, Vietnam and Iraq are examined here because of their size, duration, and wealth of operational material to study.

Vietnam

From its initial entrance into the conflict in Vietnam, the United States was taking on a very difficult task. With barely five years between the fall of Dien Bien Phu and the withdrawal of French colonial forces, another conflict between the United States and communist insurgents was beginning. To the people of Vietnam, the political distinction between French colonial forces and American anti-communist forces was negligible, merely a different set of uniforms and different shapes painted on the helicopters and airplanes that overflew their villages. And so, “the painful fact is that, from the Vietnamese point of view, the Second Indochina War is a direct continuation of the First. Politically it continues to be a struggle for territorial independence and freedom from foreign, or at any rate Western, domination; socially it continues to be a socialist, i.e., Marxist, revolution.”

The United States failed to recognize the popular perception among the people of Vietnam, and the impact that this would have on the war effort.

As will be explained in the following paragraphs, the American military was bent on executing a traditional American war of identifying, closing with, and destroying the enemy. In this case that enemy happened to be a Communist threat, thought of in much the same mold as the North Korean threat of the early 1950s. While intelligence and information operations are still important in such conventional battles, they do not carry nearly the same weight as they do in COIN operations. By failing to recognize the

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political nature of the fight they were engaging in, the American military forfeited the informational and ideological battle-space to the Vietcong (VC), without which the insurgency would have been rendered a much less effective force, as both Ho Chi Minh and Mao both recognized.

Co-opting the population was not a new idea, the concept of ingratiating oneself to the population was described in detail as early as 1940 in the Marine Corps’s *Small Wars Manual*, “Every endeavor should be made to assure the civilian population of the friendliness of our forces. No effort should be spared to demonstrate the advantage of law and order and to secure their friendly cooperation.”\(^{39}\) However, this was not the mindset of American commanders or of the Vietnamese counterparts they molded into their conventional way of thinking.

Remarks by then-Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Earle Wheeler, on November 7, 1962 display the apathy with which senior level commanders viewed the political and ideological nature of the war: “It is fashionable in some quarters to say that the problems in South East Asia are primarily political and economic rather than military. I do not agree. The essence of the problem in Vietnam is military.”\(^{40}\) General Wheeler was wrong; the essence of the conflict in Vietnam hinged on which political entity the majority of the Vietnamese people were going to support, the Government of Vietnam or the Communist Viet Cong. Neither the Vietnamese government, nor her American allies

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40 Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 127.
put sufficient efforts into winning that support. Convincing the Vietnamese population that the American military was not there to dominate and exploit their country would have been difficult, but as various theorists and practitioners have since noted, it should have been pursued as a vital objective and given the necessary resources. The fact that the Army refused to recognize the political nature of the fight precluded even the chance of achieving that vital goal.

As noted previously, the political nature of COIN is absolutely crucial, with winning the battle for political legitimacy over your opponent of overriding importance. By allying itself with the corrupt and despised Diem regime, simply because the strongman was not communist, America all but forfeited this vital component to victory from the outset as well. The growth and expansion of the Viet Cong insurgency, beginning in 1955, and conventional war that this insurgency would come to support in the third phase of Mao’s three phases of revolutionary war, was due in large part to the political and executive failures of the native Diem regime. As Robert Komer, the colorful head of the Civil Operations and Rural Development Program (CORDS), asserts,

In the last analysis, perhaps the most important single reason why the U.S. achieved so little for so long in Vietnam was that it could not sufficiently revamp, or adequately substitute for, a South Vietnamese leadership, administration, and armed forces inadequate to the task. The sheer incapacity of the regimes we backed, which largely frittered away the enormous resources we gave them, may well have been the greatest single constraint on our ability to achieve the aims we set ourselves at acceptable cost.41

The United States failed to take the lack of political legitimacy of Diem into account when it lavished thousands of military advisors and millions of dollars to Saigon. Robert Taber also highlights the impact these shortcomings of the Vietnamese government had on the U.S.-South Vietnamese ability to pursue a desirable endstate:

The course of the insurgency in South Vietnam… followed the classic pattern of the First Indochina war. Isolated acts of terrorism and sporadic attacks on remote military or police posts, beginning as early as 1955, could not have been controlled except by calling out the army in full force. Yet the Diem regime could not make such a response without confessing that all was not well with the country, and it did not find it politically expedient to make the admission. Instead, Diem played ostrich, pretending that the “bandits” were under control, and hoping that the national police would soon justify the pretense.\(^{42}\)

By playing “ostrich,” Diem allowed the communist force to gain strength by spreading its political ideology among the rural population (Phase 1 of Mao’s three phase theory of war among the people), supporting itself and gaining recruits, along much the same lines as Mao’s communist insurgency was able to support itself while fighting the Japanese and the Nationalists in China several years before. By 1964, the insurgency controlled almost all of the rural areas of the country, which comprised eighty five percent of the total population of the country, with a communist force that had grown to an astounding 40,000 committed fighters, supported by an additional 100,000 regional auxiliaries.\(^{43}\) To use Mao’s terminology, the VC insurgency had reached a correlation of force with the government of Vietnam and was prepared to pursue offensive actions.

\(^{42}\) Taber, 82.
\(^{43}\) Ibid, 83.
By controlling, such a large area, the insurgency forced the government troops to remain barricaded in strong defensive positions, venturing out only in large heavily armed columns, all the while, the insurgency implemented a shadow government, complete with taxes and regional government to adjudicate civil and economic disputes. By forcing the Diem government and his growing contingent of American military “advisors” into an entirely defensive position, Ho Chi Minh and his communist insurgents were seizing the political legitimacy from under the feet of the regime. Additionally, the Viet Cong were arming and supplying themselves by pillaging the South’s overextended and vulnerable supply lines, capturing 128,682 weapons from the South Vietnamese army between 1960 and 1963, most of which were American-made.44 Just as the VC followed Mao’s communist revolutionary orthodoxy of spreading and consolidating political support as a base to launch operations, they also followed his instructions that “after a period of resistance, it is possible to increase the supply of equipment by capturing it from the enemy… Guerillas must not depend too much on an armory. The enemy is the principal source of their supply.”45 The U.S.-supplied Vietnamese forces filled this role of quartermaster and arms supplier to the VC very well.

