INSTITUTIONAL IMPEDANCE:
WHY THE POST-WAR AMERICAN MILITARY FAILS TO ADAPT IRREGULAR WAR

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By

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ABSTRACT

Before the Second World War, the United States successfully prosecuted a number of counterinsurgency campaigns, defeating irregular adversaries in the Philippines and throughout the Caribbean. Since, the United States has not defeated a single irregular adversary despite numerous campaigns against such enemies. This paper hypothesizes that the institutional United States military's failure to fight effectively in irregular environments stems from its difficulty in constructing a flexible theory of victory and its preference for ignoring the integration of non-military factors in campaign planning. While this explains the observed phenomenon, the change after World War Two appears to correlate to an increase in the political influence of the institutional US military that promotes its inflexibility and focuses its campaign planning on overwhelmingly military mechanisms. Though the ongoing operation in Iraq offers an example of adaptation, the need to circumvent the institutional decision-making process in order to change the campaign plan actually reinforces the notion that the US military as an institution has extreme difficulty adjusting to the irregular environment due to its inflexible theory of victory and difficulty incorporating non-military endeavors into operational plans.
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Introduction

With America embroiled in Afghanistan and Iraq, counterinsurgency as a discipline has become a topic of national debate. While American military forces have consistently achieved tactical success in local engagements against insurgents, since World War Two the United States has generally failed to achieve its policy aims in campaigns against irregular forces. Strangely, prior to World War Two the American military successfully waged counterinsurgency campaigns in the Philippines and across the Caribbean. Why has the American military, arguably the most powerful military institution in history, routinely failed to adapt to fight effectively in irregular environments since 1945? Why has the institutional US military found operational success elusive in Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia, Iraq, and Afghanistan?

I hypothesize that the institutional United States (US) military's failure to fight effectively in these environments stems from its difficulty in constructing a flexible theory of victory and its preference for ignoring the integration of non-military factors in campaign planning. If this argument is correct, there should be ample evidence of the US military confronting an irregular adversary, adopting an inflexible theory of victory, and ignoring the role of non-military factors in campaign planning. If this argument is incorrect, evidence will emerge that US military commanders adapted their campaigns to the irregular environment, fielding a mostly light infantry force and incorporating non-military measures such as economic and political initiatives to address the non-military sources of irregular forces’ strength.
When addressing the flaw in American military planning for the irregular environment, organizational theory offers useful explanations for the origin of the institutional US military’s inflexibility and reluctance to integrate non-military initiatives. Unless faced with an existential threat, organizations resist changes imposed from without, and will restrict their own options for change to the range of collective experience. While this explains the observed phenomenon, the change after World War Two appears to correlate to an increase in the political influence of the institutional US military that promotes its inflexibility and focuses its campaign planning on overwhelmingly military mechanisms. Though the ongoing operation in Iraq offers an example of adaptation, the need to circumvent the institutional decision-making process in order to change the campaign plan actually reinforces the notion that the US military as an institution has extreme difficulty adjusting to the irregular environment.

This paper explores the institutional US military’s planning for warfare in the irregular environment through a structured, focused comparison among a series of cases, along both axes of time and space, beginning with an era in which the US military successfully prosecuted irregular campaigns. In each case, this paper will examine the manner in which military commanders confronted irregular adversaries, and will judge the ability of the military as an institution to execute an effective campaign in the irregular environment. For the purpose of comparison, this paper contrasts American campaigns against irregular foes with contemporary campaigns against similar adversaries prosecuted by Great Britain, to illustrate the similarities and differences between the American experience and those of another democratic world power. This
paper varies the temporal and institutional variables be examining the US military in irregular campaigns before and after World War Two, comparing it to the British military engaged in irregular campaigns at the same time, with a different institutional culture.

The wars in the Philippines and South Africa that took place around the turn of the 19th century offer a comparison of the American and British militaries adapting to an irregular environment in the wake of a successful conventional campaign. In the Philippines, the US military first defeated a conventional Spanish force and then dispersed a brave but poorly organized conventional Filipino force. As the Filipinos shifted to guerrilla tactics, American commanders recognized the importance of civic action as a counterpart to military measures, and established an effective campaign plan to subdue the irregulars.

In South Africa, the British suffered initial reverses at the hands of well-armed and tactically innovative conventional Boer forces, but as superior British materiel and manpower resources turned the tide the Boers adopted guerrilla tactics. British success in the Second Boer War also reflected innovation on the part of battlefield commanders, who devised a set of counterinsurgency tactics to crush the Boer resistance. In both cases, the institutional militaries changed their campaigns as a result of flexible notions about the use of military force, and successfully integrated non-military measures to defeat the irregular adversary.

The next case illustrates the development of doctrine in the institutional US military. Between 1915 and 1935, the US Marine Corps executed a number of campaigns against irregular adversaries as part of America’s policy of Dollar Diplomacy.
The collective experience eventually formed a doctrine for the conduct of small wars, specifying tactics and organizational methods fundamentally different from those associated with the major campaigns of the First World War. As subsequent cases make clear, this body of organizational experience did not survive the Second World War, and the lessons learned by Marines in the Caribbean did not translate to their Army counterparts three decades later.

Vietnam and Malaya offer another near-simultaneous comparison of American and British adaptation to the irregular environment, when faced with a jungle-based Communist insurgency. In Vietnam, the US military focused on fighting a conventional war of a type it had become familiar with in World War Two and Korea, and which it had long anticipated fighting against the Soviet Union (USSR). As a result, the US military systematically under-resourced and marginalized attempts to address the irregular aspects of the war, ultimately failing to defeat the Vietnamese insurgency. In Malaya, the British discarded the organizational structure of the Second World War, re-configured their armor and air-centric military to face irregular forces, and achieved comparative success.

Two subsequent cases illustrate the continued American difficulty with adaptation to the irregular environment. In both Lebanon and Somalia, the US military encountered an unexpected irregular adversary after a successful United Nations (UN) intervention. In both cases, the US military failed to adapt quickly enough to the changing environment, continuing to employ destructive military force in situations where that force could not achieve a decisive outcome.