As the United States watched its ally sink further and further toward total defeat by a Communist guerilla forces, it chose to heighten its engagement by officially committing U.S. combat forces on March 8, 1965, with the amphibious landing of 3,500

44 Ibid, 6.
45 Mao, On Guerilla Warfare, 83.
Marines just north of Danang, Vietnam’s second-largest city. Instead of recognizing the VC insurgency for what it was, a political war fought mainly for independence, the U.S. military saw only a conventional threat to be engaged with and destroyed. John Nagl addresses the consequences of this mindset or “institutional culture” of the U.S. Army and its unwillingness to adapt and produce innovative doctrinal responses to the challenges on the ground:

The United States had become reliant on firepower and technological superiority in its history of annihilating enemy forces; although political considerations may have governed the strategic conduct of the war, they had little connection with the tactical-level application of violence… The concept that success in counterinsurgency consisted of separating the insurgents from popular support never took root. The U.S. Army proceeded with its historical role of destroying the enemy army—even if it had a hard time finding it.

In addition to fighting this conventional type of war, the United States built up and trained the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) to fight in the same way, seeding the fledgling force with the same conventional-mindedness that crippled the United States. The assumption that the main threat to a free South Vietnam was a North Korean-style invasion by the North was a key misreading of the situation on the part of the United States. In fact, the festering insurgency galvanizing popular support throughout South Vietnam, as noted earlier, was the most critical threat.

The other erroneous assumption that hamstrung the combined U.S./South Vietnamese effort was the idea that if a conventional South Vietnamese army could be

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established that was capable of repelling a Communist invasion from the north, this same force would inherently be able to deal with the relatively minor problem of a guerilla threat with ease. “The organizational proclivity toward conventional armed forces was reinforced by ‘the general assumption that the ability to promote internal security was automatically provided for in the creation of forces capable to promote external security.’”\(^{49}\) It was this focus on creating a conventional military, while consciously ignoring considerations of an irregular threat, which allowed the insurgency to grow to the size it reached. When the lumbering U.S./ARVN forces tried to attack suspected VC strongholds, the insurgents would melt into the population that already supported it. Any targets engaged by the American or ARVN forces were almost guaranteed to produce civilian casualties, which produced yet more recruits for the VC ranks.

While the U.S. Army’s leadership had its head down and shoulder lowered, doggedly pushing its conventional dogma, others with a stake in the conflict did recognize the incongruence plaguing American military doctrine and the situation on the ground. President Kennedy, who had a long-standing interest in low intensity conflict, immediately placed an emphasis on pursuing a more tailored response to Vietnam upon assuming the presidency in 1961. Months after taking office, Kennedy outlined the threat he saw insurgency posing to the United States in his address to the graduating class of West Point, describing:

\(^{49}\) Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 120.
another type of war, new in its intensity, ancient in its origin—war by
guerillas, subversives, insurgents, assassins, war by ambush instead of by
combat, by infiltration instead of aggression, seeking victory by evading
and exhausting the enemy instead of engaging him. Where there is a
visible enemy to fight in open combat, the answer is not so difficult… But
when there is a long, slow struggle, with no immediately visible foe, your
choice will seem hard indeed.\(^{50}\)

In January of 1962, President Kennedy ordered the formation of the Special Group
comprised of cabinet level officials through a special charter in order to examine the
efficacy and viability of pursuing a COIN approach to the Vietnamese insurgency.\(^{51}\)
However, even with the President’s continued pressure for the implementation of COIN
document, the military’s highest echelons resisted Kennedy’s efforts, and he was well
aware of it, musing that “I know the Army is not going to develop this counterinsurgency
field and do the things that I think must be done unless the Army itself wants to do it.”\(^{52}\)
Even more than a comment on civilian control of the military, this uneasy relationship
between Kennedy and his generals illustrates the depth of military rigidity that even the
Commander in Chief could not alter the course of the war in this way. The need for
flexibility, whether Kennedy’s “flexible response” regarding nuclear weapons policy at
the strategic level, or operational and tactical flexibility necessary for COIN operations
(though successful COIN must be executed primarily from a strategic level as well), is a
lesson that the junior officers of Vietnam learned well.

\(^{50}\) Ibid, 125.
\(^{51}\) Ibid.
\(^{52}\) Ibid.
Some within the military, particularly the junior officers, CIA operatives, and other civilian personnel, did indeed see the efficacy of such population-centric COIN operations. The CIA’s Civilian Irregular Defense Group (CIDG) was such an organization that achieved surprisingly successful results.\textsuperscript{53} The program’s basic premise was arming, supplying, and supporting local villagers under the supervision of American Special Forces operators, and allowing villagers to defend themselves from VC infiltration. This idea proved incredibly successful. From its inception with forty villages in November of 1961, by April of 1962 all forty villages were secured with another 200 villages pronounced secure by November of 1962.\textsuperscript{54} This idea of allowing the vastly superior knowledge of locals to drive operations is a key lesson to come from Vietnam, though it would not reach the highest echelons of power until much too late in the war. The experiment, eventually led to the implementation of 38,000 irregulars and the declaration of the entire province as “secure” by the South Vietnamese government at the end of 1962.\textsuperscript{55} “(The villagers) fought well on their home ground without support from conventional Vietnamese armed forces and had a record of almost unbroken success against the VC.”\textsuperscript{56} This local effort required a fraction of the effort and casualties of the Army’s regular seek and destroy missions.\textsuperscript{57} However, even with this stunning success, the General staff of the Army, including the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 128.
\textsuperscript{55} Nagl, \textit{Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife}, 168.
\textsuperscript{56} Krepinevich, \textit{The Army and Vietnam}, 71.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
Maxwell Taylor, viewed the program as an ineffective use of the special forces assets who should be more focused on finding and killing VC personnel. The program was gutted in 1963, moving control from the CIA to the MACV, and shifting focus from empowering and securing the population to offensive operations against the Viet Cong. “The most flexible of all U.S. government organizations (the CIA) was unable to alter U.S. Army counterinsurgency policy with a program that achieved demonstrable results in a comparatively short time and with relatively few resources expended; the organizational culture of the army was too formidable a barrier to permit learning from the CIA’s success.”