Definitions
The term “institutional military” requires clarification, as does the mechanism this paper employs for identifying its preferences. For the purposes of this paper, the institutional US military is the senior uniformed leadership as a collective, and its decisions reflect the institutional preferences. Institutional preferences are notoriously difficult to define, as they rely on collective perceptions of individuals that evolve over time. However, since preferences are arguably most measurable in decision-making, the choices of an organization’s leaders that create a pattern can be said to demonstrate the organization’s institutional preference. Thus, the pattern of decisions made by US military leaders when adopting campaign plans for defeating irregular adversaries can be said to demonstrate the institutional US military’s approach to the irregular fight.¹

As a means of examining such approaches, the concept of the theory of victory explains the philosophy behind the use of force that underpins a strategy or campaign. When leaders construct a plan to use force to achieve a goal, there are implied or explicit assumptions about how military force can secure that goal. A theory of victory consists of the underlying assumptions about using force to achieve the political ends for which one fights.² Some theories of victory are explicit: Roosevelt and Churchill announced their intention to use military force to secure Germany’s unconditional surrender, and held to that statement despite Hess’s mission to secure peace on the western front. Other theories of victory are implicit, but discernable in statements about the role of “soft” and

¹ A more comprehensive examination of the institutional military’s approach to irregular warfare requires the separate identification and testing of a number of variables. The curricula for training and education in military schools, the doctrinal publications, the published writing of influential officers and civilians, and the collective interests of uniformed and civilian leadership would yield a degree of thoroughness that is beyond the scope of this paper.

“hard” power: the combination of blandishments and military power that comprised the NATO campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999.

The importance of a theory of victory is that it indicates the assumptions of the leaders or the organization prosecuting a military campaign. In the absence of a theory of victory the employment of military force becomes an end in itself, and planners rely on tactical success to achieve the political results desired. Some analysts of American military history place this “strategy of tactics”, born of a conviction that American materiel supremacy made strategic calculation unnecessary, at the heart of America’s failure in Vietnam. Theories of victory can be usefully estimated on two basic metrics: their use of force as an instrumental vice communicative tool, and their relative flexibility to address a variety of foes. The irregular environment demands a communicative and flexible theory of victory to defeat a politically-attuned and highly adaptive adversary.

In a purely instrumental theory of victory, violence is employed without mediation by political messages, such that the threat of military destruction is explicit and unconditional surrender is the sole legitimate objective. In a purely instrumental campaign diplomacy plays no role since negotiation is neither desirable nor necessary. World War Two is a useful approximation of an instrumental theory of victory: with its emphasis on the complete and unconditional surrender of Germany and the American and British refusal to entertain a separate peace.

In contrast, a communicative theory of victory employs violence as part of a strategic dialogue. The implied threat isn’t total destruction, but instead pain inflicted by

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military force as a mechanism to achieve a political objective short of unconditional surrender. To that end, various applications of military force must be considered and planned as part of a campaign: mining harbors, interdicting supply lines, the targeted destruction of key infrastructure, and the annihilation of military units all play a role. In this respect, a communicative theory of victory relies on the coercive use of force to persuade an adversary to change its behavior.

A theory of victory can be considered rigid if its application of force is confined to a single set of objectives. For example, a military only employed in peacekeeping operations might be said to have a rigid theory of victory, perceiving the attainment of its objectives only in the communicative effects of its forces. A military that only employs its forces to destroy adversary forces has a similarly rigid theory of victory, but in the opposite manner: its forces are only used instrumentally, as agents of destruction.

A flexible theory of victory conceives of the use of violence as one of several methods for achieving political objectives, or employs a military force to execute a variety of tactical tasks in a campaign. One construct for planning the use of military force in the irregular environment is the “three-block war”, a model in which military forces would be employed to provide humanitarian assistance on one block, to conduct population control (checkpoints, searches) on another, and to assault a fortified position held by insurgents on a third. The “three-block war” is thus an example of a flexible theory of victory: The ability to use military force in a variety of manners within the same campaign reflects a flexible campaign plan, and relies on a flexible theory of victory.
The concept of a “campaign” refers to an endeavor in which one military force engages against another for a given purpose, and is defined as a series of related tactical engagements coordinated to accomplish an operational or strategic objective.\textsuperscript{4} A campaign plan links separate operations into a unified whole, coordinating tactical events to achieve a larger operational objective.\textsuperscript{5} An effective campaign is one which achieves the operational or strategic objectives that have been set forth at the start of the campaign, renders those objectives easier to achieve, or makes the objectives unnecessary to achieve.

For example, Grant’s campaign in 1864 sought the destruction of Lee’s army as part of the strategic plan to defeat the Confederacy. While Grant failed to force Lee’s surrender that summer, he prevented Lee from frustrating Sherman’s campaign in Georgia, and facilitated Sheridan’s destruction of the Confederate supply base in the Shenandoah Valley. Grant’s campaign was effective despite not achieving its stated objectives until the following spring. While effective, Grant’s campaign was not flexible: he relied exclusively on the destructive power of his conventional military forces, neglecting to employ population control measures and civil reconstruction initiatives in territory he conquered.

The role of civil reconstruction grows in importance the further one deviates from combat between parallel regular forces, the closer the struggle approaches battle between regulars and disorganized groups. “Irregular” is a term applied by military professionals

\textsuperscript{4} Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1-02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, The Joint Staff, Washington, DC, 2001, p. 76,
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
to all non-regular forces, limited in scope to the traditional battlespace environment. In that respect it differs from the doctrinal term “unconventional”, which encompasses a broader range of means such as cyber-warfare and weapons of mass destruction.\(^6\) For the purposes of this article, the defining aspect of the irregular environment is the conflict between the military forces of a state and armed agents of a non-state actor, and has become a significantly greater concern since 2001.

The 2006 National Security Strategy describes “irregular challenges”, including “methods such as terrorism and insurgency”, and criminal activity “such as piracy and drug trafficking”, effectively endorsing this perspective.\(^7\) Guerrillas, terrorists, militias, insurgents, and covert operatives not openly representing or beholden to another state government are all irregulars. Thus counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and military operations against criminal elements all take place in the irregular environment.

The irregular environment is an important component of hybrid warfare, an area of increasing concern in which the US will likely operate in the future. A hybrid war involves a state’s forces simultaneously fighting regular and irregular forces in the same theater. Hoffman’s writing on hybrid war has influenced the thinking of several Service chiefs, citing the 2006 war in Lebanon as a foretaste of future conflicts. This vision does not seek to supplant traditional war, but rather adds a layer of additional complexity, forcing the US military to focus on campaigns rather than discrete battles.\(^8\)

\(^6\) Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1-02: Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, p. 574.
For many thinkers, including "those drafting NDS 05 [the 2005 National Defense Strategy], strategic-level contests of an irregular and potentially catastrophic nature would be consistently more likely and over time increasingly more consequential than most traditional military challenges". As war in the irregular environment occupies an increasing proportion of American military planning, it is worth discussing several elements of the irregular environment in some detail.

Guerrilla warfare is conducted by irregulars who fight, often in support of conventional forces or in the vacuum left after the destruction of regular forces, classically such as in Spain in 1808-14 and France in 1870-1871. In the archetypal Spanish case, guerrilla forces were poorly organized and prone to the pursuit of criminal endeavors, which decreased some of their popular legitimacy over time. Tactically, guerrilla warfare consists of raids and hit-and-run engagements that seek to increase the territory and population under guerrilla control, to eventually muster the resources to field conventional forces against the state. Whereas guerrillas tend to be poorly organized, an insurgency displays a greater degree of organization and coordination.

Defined by Trinquier as "modern warfare", insurgency seeks "the overthrow of the established authority and its replacement by another regime", a fundamentally political objective. The sharp asymmetry between the insurgent and the

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counterinsurgent lies in the insurgent’s strength in intangibles, often the ideological power of a cause such as communism, religion, or nationalism, which combine with fear and intimidation to sway the population to the insurgent side. In contrast, the counterinsurgent relies on the tangible power of the organs and institutions of the state, and the protection those organs can provide the populace. This struggle over legitimacy, determining by force of arms who will exert political control over the population, elevates the role of political considerations at the tactical level, where actions must link to the “essential political goals” of the overall campaign.

**Literature Review**

Organization theory and strategic studies have important insights into the behavior of military institutions, that explain the individual cases in some detail and shed light on the important change in the US military’s ability to prosecute a campaign against an irregular adversary. Organizational theory explains that leaders, particularly military leaders, are prone to resist change until either an existential threat is manifest or a series of defeats unequivocally shows the failure of existing methods. Strategic studies draws out the unique nature of small wars relative to major combat operations, and notes the elements of military culture that influence how individual leaders approach a given campaign.

Posen’s description of organizational decision-making in the absence of existential threat offers important insight into the process by which the institutional

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military approaches change in the context of irregular warfare. Posen identifies the critical interaction between people, organizations, and the purpose they have been charged with working towards as the key element for explaining the nature of change. The interaction among three sets of variables poses a challenge for developing a causal framework, but “organization theory explains a great deal about general tendencies within military organizations that affect military doctrine”, particularly the resistance to change from without.

Notably, Posen’s work illustrates how organizations resist externally imposed change in the absence of an existential threat. To effect change in a military institution, a civilian leader would require the military leadership to recognize the imperative for change, posed by a threat to the existence of the institution itself. This has important implications for the case study of Vietnam: in the absence of an existential threat, Kennedy’s insistence that the Army develop a counter-guerrilla strategy fell on deaf ears.

Feldman and Kanter’s work on organizational decision-making also sheds light on the ability of a military institution to develop alternatives in order to effect change. Echoing Posen, they argue that the “principal stimulus to search” for an alternative “is dissatisfaction with available” options, though they do not postulate the level that dissatisfaction must reach. More importantly, Feldman and Kanter describe how the search for options tends to be limited, effectively constrained by the experience of the

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leadership. In the case of the US Army, the formative experience of World War Two created a purely conventional range of experience from which to draw, limiting the organization’s perceived options. This explains the institutional military’s preference for a rigidly instrumental theory of victory, but not its unwillingness to change when faced with defeat on the battlefield of Vietnam.

Strategic studies offers important insights into the manner in which military thinkers select among their available options, as does the history of American strategic thought on irregular war. The most influential strategic thinker of modern times is probably the 19th-century Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz, though his influence on the institutional US military has been rather less profound than one might expect. As late as 1900, the nation’s pre-eminent naval theorist, A. T. Mahan, sought to be “the Jomini of maritime war, not its Clausewitz”, reflecting the American preference for French over Prussian military thought.18

Even after World War I demonstrated the planning acumen of the German General Staff, the American military largely ignored Clausewitz’s dictum that “war is the continuation of policy by other means”.19 In the austere budgetary environment of the 1920s and 1930s, the American military “was concerned with survival”, and summarized Clausewitz in a series of military principles with tactical, rather than strategic implications.20 By latching onto the high reputation that German military

19 Clausewitz, On War, p. 87.
20 Weigley, The American Way of War, p. 212.
professionalism had acquired, the US military sought to use Clausewitz’s comments regarding professionalizing the conduct of war to justify the creation of military schools dedicated to the study of warfare.

As a result, American military doctrine focused on tactical maxims such as the importance of massing forces and the role of the offensive in war, and overlooked the Prussian’s strategic regarding the relationship between war and policy. This instrumental focus on the employment of military force to defeat an opponent in the field and the general neglect of the political dimension of war proved benign in the major combat environment, where politics is generally suspended for the duration of conflict. But it has critical implications in the irregular warfare environment, sometimes categorized as “small wars”, in which political considerations are more tactically relevant.

Small war is a broad term originally defined by British writers early in the 20th century, as “all campaigns other than those where the opposing sides consist of regular troops”. Among British writers, this definition has persisted through to the present day, where Colin Gray defines small wars as “war between regulars and irregulars”. For the purposes of this article, the British term “small war” refers to warfare in the irregular environment: in the British sense all small wars involve regular forces opposing irregular adversaries.

American usage of the term is subtly but significantly different. The Small Wars Manual, published by the US Marine Corps in 1940, defines small wars as “operations

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taken under executive authority, wherein military force is combined with diplomatic pressure in the internal or external affairs of another state”, and links American small wars to enforcement of the Monroe Doctrine. In this sense, a small war is a minor war, not necessarily against an irregular adversary, waged by the President without the explicit approval of Congress: many of America’s post-Vietnam interventions fit this definition.

Modern American thinkers such as Andrew Mack, Eliot Cohen, and Carnes Lord expand the Small Wars Manual’s definition to include wars waged against the vastly smaller proxy forces of other great powers. In Mack’s perspective, the asymmetry in scale is critical because it correlates to an asymmetry in resolve: the great power fights the lesser power under conditions where the lesser power is faced with potential annihilation, and the stronger is not. This includes conventional conflict: the US interventions in Grenada (1983), Panama (1989), Haiti (1994) and Bosnia (1995) can all be viewed through this prism. In each case, the American conventional forces defeated the military forces of another state or representatives of a state, and achieved the policy objective through destructive force or the threat of military action.

In Cohen’s view, “small war” substitutes for the terms “limited war” and “low-intensity conflict”, since limited war brings to mind applications of tactical nuclear weapons and the latter implies a low degree of violence. Cohen accepts the role of asymmetry and the weaker state’s option to “drag it out” to erode the great power’s

resolve. But he also notes that the military force required for small wars is generally light infantry, instead of the armored and mechanized forces planned for major war. He also notes that unlike major wars, small wars are rarely foreseen, so the forces required must be dispatched quickly to “remote corners of the world”. Cohen notes deficiencies in the “American defense establishment” when faced with small wars, and traces these to an inability to recognize that a different type of military force (in terms of doctrine, training, equipment, and organization) is required for fighting a small war as opposed to a major war.