If the Army refused to embrace the CIA’s demonstrated success, the idea of the “spreading ink-blot” of security was also recognized and utilized by the Marine Corps. The Marine Corps, under the leadership of Lieutenant General Victor “Brute” Krulak, commander of Fleet Marine Force, Pacific, embraced the doctrine of population-centric counterinsurgency that it helped develop while winning the small wars of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, and the Philippines. These lessons, codified in the Marine Corps’ Small Wars Manual, could have been of great use had the Army establishment, who commanded all operations in Vietnam, recognized and adopted their logic earlier on in the war. Eventually, after General Creighton Abrams assumed command and began programs like the Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC),

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58 Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife, 129.
population-centric operations based around providing local security and holding ground permanently once taken, but this was too late to alter the ultimate course of the war.\textsuperscript{60}

Krulak actively pursued a strategy of securing the population centers of the coast and Mekong Delta (geographically only ten percent of the country but an area that housed eighty percent of the population) and abandoned attempts to conquer large swaths of the mountainous countryside, as Army General William Westmoreland was intent on pursuing. Krulak reasoned that, “Denying the Vietcong access to the people would call for few big-unit operations. It would take aggressive small-unit foot patrolling, especially at night, to gather intelligence, and disrupt guerilla operation. Above all, it would mean training the local people to defend themselves. That was the only way to ensure the security of the country.”\textsuperscript{61} Several programs to ensure the security of the country would materialize under this premise.

Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) functioned in much the same way as the CIA’s Civilian Irregular Defense Groups worked. Like many successful innovations in Vietnam, the CAP experiment was the brainchild of a junior officer, Captain Jim Cooper. An infantry company commander near the village of Chulai in northernmost region of South Vietnam, Cooper decided to imbed a small contingent of marines with Vietnamese Regional Forces platoons. These twelve to fifteen marines were volunteers and were selected based on their ability to live and work the local villagers. “These (platoons) lived

\textsuperscript{60}Sorley, \textit{A Better War}, 64.

\textsuperscript{61}Boot, \textit{The Savage Wars of Peace}, 297.
in the villages and focused on pacification while regular marine battalions divided their time between platoon-sized patrols and civic programs.”

The villagers provided the local knowledge and intelligence that was the key to repelling the Vietcong from the area, while the Marines provided the military know-how, “giving high priority to the traditional elements of counterinsurgency strategy: destruction of the insurgent infrastructure, protection of the people and the government infrastructure, organization of local intelligence nets, and training of the (local Popular Forces).”

The efficacy of these platoons was evident almost immediately with safer roads and more secure hamlets, which LtGen. Krulak argued may be “harder to quantify” but are much better indicators of success than simply counting dead VC.

General Westmoreland disagreed, saying:

I believed the Marines should have been trying to find the enemy’s main forces and bring them to battle, thereby putting them on the run and reducing the threat they posed to the population… The Marines have become so infatuated with securing real estate and in civic action that their forces have become dispersed and they have been hesitant to conduct offensive operations.

Had this initiative been ineffective or only produced results in an isolated village or of a transient nature, Westmoreland’s criticisms may have been warranted, but that was not the case. In fact, no village that was protected by CAP forces was ever retaken by the VC. Additionally, sixty percent of the marines who participated in the CAP program volunteered to stay on with their marine and Vietnamese team members for another six

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62 Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife, 157.
64 Ibid.
65 Nagl, Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife, 157.
months even when presented with the option of returning to the United States.\textsuperscript{66} This was accomplished with fifty percent lower casualties than the forces conducting large-scale “seek and destroy” missions in the rest of the country, which flew in the face of Army logic that CAP should be eliminated because it left small detachments vulnerable to being cut off by large VC operations.\textsuperscript{67} British counterinsurgency expert Robert Thompson summarizes the program very well saying, “The use of CAPS is quite the best idea I have seen in Vietnam, and it worked superbly.”\textsuperscript{68}

The whole of American power and influence was unable to address the insurgency in Vietnam because the nation’s military, its chosen instrument of foreign policy, was organized, trained, and equipped to fight conventional battles against the Soviet Union on the plains of Europe, not local wars of independence in the jungles of Southeast Asia and it was unable or unwilling to adapt. This conventional mindset, developed by officers who cut their teeth in the quintessentially conventional conflicts of World War II and Korea, was too much even for President Kennedy and eventually the commander of all U.S. forces in country, General Creighton Abrams, to overcome. The U.S. government and military failed to affectively rectify the deficiencies in the various Vietnamese regimes throughout their involvement in the conflict, yielding political legitimacy to the insurgents.

\textsuperscript{66} Boot, \textit{The Savage Wars of Peace}, 307.  
\textsuperscript{67} Krepinevich, \textit{The Army and Vietnam}, 174.  
\textsuperscript{68} Boot, \textit{The Savage Wars of Peace}, 307.
Additionally, the United States failed to address the political nature of the communist insurgency being executed by Ho Chi Minh and his followers and tried to combat that ideology with bombs and communist political propaganda with bullets. By over-militarizing the conflict, the United States shifted the focus from winning the people’s confidence through a sustained local presence and information operations to killing communists. By failing to extract intelligence and designing our operations accordingly, the military ignored several of the foundational concepts of counterinsurgency. These mistakes would be understandable were it not for the persistent exhortations of participants calling for a return to concepts rooted in the successful small wars of the early 20th century, like various junior officers, CIA personnel, and the leadership of the U.S. Marine Corps. It was not a lack of knowledge or expertise that led Military Assistance Command, Vietnam to these mistakes. Rather they were regrettable failures due to an institutional refusal to learn the lessons of past conflicts. And, as frustrating as these shortcomings appear in retrospect, it is even more maddening to think that the American military repeated many of the same mistakes in Iraq a generation later.

Iraq

The American-led war in Iraq that began in the spring of 2003 bore many similarities with the war in Vietnam. These similarities were the cause of the similar course of the war’s first three years. America’s conventionally-minded, conventionally-trained, and conventionally-equipped military made short work of Saddam Hussein’s
military defenses, moving to seize Baghdad in a matter of weeks after crossing the line of
departure. However, that was the point where America’s success peaked. With Saddam
ousted from power and the Ba’ath party disbanded, along with the military and various
other government organizations and bureaucracies, the United States was not ready to
administer the newly leaderless country or combat the insurgency that would result.