Lord draws out the key point that the American tradition of fighting small wars was forgotten in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the US military configured itself to fight a massive war with the Soviet Union. In this respect, Lord agrees with Cohen, who notes that the American style of war that emerged in the two world wars emphasizes a style of war-fighting largely unsuited to the political constraints of small wars. Both authors identify the root cause as institutional: Cohen in the military’s approach to small war and Lord in the “conceptual clarity and operational effectiveness” that the military applies to the category of conflict. The key question remains: why are the institutional US military’s approach and concept flawed?

In two significant cases in which the United States achieved its objectives in defeating a Communist guerrilla movement, but neither actually meets the criteria of this

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26 Ibid.
paper because the institutional US military did not directly confront an irregular adversary. The counterinsurgency campaigns in Greece (1946-49) and El Salvador (1980-90) are campaigns against irregular forces, but they are more accurately described as proxy wars, in which the US military supported but did not engage irregular foes.

A proxy war is a war fought by one power against another, using an intermediary instead of its own forces. For example, the Vietnam War was a proxy war by the Soviet Union, using its North Vietnamese ally against the United States. Likewise, the Soviet war in Afghanistan (1979-89) was a proxy war by the United States against the Soviet Union, using its Afghan mujaheddin allies. In this study, both Greece (1946-49) and El Salvador (1980-90) are treated as proxy wars, fought by combat forces of an American ally against communist insurgents backed by Moscow. In both cases, the collapse of external support (via Yugoslavia in Greece, from the Soviet Union in El Salvador) proved the decisive factor in the campaign. In neither instance did American advisors plan or engage in combat operations; they were restricted to training and equipping conventional military forces.

The importance of the El Salvador campaign is twofold: it was both largely instrumental in nature and yet an oft-cited template for future American counterinsurgency operations. The Government of El Salvador (GOES) engaged in an overwhelmingly military campaign against its Marxist adversaries of the Faribundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Salvadoran officers preferred the type of search-and-destroy missions typical of the failed American effort in Vietnam and resisted the counsel of their American advisors, who insisted that the war would be won politically. The
persistence of the FMLN after the ending of hostilities signals the failure of the GOES to address the grievances that produced the insurgency.

**The Pre-War Era**

The American experience in the Philippines from 1898-1902 closely parallels that of the United Kingdom in the Boer War. In both conflicts, liberal democracies defeated conventional adversaries in a colonial war, only to face a guerrilla movement as the defeated forces refused to accept the transfer of control to a new regime. Each military adapted to the emerging irregular environment and effectively prosecuted a counterinsurgency campaign, establishing a model the British employed in their colonial enterprises, and the Americans used later in the Caribbean.

In the Philippines, America initially had very limited policy aims, but unexpected naval success offered the hitherto unimagined prospect of overseas empire. McKinley moved slowly to exploit the opportunity, leaving critical decisions regarding the occupation and transition to civilian control in the hands of the military commanders. The commanders’ ability to adapt to the irregular environment paved the way for the Philippines to become an American protectorate for decades to come.

The Filipinos themselves, led by Emilio Aguinaldo, had declared independence in late 1897. Despite their undeniable valor, they proved unable to eject the Spanish imperial garrison, which in turn could harry but not destroy Aguinaldo’s rebel army. In the spring of 1898, Admiral George Dewey’s defeat of the Spanish squadron in Manila Bay allowed the Americans to facilitate Aguinaldo’s return, assisted by the landing of General Wesley Merritt’s US Army forces. Merritt’s expeditionary force defeated the
Spaniards at Manila after token resistance, and the general excluded Filipino forces from the city.\textsuperscript{30}

While Aguinaldo expected US to leave the archipelago to native control, the Treaty of Paris annexed the Philippines to the United States in December 1899.\textsuperscript{31} Hostilities between Filipino forces and the Americans (now led by General Elwell Otis) commenced at Manila in February of 1900, the first of a series of battles the Americans “won handily”.\textsuperscript{32} This mirrored the Spanish experience of decisively defeating Filipino rebels in pitched battle, only to find them accustomed to formal defeat and capable of assuming harassing operations, characteristic of guerrilla war.\textsuperscript{33}

Campaigns on Luzon in 1899 and 1900 highlighted the difficulties faced by the US Army, as cavalry and heavy supply trains were restricted to glacial paces of movement.\textsuperscript{34} But none of the heralded conventional victories were able to crush the insurgent military organization, nor destroy popular support for their cause.\textsuperscript{35} Otis refused initially to recognize the existence of a guerrilla army, and was quoted to that effect.\textsuperscript{36} Otis’ failure to address the reality of guerrilla war was pilloried in the press and earned him opprobrium from fellow officers, both of whom noted that his campaign plan

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{30} Linn, Brian McAllister. \textit{The Philippine War: 1899-1902}. University of Press Kansas, Lawrence, Ka., 2000, p. 25.
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Minger, Ralph Eldin. \textit{William Howard Taft and United States Foreign Policy: The Apprenticeship Years 1900-1908}. University of Illinois Press, Urbana, Ill., 1975, p. 58
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Linn, \textit{The Philippine War}. p. 47.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Asprey, Robert. \textit{War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History}. William Morrow and Company, New York, 1994, p. 129.
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Linn, \textit{The Philippine War}. p. 169.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Wolff, \textit{Little Brown Brother}. p. 289.
\end{itemize}
was “not adapted to the nature of the country, the climate, or the people”. Nonetheless, Otis deserves credit for identifying the necessity of civic action, though he was unable to implement an effective plan.

Despite the establishment of local governance by force, the guerrillas were usually able to create a shadow government that suborned US initiatives and prosecuted a murder and intimidation campaign against collaborators. Succeeding Otis, General Arthur MacArthur (father of the World War II commander) recognized the link between the guerrilla forces and the towns, but his growing understanding of the nature of the war did not lead him to an immediate solution. In fact, MacArthur was building on a “pacification doctrine that that balanced conciliation and repression”, grounded in the Civil War and Indian War experience.