Andrew Krepinevich, writing in 2005, notes the turmoil that plagued the coalition
efforts in Iraq following the quick success of the March 2003 invasion:

The basic problem is that the United States and its coalition partners have
never settled on a strategy for defeating the insurgency and achieving their
broader objectives. On the political front, they have been working to
create a democratic Iraq, but that is a goal, not a strategy. On the military
front, they have sought to train Iraqi security forces and turn the war over
to them. As President George W. Bush has stated, "Our strategy can be
summed up this way: as the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down." But the
president is describing a withdrawal plan rather than a strategy.  

In addition to training Iraqi forces, the American military’s focus was on hunting down
and killing insurgents. The examples of this approach are multiple. The massive and
intense fighting the battles of Fallujah in April, November, and December of 2004
exemplify this approach, when multiple Marine Corps brigades from the First Marine
Expeditionary Force encircled and then systematically cleared the city, both times killing
scores of insurgents and taking heavy casualties themselves.  

69 Andrew F. Krepinevich, "How to Win in Iraq," Foreign Affairs 84, no. 5
(September 1, 2005), http://0-www.proquest.com.library.lausys.georgetown.edu/.

70 Anne Barnard, “Anger Over Fallujah Reaches Ears of the Faithful,” The Boston Globe, April
the same lines as British operations in Malaya before General Templer’s arrival and U.S. operations under General Westmoreland in Vietnam. Such operations not only polarized local Iraqis caught in the cross-fire, but literally angered Muslim communities around Iraq, the Middle East, and around the world. This battle and subsequent incidents such as the killing of twenty-four Iraqi civilians in Haditha in November of 2005 after an attack on a U.S. convoy, were combining to turn the people of the country away from the political progress that the United States was pleading for and trying establish with the Maliki government in Baghdad, and closer to unrestrained civil war. Thomas Ricks summarizes the effect that the American military and civilian administration had had in Iraq from the invasion to this point in 2006,

> What happened that day in (the Haditha killings) was the disturbing but logical culmination of the shortsighted and misguided approach the U.S. military took in invading and occupying Iraq from 2003 through 2006: Protect yourself at all costs, focus on attacking the enemy, and treat the Iraqi civilians as the playing field on which the contest occurs… This bankrupt approach was rooted in the American military tradition that tends to view war only as battles between conventional forces of different states.  

Many commanders in various operations exemplified this attitude. One such commander of note was General Raymond Odierno. As commander of the 4th Infantry Division in the middle of the Sunni Triangle in 2003-4, Odierno had the reputation of being incredibly harsh, ordering huge sweeps to kick in doors and round up tens of thousands of

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“MAMs”—military-aged males. This heavy handed approach was said by intelligence officers to spawn many insurgents (the exact number is impossible to know) and certainly did not bring the people closer to helping the coalition combat the insurgency.

However, in subsequent tours in Iraq, Gen. Odierno would become one of the most effective operators of the counterinsurgency. Speaking of this transformation as he began his second tour, General Odierno said, “I think that everyone’s changed. We’ve all learned. We came in here not thinking about counterinsurgency.” The experience of a tour facing a growing insurgency taught Gen. Odierno many of the lessons learned by his predecessors in COIN operations. General Odierno is but one of many conventionally-minded soldiers whose operational perspective shifted after conducting operations in Iraq.

Another major cause of General Odierno’s transformation, and of the entire U.S. effort in Iraq, was the introduction of a commanding general in the theater of operations who was steeped in COIN theory and historical practice. Having just come from overseeing the publication of the Counterinsurgency Field Manual FM 3-24 for the Army and Marine Corps, General David Petraeus was committed to pursuing a COIN strategy that placed the focus of effort on protecting the population and building relationships that would provide the information. This information would drive effective missions that furthered the goal of a stable and self-sustainable Iraq rather than creating more

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72 Ibid, 107.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid, 110.
insurgents through brutality and ineffectual violence. Speaking to his generals on his fourth day in command in Iraq, February 10, 2007, he said, “We are in an information war… Sixty percent of this thing is information,” and by extension using that information to persuade the population not to support the insurgency. This new strategy would require more troops to heighten coalition presence in Iraqi communities and it would also require time for these troop increases and new strategy to take effect.

Having commanded the 101st Airborne Division during the invasion of Iraq and the initial tour in Mosul, General Petraeus was one of the few commanders to recognize and implement a sound strategy for securing the population, establishing some measure of success. He did so, in part, by instituting three rules for his subordinate commanders, similar Mao’s: “We are in a race against time, give the locals you deal with a stake in the new Iraq, and don’t do anything that creates more enemies than it removes.” In addition to Gen. Petraeus’s success in Mosul, and his academic background in the study of counterinsurgency, the successful COIN campaign in Iraq beginning in 2007 was also informed by the success of a few isolated commanders’ initiatives. Colonel H.R. McMaster, whose successful counterinsurgency campaign in Tall Afar in 2005-6 was a model for subsequent efforts in Ramadi, was later influential in designing “the surge” in Baghdad in 2007. Under McMaster, the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment moved its personnel into twenty-nine outposts in neighborhoods throughout the city, the first large-

\[75\] Ibid, 133.
\[76\] Ibid, 20.
scale COIN operation of the war.\textsuperscript{77} This would serve as the example for other isolated campaigns such as those in al-Qaim and ar-Ramadi, but would not reach the national stage until years later.

Similar to Tal Afar in 2005, and indicative of the surge to come in Baghdad in 2007, Colonel Sean MacFarland pushed his troops of the First Brigade of the First Infantry Division out into the city of Ramadi. By initially moving forces into small outposts throughout the al-Qaeda and insurgent-saturated city in the Sunni Triangle of western Iraq, American forces lived with their Iraqi Army counterparts and learned about their culture and the local “street” while at the same time developing a more professional atmosphere within the Iraqi army. The similarities between the local operations conducted in Tal Afar and ar-Ramadi are strikingly similar to the CIA’s CIDG and Marine Corps CAP initiatives of the Vietnam War. In addition to the bolstered morale and increased effectiveness of the Iraqi troops, the wealth of information being collected by these dispersed U.S. troops, and the operational flexibility of living among the population, the greatest effect that these outposts had was political. By verbally committing to stay and then demonstrating American sincerity and resolve by investing millions of dollars in the local economy, and doggedly refusing to give ground back to the insurgents once it was taken by coalition forces, MacFarland was able to gain the political legitimacy in Ramadi.\textsuperscript{78} This trust and a series of vicious al-Qaeda attacks in the

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid, 60.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, 67.
region throughout the summer led to the meeting of more than fifty sheikhs on September 9, 2006. At this meeting the Sunni sheikhs established a tribal body known as “The Awakening Council,” which was truly a turning point in Anbar province and for Iraq as a whole. Seeing the brutality of al-Qaeda and the competent and demonstrably committed American presence, the sheikhs decided that the American led coalition held legitimacy and warranted support. Col. MacFarland identifies this turning point saying,

To me, it was the first real clear vindication of the strategy we were pursuing, that we were beginning to turn the tide… Whenever a tribe flipped and joined the Awakening, all the attacks on coalition forces in that area would stop, and all the caches of ammunition would come up out of the ground. If there was ever an attack on us, the sheikh would basically take responsibility for it and find whoever was responsible, and this happened time and again.\(^79\)

By February 2007, Col. MacFarland had lost 83 soldiers from his brigade, but his efforts had resulted in the shifting of popular support away from insurgents and al-Qaeda terrorists and toward the coalition efforts. As similar as McMaster’s efforts in Tal Affar and MacFarland’s efforts in Ramadi were to the CAP platoons of Vietnam, the most glaring difference is that in Iraq these successes were recognized and sustained. As General Peter Chiarelli, the number two commander in Iraq in 2006 notes, “MacFarland’s operation marked the first time in the Iraq war that a counterinsurgency campaign had been conducted and then had been sustained by the succeeding unit… (MacFarland) was the first guy who did it and it stuck for the guy who followed.”\(^80\) In addition to accolades,

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\(^79\) Ibid.
\(^80\) Ibid, 72.
this success brought Col. MacFarland a visit and consultation from the newly arrived commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, in February of 2007, who was looking for methods and metrics to carry out a similar strategy on a much larger scale in Baghdad.\textsuperscript{81}

The concept of utilizing local citizens to drive security for their own homes, towns and cities was the key to the surge strategy in Iraq. After four years of fighting Sunni militias, General Petraeus began co-opting them in the spring and summer of 2007. Just as in Anbar province, al-Qaeda had overplayed its hand by terrorizing populations, causing many Sunnis in the Abu Ghraib area and the cities of Arab Jabour and Ghazaliyah to resist their presence.\textsuperscript{82} This resistance took several forms. Some citizens with military experience or with ties to family or clan members with military experience, were allowed to begin patrolling with their own weapons. While not a truly effective combat force, this Concerned Local Citizens program as it is called, at least put a check on al-Qaeda and other terrorists’ freedom of movement, making terror and intimidation efforts more difficult.\textsuperscript{83} Unlike Vietnam, where innovation came solely from junior soldiers, in Iraq the commanding four star general was instituting new and innovative initiatives. The military commanders of Vietnam refused to learn from previous experience in the type of war they were facing, whereas today’s military and civilian leadership utilized the lessons of study and experience to great effect.

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\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{82} Francis J. West Jr., \textit{The Strongest Tribe} (New York: Random House, 2008), 316.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid, 312.
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The bulk of the surge’s success came from these Concerned Local Citizens and members of the Sunni Awakening who cooperated with the increased number of U.S. troops that were arriving in country. Just as the CIA utilized Joint Security Stations (JSS) in the Vietnam war, “Petraeus brought the concept to Iraq, installing a joint security station in every district to collect actionable intelligence, such as the location of an insurgent, and launch reaction forces.”\textsuperscript{84} Often involving satellite communications, military radios, high-resolution monitoring cameras, laptop computers, video screens for streaming video from UAVs, and huge detailed photomaps, these joint security stations could also be as simple as a few cell-phones, distributed to locals who would call coalition forces to capture or destroy al-Qaeda and other terrorists who entered their village. With the increased troop levels of the surge, coalition forces, and their Iraqi Army partners, who lived in close proximity to the target, quickly acted upon this information. Once the information came in, America’s military dominance quickly became useful once again:

The Concerned Local Citizens didn’t fight (al-Qaeda). Instead, someone stepped around a corner, pulled out a cell phone, and called (the coalition forces)... (The American forces in Abu Jabour) couldn’t believe their luck. In conventional war, it’s relatively easy to gain intelligence about the enemy; the killing is hard. Counterterrorism (and counterinsurgency) is the opposite. Killing the terrorists is easy; finding them is hard.\textsuperscript{85}

The American commander’s experience of studying and learning from affective practices in Vietnam for his PhD at Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School and the

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid, 313.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 314.
current experience coming from successes like Tal Afar and Ramadi combined to drive this American operation. \textsuperscript{86}

With some isolated examples of success, a stable of Ph.D.’s as advisors, and an intellect revered throughout the United States military and highest levels of government, General David Petraeus instituted a counterinsurgency strategy based on the importance of time, political legitimacy, and the security of Iraqis above the immediate security of American forces, which has proven successful to date. Time will tell if the relative calm generated by securing the population will lead to lasting stability, however these examples serve to demonstrate the fact that the American military has learned, if imperfectly, the lessons of population-centric counterinsurgency warfare and these same leaders are now executing the counterinsurgency campaign in Afghanistan.

\textbf{Section 3: Lessons for Afghanistan}

\textit{As you study the history of insurgencies, successful insurgencies tend to be fought, frankly, in places like Afghanistan, in places where you've got mountains; you've got tribal societies which tend to resent outsiders and protect insiders, protect people of their tribe; and most importantly, where you've got a sanctuary just across a border that's impossible to police. That's what Pakistan is. So it's a very, very difficult place to fight a counterinsurgency campaign. It's a very good place to be an insurgent.} \textsuperscript{87}

\textit{~ John Nagl, President of the Center for a New American Security}

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid, 317.
The insurgency that Alexander the Great encountered in this mountainous expanse of South Asia millennia ago would not have been incredibly different from the combat facing the American-led coalition today. While the region has been invaded, lost and re-occupied by the likes of Alexander, Genghis Khan, Timur, Babur, Great Britain and other would-be hegemons, this ancient collection of tribes, clans and families has remained all but impossible to conquer.\(^88\) To examine the current chapter of warfare in Afghanistan one must reach back at least to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Day, 1979 to have an understanding of the context in which this conflict is being fought. On that day, Soviet air and ground assets crossed the Amu Darya River into northern Afghanistan and occupied much of this territory in an attempt to settle the political and ethnic tensions that threatened the stability of a nation in the Soviet sphere of influence.\(^89\) By December 27, 1979 there were 50,000 troops in country and 5,000 Spetsnaz special forces soldiers encircling the capital of Kabul.\(^90\) The size and sophistication of the Soviet military machine allowed it to achieve great initial success in Afghanistan, but over the course of a decade its political will to maintain combat in this distant and austere theater would be eroded.