This doctrine originates in General Order 100, a Civil War-era directive that “outlines the duties and responsibilities of noncombatants and called for strict penalties against both guerrillas and their supporters”. As military patrols uncovered and arrested guerrillas, the Army “continued to work on civil government as a means of cutting off the guerrillas from the population”. The cumulative effect of municipal government, local police, and government supporters gradually divorced the populace from the

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38 Linn, The Philippine War, p. 208.
41 Linn, The Philippine War, p. 9.
43 Linn, Brian McAllister. The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, p. 146.
revolutionaries.\footnote{Linn, Brian McAllister. The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, p. 148.} This effect reflects the close coordination between military and civilian authorities. As the President’s representative, Governor William Howard Taft assumed executive power on July 4, 1900, and swiftly incorporated Filipinos on the ruling Commission, a first step toward Filipino autonomy that effectively undermined the rebel cause.\footnote{Minger, William Howard Taft and United States Foreign Policy, pp. 70-71.}

The Philippine Insurrection offers an important example of the institutional US military’s ability to adapt to the irregular environment. The conventional military campaigns, employing artillery and cavalry as well as infantry, defeated the regular forces fielded by the Filipino rebels, but were unable to handle the guerrilla fight. The military commanders then began to implement civic initiatives and used military forces to establish non-military power. The emerging formula has become something of a cornerstone in counterinsurgency doctrine: security comes first, followed by establishment of civil governance with associated educational, legal, and social reforms.\footnote{Linn, Brian McAllister. The U.S. Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, p. 170.}

From the standpoint of organizational theory, the military leadership adapted quickly in the face of defeat. Military leaders changed their campaign plans from punitive expeditions and seeking to defeat an enemy army in the field to securing the population and building a legitimate governance structure. From Posen’s perspective, this adaptation reflects change from within, while Kanter and Feldman would note the
role of Civil War experience among the senior commanders in shaping US military planning for counterinsurgency.

The role of Presidential leadership is not unimportant here: President McKinley fired Otis without hesitation and ultimately installed Taft as governor, replacing MacArthur with General Adna Chaffee. Interestingly, Taft was given control of every US penny spent in the islands, to include the salaries of the military personnel, thus reinforcing his control over the military leadership. The institutional US military was rapidly reflective of the civilian politician’s preferences in a manner that Avant associates with the British experience in South Africa.

In many ways, the British experience in South Africa paralleled that of the Americans in the Philippines, particularly in the need for a conventional military to adapt to an irregular environment. British policy sought to protect the rights of Britons living in the Afrikaaner states of Transvaal and the Orange Free State, but by extension the British position in Africa and the prestige of its global empire. In the Boer War, the British conventional campaign suffered initial reverses, then achieved victory rendered hollow by the Boer shift to guerrilla tactics. The British commanders’ ability to adapt to this environment reflects both the institutional flexibility of the military institution and their responsiveness to the desires of the civilian leadership.

In the early stages of the war, faster Boer mobilization enabled them to achieve impressive initial victories, and British weapons and tactics proved inadequate to the challenge. Repeated British failures culminated in a series of defeats known as “Black

47 Asprey, War in the Shadows, p. 131.
Week”, after which the United Kingdom (UK) dispatched a vastly larger force under Field Marshal Lord Frederick Roberts. Changing tactics to break free of cumbersome rail-linked supply routes, by the spring of 1900 Roberts had captured the Free State’s capital at Bloemfontein. In response to the Boer tactics, the British evolved a remarkably modern set of infantry tactics, using terrain for cover, advancing infantry by bounding rushes, and coordination with artillery.⁴⁹

After the fall of Bloemfontein, Roberts’ subordinate General Sir Redvers Buller “forecast a guerrilla war”, and that the Boer forces would now have to be the focus of the campaign.⁵⁰ Roberts persisted with the conventional fight, and captured the Transvaal capital at Pretoria in June. But Buller’s prediction proved accurate, and at the end of May the Boer commander Piet de Wet captured over 500 British troops, escaping afterward into the eastern Transvaal.⁵¹

In early 1901 Sir Alfred Milner, the senior British civilian in South Africa, suggested a change in tactics to Roberts. Milner proposed that the British adopt a progressive reconquest plan, securing each district in turn and establishing order before moving on.⁵² This replication of French Marshal Hubert Lyautey’s successful tac d’huile (“oil spot”) methodology from the Morocco campaign dovetailed with the campaign plan offered by Roberts’ replacement, Field Marshal Lord Herbert Kitchener.

Kitchener planned a twofold campaign: sweeps by “flying columns” to flush out the guerrillas combined with more methodical expeditions to deprive them of everything

⁵⁰ Pakenham, The Boer War p. 399.
⁵¹ Pakenham, The Boer War p. 463.
⁵² Pakenham, The Boer War p. 515.
that could provide them sustenance. In addition to burning crops and destroying farms, the British captured livestock and interned the civilian population in camps. Kitchener also constructed blockhouses, small fortifications that could support each other and defend the newly cleared areas against guerrilla attack. Kitchener’s program of “a labyrinth of blockhouses” effectively denied the Boer forces freedom of movement, and isolated them from the civilian population.  

Milner’s original proposal directed Kitchener to adopt the “protection policy”, and the British shifted to a campaign designed to control territory and the population residing therein. Notably, the operational changes originated with the military commanders and their civilian counterparts in South Africa, and not in the government in London. Avant identifies one source of this flexibility in the ability of civilian leaders to intervene in selecting field commanders, forcing the military to reflect the goals of their civilian masters. In this respect, the two chief executives had similar roles: several military commanders were replaced in both the Philippines and South Africa, regardless of changes in the campaign plan. In contrast, the present US military policy favors continuity in command, based on Eisenhower’s success in the Second World War.

The lessons of adaptation to the irregular environment were not lost on the institutional US military. As the formal collective memory of the organization, military doctrine reflects the accepted manner in which to execute a given set of operations, and

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53 Asprey, War in the Shadows, p. 147.
54 Pakenham, The Boer War p. 543.
campaigning in the irregular environment was formalized in doctrine in 1940. That formalization reflected nearly four decades of fighting, called the Banana Wars, in which US military forces intervened throughout the Caribbean to secure the economic interests of US corporations - the so-called “Dollar Diplomacy” era.

Most importantly, the institutional leadership retained their knowledge of counterinsurgency for use in irregular wars. The Banana Wars were executed largely by the Marine Corps, the infantry force most available to the “interventionist institutions” of the State and Navy Departments. In this respect, the Marine Corps experience was very similar to that of the British, who used their military for imperial policing and internal security and counterinsurgency operations. The formal doctrine encapsulated in the Small Wars Manual of 1940, specified methods for combat tactics and organization to defeat guerrilla foes.

It also specified that the military commander would be subordinated to the State Department representative, noting the primacy of politics in such campaigns. Because of this political emphasis, the manual directed officers to remember that the State Department “exercises a constant and controlling influence over military operations”. Since military operations can only be a precursor, and civil control the desired endstate, the military commander must assume governance functions until the native government can take over. This deliberate subordination forced the institutional military to

incorporate non-military mechanisms to achieve their objectives. Commanders had to think in terms of flexible applications of military forces, to employ them both destructively and constructively.