After much debate in the Carter administration, it was decided that the United States would supply a multi-member group of tribal leaders and warlords, American-backed insurgents, with assistance in their fight against the Soviet aggressors, including:

\(^{88}\) Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires* (New York: Norton, 2009), 5.
\(^{89}\) Ibid.
\(^{90}\) Ibid, 19.
Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-i-Islami; Burhanuddin Rabbani’s Islamic Society of Afghanistan; Mawlawi Muhammad Nabi Muhammadi’s Movement of the Islamic Revolution; Pir Sayyid Ahmad Gailani’s National Islamic Front of Afghanistan; Sibghatullah Mujadidi’s Afghanistan National Liberation Front; Abdul Rasul Sayyaf’s Islamic Union for the freedom of Afghanistan; Yunus Khalis’s breakaway wing of Hezb-i-Islami, these last four composed of Muslim fundamentalists. With the help of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI), American weapons and intelligence, and a popular base of Afghan support, this disparate group of tribesmen and warlords was able to drive the Soviet Union out using “two of the oldest tactics of warfare; the raid and the ambush. Soviet conscripts referred to the Afghan mujahideen as dukhi, or ghosts. Since the Soviets were vulnerable to guerilla warfare, local troops slowly picked them apart in rural areas through a campaign of sabotage, assassinations, targeted raids, and stand-off rocket attacks.” The Afghan lessons in insurgency were long and unforgiving, lessons that these same fighters would utilize against their American opponents decades later.

In fighting this kind of war, militarily inferior rebels were able drive out the Soviet aggressors through ten years of bitter fighting and, three years later, were able remove the unpopular Afghan Communist government from Kabul as well. However, the

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92 Ibid, 34.
fact that the Soviet Union was repulsed was not a harbinger of peace or stability in Afghanistan because:

once the Afghan Communists had been dethroned, the rebels turned their weapons on each other… Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Iran backed factions that they considered most conducive to their own security concerns. Eventually, the Pakistanis and Saudis settled on a group of Pashtuns called the Taliban, grim enforcers of a legal code that combined the most extreme elements of the Quran and traditional tribal law.93

The desire for the establishment of law and order and the aspiration of many ethnic Pashtuns to see themselves return to power drove the ascendance of the fundamentalist Islamic group known as the Taliban. Pashtuns account for forty percent of Afghanistan’s twenty million people, among other smaller minorities, and had ruled the country for some three hundred years before being ousted from power in the previous decades by Soviet-backed regimes.94 The rise of the ethnically Pashtu Taliban offered a return to power that many Afghans welcomed. The tribal disputes of a land-locked and relatively insignificant player on the international stage did not arouse much attention from the Clinton administration in the 1990s, particularly while the rest of the world was trying to sort out the newly Soviet-free international system.

Having subdued most of the nation’s warlords, except for the Russian and Iranian-backed Tajik Northern Alliance in the northernmost territory of the country, and having intimidated the population into submission, the Taliban consolidated their cruel stranglehold over Afghanistan between 1994 and 1996, committing various atrocities and

human rights violations along the way. It was in 1996 that the Taliban agreed to give sanctuary to the Arab terrorist leader Osama bin-Laden and his followers. After years of plotting and executing terrorist attacks, al-Qaeda’s operations against the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and Shanksville, PA on September 11, 2001 brought a response that al-Qaeda and their Taliban hosts could hardly have expected or withstood.

With American and international attention keenly focused on the perpetrators of these fantastic attacks, the military response was swift and devastating. With robust and unified allied support, the attacks of September 11, 2001 having triggered the first invocation of Article 5 of NATO’s charter in its history, requiring all member nations to consider an attack on one nation as an attack on all members, the United States military and intelligence services began dismantling the Taliban regime through massive air strikes and the infiltration of special operations forces and CIA operatives, all working in conjunction with the Northern Alliance, the predominantly Tajik resistance group that fought the Soviets in the 1980s and managed to escape the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s. This group had been pushed into the far northern mountains of Afghanistan in the months leading up to September 2001, with its force diminished to 12,000 fighters and 10,000 militiamen, compared to the Taliban’s 50,000 regulars and 40,000 militiamen.96

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95 Moyar, A Question of Command, 192.
96 Ibid.
The advent of American military expertise and airpower would more than make up for this disparity in numbers.

In battles such as the invasion of Mazar-i-Sharif on November 9, 2001, U.S. Special Forces and CIA operatives rode into battle on horseback with their Northern Alliance allies utilizing an 18th century cavalry charge supported by the most sophisticated and accurate missile strikes in the history of warfare. As then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld described it, “What won the battle for Mazar-i-Sharif—and set in motion the Taliban’s fall from power—was a combination of the ingenuity of the U.S. special forces; the most advanced, precision-guided munitions in the U.S. arsenal, delivered by U.S. Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps crews; and the courage of valiant, (battle-scarred) Afghan fighters on horseback.” In those initial months of the coalition mission in Afghanistan that analysis of the future course of the war appeared to be correct, as “American B-52 and B-1B bombers and F/A-18 fighters began the onslaught by depositing precision-guided munitions onto Taliban air defenses, command-and-control centers, and airfields… Northern Alliance forces accompanied by 350 Special Forces soldiers and 100 CIA officers then advanced on the ground, supported by AC-130U Spectre gunships and other aircraft lurking in the skies.” Just as would happen several months later in the deserts of Iraq, American technological and conventional military capabilities would make short work of an inferior military opponent. The Taliban

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98 Ibid.
was driven from their capital of Kandahar in December of 2001 and fled with their al-Qaeda colleagues across the border into Pakistan.\textsuperscript{100} However, just like Iraq in the following years, a military victory did not lead to peace, on the contrary the post-conventional military victory in Afghanistan has led to a prolonged insurgency that has grown increasingly dangerous and bloody, with the number of coalition casualties increasing every year that the conflict has continued.\textsuperscript{101}

The cause of this steady increase in violence and degradation of Afghan stability is directly related to the traditional causes and enablers of insurgency, many addressed earlier in this paper, that were permitted to grow in Afghanistan. While the Taliban was emphatically and quickly removed from power in Afghanistan initially, its leaders and infrastructure simply moved the short distance across the border into Pakistan to await a culmination of coalition political will and subsequent withdrawal. In the meantime, the regime of President Hamid Karzai did little to establish a government in which the population could place their trust, installing high-level officials based on tribal, ethnic, and personal allegiance rather than merit.\textsuperscript{102} In fact,

the prevailing condition (that led to the rise of the insurgency) was the inability of (the Afghan) government to improve the life in rural areas of the country... Without a change in approach, Afghanistan and its international partners would lose ground: their fortunes were now linked. Civilians would be more likely to fight their ‘disgusting government’ both because they detested it and because they feared the consequences of not fighting.\textsuperscript{103}

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{101} “Coalition Deaths by Year” iCasualties.org, http://icasualties.org/oef/ByYear.aspx.  
\textsuperscript{102} Moyar, A Question of Command, 193  
\textsuperscript{103} Jones, In the Graveyard of Empires, 202.
In addition to a weak Afghan government, American security planners opted for a light presence in Afghanistan for fear of being viewed as occupiers in the minds of the Afghan people, along the same lines as the Soviets two decades before. While there was significant debate within the administration, the view of Secretary Rumsfeld and those supporting a small and mobile force to engage the enemy won out over proponents of a more labor and money intensive reconstruction program proposed by Secretary of State Colin Powell among others.\(^{104}\) In discussing the exchange between these two camps, Seth Jones asserts that, “out of this debate emerged the watchword of American and international involvement in Afghanistan: a “light footprint.” In hindsight, this would prove to be a serious misstep that contributed to the collapse of government in Afghanistan.”\(^{105}\) This decision to keep a small number of troops in country was only galvanized as the White House’s security planners began drawing up plans for the invasion of Iraq, which would siphon off invaluable troops, equipment, and resources that effectively relegated Afghanistan to the backburner of American foreign policy. Fighting a war with a corrupt ally whose political credibility was strained and with far fewer resources than optimal, Afghanistan slowly slid back under the control of a ruthless and resilient Taliban regime, whose knowledge of local tribes, customs, and codes allowed them to exert tremendous pressure on the population.

\(^{104}\) Ibid, 114.
\(^{105}\) Ibid.
As David Kilcullen, the prominent counterinsurgency expert who has advised General Petraeus and Condoleza Rice on counterinsurgency, notes, “The Taliban’s relationship with local tribal allies is important in this pattern of conflict, and arises largely from opportunities created by the Afghan government,” as the Karzai regime has traded political status for support, regardless of ability. This vacuum of legitimate political governance has allowed the Taliban to step in and command the loyalty of much of the south, west and north of the country outside of the major cities of Kabul and Kandahar through a type of exhaustion strategy, forcing the feeble and inept government of Afghanistan to exhaust itself and its international allies pursuing small bands of Taliban throughout the country, or conceding it to their control. If the Taliban can convince the international community that this frustrating, expensive, and bloody operation is not in their interest, causing them to leave Afghanistan, the Uzbeck, Tajik, and Hazara tribes would likely abandon support of the Karzai regime, plunging the nation into civil war, a war which the Taliban and their Pashtu allies would likely win. Importantly, the Taliban has proven adept at carrying out such a strategy. As the first generation of conventional Taliban fighters was destroyed by the initial American attacks between 2001-2002, so too was the second generation of Taliban fighters that emerged from their hiding places in Afghanistan and Pakistan between 2003-2004 and began raiding coalition forces in earnest in 2005. “In contrast to (these two) previous

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107 Ibid, 52.
108 Ibid.
generations, today’s Taliban are an extremely proficient, well-organized, and well-equipped insurgent force. They combine cynical, experienced, hard-bitten leaders with extremely well-motivated, disciplined fighters and a new capacity for terrorist attacks,” thus making them well-suited to fight a disciplined and prolonged campaign against an impatient Western enemy.\(^{109}\)

The current enemy being fought in Afghanistan is the result of the political and local factors described above and because the United States started the job of eliminating the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, but shifted focus to Iraq before the job was completed, choosing to

run this campaign as an ‘economy of force’ operation, with a fraction of the effort applied elsewhere… (Afghanistan) is about one and a half time the size of Iraq and has somewhat larger population (32 million, of whom 6 million are Pashtun males of military age), but to date the United States has resourced it at about 27 percent of the funding given to Iraq, and allocated about 20 percent of the troops deployed in Iraq… The Taliban movement’s phenomenal resurgence from its nadir of early 2002 underlines this point: the insurgents’ successes seem due as much to inattention and inadequate resourcing on our part as to talent on theirs.\(^{110}\)

Afghanistan has been allowed to slip into insurgency because Iraq shifted the American focus before the country was pacified and handed over to a legitimate Afghan government, capable of providing its own security. However, if this analysis is correct and the Taliban successes since 2002 are largely a result of coalition ineptitude, it stands to reason that a recommitment to success in Afghanistan with newly available resources,

\(^{109}\) Ibid, 53.
\(^{110}\) Ibid, 44.
troops, and perhaps most importantly, a fresh understanding of the importance of time honored counterinsurgency doctrine, relearned in Iraq, can lead to significant and lasting success in this region. While the two theaters are certainly very different, it seems clear that the crucible of Iraq has taught America’s military and civilian leaders that the population is the ultimate objective of counterinsurgency, whether you are fighting in the metropolitan and educated society of Iraq or the largely illiterate, agrarian and village-centric society of Afghanistan.