The *Small Wars Manual* thus effectively distills the theory of victory necessary for successful operation in the irregular environment, and notes how it differs from that required for major combat operations. A successful campaign plan against irregular forces combines military operations with non-military initiatives designed to destroy the insurgent base of support by securing the loyalty of the population. The military operation establishes security and trains a local paramilitary or police force, while the non-military operation builds local capacity in a variety of areas to resist the blandishments and threats of insurgents. With that template, American forces repeatedly waged successful campaigns against irregular forces prior to the Second World War.

In these three cases, perhaps the most notable aspect is the flexibility of the institutional military when confronted with irregular adversaries. In both the Philippines and South Africa conventional military campaigns failed to secure victory, and rather than persist with inappropriate tactics the respective militaries shifted their focus. In the Caribbean, regular forces confronted irregulars consistently enough to formalize this shift in doctrine. Repeatedly, local commanders adapted their tactics and organization to the needs of the irregular environment.

Avant cites the intervention of political leadership in selecting military commanders, and there are examples in the Philippines and South Africa of such selection. That intervention does not appear in the major studies of the Banana Wars,
perhaps because of the small scale of the operations. Whatever the role of political leadership, by 1940 the institutional US military had adopted a flexible theory of victory for the irregular environment and codified it in a doctrinal document. Later American difficulties in Vietnam and elsewhere reflect the extent to which the institutional military ignored those lessons and that doctrine.

**Vietnam**

In the wake of the Second World War, both the US and the UK fought wars against a jungle-based Communist insurgency in Southeast Asia. Where the Americans largely failed in Vietnam, the British achieved remarkable success, for reasons that reflect the US military’s comparatively inflexible approach to campaigning against an irregular adversary. Where the British re-configured their force to fight the guerrillas in Malaya, the Americans persisted in employing the same type of forces designed to fight the Soviet military in the jungles of Vietnam. Where the British incorporated political and economic initiatives into the campaign plan, the Americans relegated those efforts to secondary roles, systematically under-resourcing and marginalizing them.

At the height of the Cold War, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev endorsed the principle of wars of national liberation, as a means for the USSR to strike at the colonial empires of America’s allies through anti-colonial insurgencies. To mitigate this threat, President John F. Kennedy emphasized counter-insurgency as part of his “Flexible Response” doctrine, but the irregular warfare concept “ran into conflict with an Army bent on preparing for conventional war in Europe, not brushfire wars in the emerging

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61 Millett, *Semper Fidelis*  
Asprey, *War in the Shadows*
nations of the Third World”. The institutional military resisted the shift in focus from a conventional adversary to an irregular one, viewing the civilian-directed change as unnecessary.

Posen explains this type of organizational resistance as reflecting unwillingness to change in the absence of a recognized existential threat. So long as the institutional military believed that the solutions to the insurgency problem lay within the existing capacity of the military, the generals would resist presidential directives to change. Indeed, generals regarded counterinsurgency as a lesser-included task in the conduct of war. The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Maxwell Taylor, told the President “we soldiers are trained for all kinds of things”, a sentiment echoed by his successor General Lyman Lemnizter and the Army Chief of Staff, General George Decker, who claimed “any good soldier can handle guerrillas”. When civilians suggested major changes, the senior leadership resisted the “structural reforms or innovations”, perceiving a threat to the institutional structure which reflected their experience in World War Two.

The institutional US military resisted three major adaptations during the Vietnam War, illustrating both inflexibility and the unwillingness to integrate non-military approaches in the campaign plan. First, the institutional military developed new missions for existing equipment rather than discarding systems inappropriate for fighting irregulars. Second, the institutional military employed its forces to destroy major enemy

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63 Posen, The Sources of Military Doctrine, p. 75.
units while the irregular forces of the Viet Cong (VC) posed the graver threat to the Saigon regime. Third, the institutional military systematically under-resourced non-military initiatives and neglected to integrate them into the broader campaign plan.

During the Vietnam War, the institutional US military consistently organized its forces in a manner that reflected its largest anticipated adversary rather than the adversary it was fighting. Though General William Westmoreland initially “questioned the use of armored formations” in Vietnam, the Army Staff persuaded him to accept additional armored forces to increase his firepower and provide better protection to his forces. Artillery added to the available firepower, though some senior generals doubted its effective employment in Vietnam, as its unexploded ordnance provided Vietnamese insurgents with a source of explosives for their booby traps. Aircraft, both helicopters and fighter-bombers, provided additional mobility and firepower to increase the force ratio in favor of the Americans, but in practice the ratio of firepower and effectiveness was already in America’s favor and the additions were of limited utility against widely dispersed insurgent forces. Essentially, the US military as an institution failed to recognize that small war requires a different kind of military for a different kind of conflict.

This focus on firepower and force ratio illustrates the conceptual challenge faced by the US military as an institution in adapting to the counterinsurgency environment. Rather than employ population control measures, establish security zones, and deploy the

69 Cohen, p. 167.
type of light infantry forces that were successful in the Philippines and the Banana Wars, American commanders consistently chose to emphasize instrumental applications of military force, such as the firepower deployed in terms of bombs and artillery rounds, the destruction of enemy main force units, and the ratio of enemy to friendly killed. This instrumental (and relatively indiscriminate) use of force drove an estimated four million South Vietnamese from the rural areas to the cities, where their concentration in shantytowns added to the social and political problems that fueled the insurgency.\(^{70}\)

American commanders consistently rejected the idea that US forces should confront the irregulars that posed the greatest threat to the Saigon regime. As a result, it was “left to the ARVN [Army of the Republic of Vietnam] to…wage the ‘other war’ of pacification in the villages”.\(^{71}\) When American units did encounter irregular forces their superior firepower invariably forced their adversary to withdraw, but the air-mobile and armored units consistently “relied on firepower to substitute for permanent occupation of the ground”, allowing the VC irregulars to re-assert their control over the population after the American withdrawal.\(^{72}\) This ineffective campaign plan did not adequately address the Saigon regime’s need to establish its legitimate rule over the countryside.

With weapons and tactics ill-suited to the irregular environment, it comes as no surprise that the institutional US military also failed to adequately plan its integration of civil-military initiatives. The three most prominent of these were the Civilian Irregular


Defense Corps (CIDG), the Combined Action Platoons (CAP), and the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) program. In the case of the CIDG, Army Special Forces and CIA had developed an effective method of training South Vietnamese civilians to defend their villages from Communist infiltrators and small units. When the program was moved from CIA to Army control, “the latter was only interested in the contribution the CIDG could make to the main force war”, and the program was effectively terminated.\(^\text{73}\)

A Marine Corps initiative, CAP placed Marine units inside Vietnamese villages to provide security and isolate the populace from the insurgents. By 1966, the Marine Corps employed 57 platoons, training local forces, conducting night patrols, and disrupting insurgent activity while enabling the establishment of local governance.\(^\text{74}\) Similar operations protected the rice harvest from insurgent taxation by providing a long-term presence in villages threatened by insurgent activity.\(^\text{75}\) While the Marines effectively denied the insurgents the opportunity to swim among the people like fish in the sea as Maoist doctrine advised, the rest of the institutional US military rejected their efforts. When British advisors, invited by the Army to share their experience in the Malayan emergency, recommended the Marine campaign plan, they were told that they “had been fixed by the Marines- brainwashed”, according to a British brigadier.\(^\text{76}\)

In 1966 President Lyndon Johnson sent a civilian representative with the rank of ambassador to supervise CORDS on Westmoreland’s staff in Vietnam. With a military

\(^{73}\) Beckett, Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies, p. 190.
title of deputy commander for pacification, Ambassador Robert Komer embodied the “ad hoc civil-military hybrid” that was going to apply counterinsurgency principles to the campaign in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{77} CORDS worked tirelessly to improve the Vietnamese units (Regional Forces and Popular Forces) responsible for providing basic security to the people. Its efforts were hampered by the lateness of the effort, “by which time the struggle for the economic and physical security of the population had already been lost”, while its starkly limited resources (less than 4 percent of the Vietnam budget in 1969) contributed to its difficulties.\textsuperscript{78}

American commanders recognized that the campaign in Vietnam was failing, both on the battlefield and on the home front, but replacing Westmoreland with General Creighton Abrams after the Tet Offensive failed to produce significant change in the American plan. Instead, the conventional war expanded into Cambodia in 1970. Ironically, the destruction of VC cadres in the Tet Offensive forced the North to shift its emphasis from mostly successful insurgent operations to a mostly conventional campaign. Despite the institutional US military’s relative superiority in this type of contest, American unwillingness to continue the war allowed the North to exploit the weakness of South Vietnam. In part, this defeat reflected the American military’s unwillingness to strengthen the Saigon regime through a coordinated counterinsurgency campaign.

The institutional US military’s response to the irregular war in Vietnam differs fundamentally from its response in the Philippines. When confronted with a guerrilla

\textsuperscript{77} Krepinevich, \textit{The Army and Vietnam} p. 217.
\textsuperscript{78} Beckett, \textit{Modern Insurgencies and Counter-Insurgencies}, p. 200-201.
adversary in 1900, American generals changed their campaign plan and reduced their reliance on cavalry and artillery to better hunt insurgents and protect the population. The institutional leadership during the Vietnam War did not identify the need to modify the force, and focused their campaign planning on the engagement and destruction of main force units. The generals of the Philippine Insurrection drew on methods established four decades earlier; those in Vietnam had the option to draw on twenty-year old doctrine and chose not to. According to organization theory, the conditions in Vietnam were ripe for innovation: Vietnam offered a combination of battlefield defeat and civilian interference that would be expected to produce change in the institutional military.\textsuperscript{79}

One source of the institutional US military’s unexpected inflexibility lies in the formative experience of senior US Army officers in conventional combat against German, Japanese, and Chinese divisions in World War Two and Korea. They preferred to focus on an adversary they understood: the North Vietnamese Army’s main force divisions. The institutional rigidity of the US military in Vietnam flows from the dominance of the Army and its extensive but narrow experience in conventional war. Establishing security for the population and integrating political and economic initiatives in the campaign plan were concepts beyond the scope of Army generals’ experience. The Korean War reinforced the Army’s preference for an instrumental theory of victory, as a philosophy that would allow them to destroy an adversary completely and secure a surrender instead of accepting an armistice or a war half-won.

\textsuperscript{79} Posen, p. 59.
In contrast, Marine officers who served in the small wars of the 1920s and 1930s could draw on that experience to adopt a more flexible theory of victory and integrate non-military initiatives in their campaign plan, conceiving of mechanisms by which adversaries would be coerced into submission. Thus to a large extent, the decisions made by the institutional leadership of each Service in Vietnam were constrained by the previous experience of the organization’s members, and may also reflect the organizational history of the Service. As a marginal member of military establishment, the Marine Corps had been forced to maintain organizational flexibility to ensure its survival. The Marine Corps embraced expeditionary operations from 1900-1940 to find “missions that would allow them to maintain their operational integrity”, in contrast to the Army whose existence was never in doubt and whose mission changed marginally if at all.

Another interesting contrast with the Philippines case is the role of civilian leadership, both in the military theater and in Washington. In terms of presidential influence, McKinley’s willingness to replace Merritt with Otis, Otis with MacArthur, and MacArthur with Chaffee indicates a degree of civilian control absent in the Vietnam era, where commanders were retained much longer. In the Philippines, the senior civilian directed both the military and political efforts as “governor general”, whereas in Vietnam the ambassador had a secondary role in overall policy and the only civilian on the senior military staff supervised an under-resourced effort. This change correlates to the political development of the military, whose leaders had learned to play off Congress and the

81 Avant, The Institutional Sources of Military Doctrine p. 421.
President to further their budgetary goals. Facing a politically astute military leadership, and mindful of the political cost paid by President Truman for firing General Douglas MacArthur, later presidents chose to tread carefully in personnel decisions.\textsuperscript{82}

\textbf{Malaya}

From 1948 to 1961, the British fought a successful counterinsurgency campaign against jungle-based Communist irregulars in Malaya, which provides a useful contrast to the American campaign in Vietnam. Their achievement was facilitated by at least two key factors not present in Vietnam: the geography of the Malay Peninsula was more conducive to isolating the insurgency than the long land border of Vietnam, and the insurgency reflected the grievances of the Chinese minority, which limited its ability to wield independence or nationalism as effective propaganda tools. Though smaller in scale, the timeframe, the Communist adversary with roots opposing the Japanese occupation, and the Southeast Asian location make Malaya a better case for comparison with Vietnam than other major British counterinsurgency campaigns in Palestine, Cyprus and Kenya.