**Analysis and Policy Recommendations**

As described by Mr. Nagl at the beginning of this section, Afghanistan is the perfect base of operations for an insurgency for a variety of factors, including the lack of political legitimacy within the country, its incredibly forbidding terrain, and the proximity of the Pakistani border, which serves as a safe haven for insurgents and terrorists. With the corruption-riddled presidential election of August tainted by widespread voting fraud, that political landscape has become even worse, detracting further from President Karzai’s already lacking legitimacy among much of the population. Therefore, the foundational COIN tenet of allowing the indigenous population to take responsibility and ownership of the security of their country is a long way off. In the interim, NATO forces must fill that gap until an Afghan security force under some form legitimate political control can step up.
The structure of this political authority has yet to be determined. One lesson, however, that was central to Iraq that does not appear to directly apply to Afghanistan is the efficacy of a strong central government. While such a structure is necessary in Iraq to equitably distribute the revenue derived from oil wealth (the life blood of Iraqi civil society) that is unequally distributed in fields across the country, such a situation does not exist in Afghanistan. Additionally, the landscape and society of Iraq, a historically well-developed and modern Arab state in the heart of the Middle East, allow for a centralized government from Baghdad. While the tribal nature of Arab society and reticence to accept control from a different region are palpable in Iraq, modernization and the desire to obtain a portion of the nation’s oil wealth have overcome these difficulties to a certain extent, if only a modest one. This is not the case in Afghanistan. A centralized system is much less important in Afghanistan and goes counter to millennia of experience of the Afghan people. What appears to be working, albeit slowly and painfully, in Iraq does not necessarily apply in Afghanistan. The coalition authority, along with the Afghan provincial and national leaders will have to come up with a system whereby the traditional tribal nature of Afghan politics can be combined with the need for a modicum of central control, which is necessary to provide stability between the various ethnic groups and to allow Afghanistan to provide for its own security from extremist threats.

Until such a political situation can be constructed, the job of providing for Afghan security from extremist threats will fall to the NATO ISAF troops present in country. The leadership of the current military commanders such as Generals Petraeus and McChrystal
and civilian commanders such as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, have been definitively informed by America’s operations in Iraq and historical lessons from previous campaigns. The primacy of population-centric counterinsurgency warfare has been well-learned by the highest levels of the America’s security establishment, as evidenced by the our final years and operations in Iraq. Additionally, all indications are that these lessons, learned from Malaya, Vietnam, and other COIN campaigns, are currently informing the decision-making process in Afghanistan. Some of these lessons will influence the types of missions the NATO coalition pursues and also the manner in which they are carried out, such as the recent “clear and hold” operations began in Helmand province by the Marines in July of this year.111

One such lesson that the United States has learned involves the use of airpower in COIN operations. America’s reliance on carpet-bombing in Vietnam created many Viet Cong sympathizers who otherwise would have been neutral. While our unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) operating in Afghanistan today are exponentially more accurate and precise than those used decades ago in Southeast Asia, they are still responsible for the killing of civilians. While regrettable and avoided at all reasonable costs, the nature of the enemy in Afghanistan, his proximity to and involvement with the population, all but ensures that targeting key Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders will bring collateral damage. The fact that the number of innocent deaths is so much smaller than Vietnam is nullified by

the ability of al-Qaeda and other like-minded groups to broadcast these incidents to a
global audience via satellite television, internet communications, and various other forms
of real-time communication. General McChrystal, the commanding general of all
American and coalition forces operating in Afghanistan has recognized this threat and is
already acting to prevent its deleterious effects, drastically restricting the circumstances
under which coalition forces are permitted to call in air support. After one such ill-
advised airstrike in early October of 2009, McChrystal addressed his NATO generals
saying,

Gentlemen, we need to understand the implications of what we are
doing… Air power contains the seeds of our own destruction. A guy with
a long-barrel rifle runs into a compound, and we drop a 500-pound bomb
on it? Civilian casualties are not just some reality with the Washington
press. They are a reality for the Afghan people. If we use airpower
irresponsibly, we can lose this fight. 112

As frustrating and dangerous as the situation on the ground is, it cannot be significantly
or permanently improved with increased firepower for the simple reason that insurgents
and terrorists live among the population. The use of indirect fire all but guarantees that
civilians will be struck as well and should only be utilized in the gravest of tactical
circumstances, as General McChrystal has made clear to troops operating in this theater.

While both Iraq and Afghanistan follow the basic themes of counterinsurgency,
they also belie several of them, the American military has learned these lessons as well.
Mao Tse-Tung and many Western COIN experts have expounded upon the organic

nature of insurgency; insurgencies are spawned and supported from within a population and therefore are not dependent upon outside actors.\textsuperscript{113} In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the influx of foreign fighters and economic support has been vital to both struggles. Along the same lines as information and propaganda, the internet and modern travel allow finances, personnel, and various other resources to flow into Afghanistan, particularly from Pakistan, making the task of isolating insurgents much more difficult. For this reason, political coordination with Pakistan will continue to be critical. Thus President Obama’s special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke, and other high-level U.S. leaders like Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, will continue to be essential actors in this struggle, all of whom should work to coordinate the political, military, and economic activities of the governments of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the United States along with their military efforts.

The United States military has learned many lessons of counterinsurgency as evidenced by their actions and relative success in Iraq combating a similar enemy to the one now faced in Afghanistan, though one with significant differences. The importance of securing the population, helping to establishing the political legitimacy of the Afghan government, and allowing the population to drive operations and eventually take responsibility for their own security have been made paramount. While the tribal and insular nature of Afghan society and the dearth of natural resources organic to the country will likely make this task more difficult, the leaders in charge of carrying out this mission

\textsuperscript{113} Mao, \textit{On Guerilla Warfare}, 73.
understand what they are trying to achieve, a politically stable and functioning Afghanistan that can provide for its own security. They have also demonstrated that they understand the various methods that have proven affective in achieving such an end state and those that have proven counter productive. The operations and tactics employed by General McChrystal will likely differ from those of General Petraeus in Iraq, but their purpose will be similar, securing the population and empowering them to participate in their own defense.

To that end, General McChrystal has requested more troops to pursue such a strategy. If President Obama decides to pursue a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan from the various options he is currently considering, he possesses a cadre of seasoned civilian and military leadership and tens of thousands of troops who have demonstrated their adaptability and willingness to learn the lessons of counterinsurgency warfare, lessons from history and most recently from the streets of Iraq.
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