The British entered the campaign with many of the same institutional hindrances as the Americans in Vietnam. In the early years of the campaign, the British military was designed to fight “a nuclear, or conventional war in Europe” relying on armor, artillery, and air power much as the US military did.\textsuperscript{83} Like the US military, the Second World War was the dominant experience for the institutional leadership of the UK military,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{82} Avant, \textit{The Institutional Sources of Military Doctrine} p. 422.
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resulting in a preference for sweeps by large numbers of ground forces to search and destroy insurgent units. But throughout the course of the Malaya Emergency, the institutional UK military adapted their techniques to the irregular environment, focused on the enemy at hand, and developed a campaign plan that integrated non-military measures to defeat the insurgency.

With a military organized to fight the Soviets in Europe and the European theater of World War Two as the principal collective experience, the institutional British military was “slow to apply the lessons of the past”. 84 The first two years of the campaign under General Sir Neil Ritchie focused “in terms of demonstrating military superiority”, with the use of concentrated British forces that defeated insurgents in the field but failed to address the underlying causes of the revolt. 85 In 1950, the new Director of Operations, General Sir Harold Briggs (a veteran of the Burma campaign), promulgated a plan that “welded years of diverse experience in irregular warfare into a comprehensive strategy”. 86 By recognizing that the campaign would not be won militarily, Briggs re-organized his forces and re-allocated resources, seeking to close what he termed “the breeding areas” of the insurgency. 87

By re-focusing the British campaign on “winning the support of the population rather than defeating the insurgents by force of arms”, the Briggs Plan shifted its effort to

84 Mockaitis, British Counterinsurgency, p. 113.
85 Mockaitis, British Counterinsurgency, p. 114.
86 Mockaitis, British Counterinsurgency, p. 115.
resetting and protecting the population.\textsuperscript{88} This prevented insurgents from intimidating the populace and prevented the populace from supplying the insurgents with food and information. The campaign plan, though focused on population control, continued to fight insurgent forces by using Special Air Service units to range deep into the jungle. Nonetheless, the Briggs Plan was far from perfect: insurgents concentrated on the weaker police posts and civilian targets, and exploited the challenges the Briggs Plan posed for the civil administration.

The British responded by modifying the structure of their campaign staff. Following the assassination of High Commissioner Sir Henry Gurney, the British appointed a retired general to hold both the military and civilian positions: as High Commissioner, General Sir Gerald Templer directed the police, the courts, and the rest of the civilian government; as Director of Operations he directed the military campaign. While resisted by senior British military and civilian personnel, this method of organization effectively replicated the position of the “governor general”, the role Taft performed for the Americans in the Philippines. By 1955, the Briggs Plan and the new organization under Templer had reduced the insurgency from some 8000 insurgents to less than 3000.\textsuperscript{89}

The contrast between the British and American approaches to similar problems is instructive. The reaction of the two militaries to battlefield reversals is strikingly different: where the British re-organized their campaign and replaced their commander, the Americans attempted no such review. Whereas the British could incorporate their

\textsuperscript{88} Nagl, \textit{Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife}, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{89} Mockaitis, \textit{British Counterinsurgency}, p. 122-23.
institutional experience prior to the Second World War, the US military as an institution lacked that flexibility, even when individual commanders incorporated such techniques. The UK had maintained a regimental system and a tradition of colonial constabulary with reliance on professional soldiers, which differed markedly from the American employment of conscripts in World War Two, Korea, and Vietnam. British commanders’ experience as young officers in the imperial constabulary mirrors that of the US Marine Corps officers in the Caribbean. Not coincidentally, both sets of officers were capable of articulating an alternate theory of victory on which to form a campaign plan.

Organization theory explains much of this discrepancy. Feldman and Kanter’s postulate that experience establishes the range of available options explains the institutional US military’s ability to recall orders from the Civil War during the Philippines, since Merritt, Otis, and MacArthur all fought in the Civil War four decades earlier. By Vietnam, no US Army commanders had experience of the now 60-year-old Philippine campaign, and the Marine commanders’ experience of the Banana Wars was ignored due to their subordinate status.

Avant locates the flexibility to adapt to the irregular environment in the personnel decisions of the civilian executive, which in Malaya appear far more intrusive than in Vietnam. The relative strength of the institutional military as a political entity appears to correlate inversely to its ability to the irregular environment. When the US military was

politically weak and its leaders were subject to recall, the institutional leadership adapted to irregular adversaries without specific directions from Washington. After World War Two, the increased prestige and political influence of the US military correlates to a reduced capacity to adapt and innovate at an institutional level, a feature demonstrated later when confronted with irregular adversaries in both Lebanon and Somalia.

**Lebanon and Somalia**

The American interventions in Lebanon (1982-84) and Somalia (1992-94) offer strikingly similar examples of the institutional US military’s difficulty with irregular adversaries. In both cases, the American intervention took place as part of a United Nations (UN) effort, which conferred international legitimacy on the American presence. In both cases, the initial mission proved successful and the first American force largely departed, but the UN leadership faced difficulties posed by ethnically cohesive militias. Both times, a second influx of American military units attempted to apply military force against the irregular forces with limited success, and incurred significant casualties that led to an American withdrawal.

Lebanon’s civil war came to American attention after Israel’s June, 1982 embroiled America’s closest Mid-East ally in combat with Palestinian guerrillas, Lebanese militias, and Syrian regular forces. America embarked on a peacekeeping mission under UN auspices, first to facilitate a Palestinian evacuation but later to remove Israeli and Syrian forces from Lebanon and shore up the weak Lebanese government.\(^91\) Though the first mission was successful, the assumption that military force could create

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\(^91\) Ball, George W. *Error and Betrayal in Lebanon*, Foundation for Middle East Peace, 1984, p. 22.
the context for a political solution did not appreciate the complexity of the local political
and cultural environment, making “the mistake of using military forces in a conflict that
did not have a military solution”. 92

In Somalia, starving children on the nightly news challenged America to uphold
its leader’s vision of a “new world order” in the aftermath of the Cold War. In November
1992, President Bush authorized Operations Provide Relief and Restore Hope, to bring
food directly to the Somali people and bypass local warlords. Persistent violence led to
the introduction of US ground forces and a US ambassador, overshadowing the UN
presence. 93 The initial plan involved military forces providing security to further civil
affairs missions aimed at building local infrastructure and ameliorating the conditions
that had led to anarchy. 94 Smooth coordination between the ambassador and the military
produced swift results, limiting violence and permitting the UN to assume leadership of
the military mission, with a retired US Navy admiral now in charge of the UN effort.

Confronted by a challenge from a Somali warlord and his clan-based militia, the
American responded not with a political initiative but with force. Admiral Jonathan
Howe “was convinced that getting the warlord…would cut through the tangle of tribal
hatred”. 95 The UN mission, with an American leader and a US military as deputy
commander, thus reflected the common preferences of the institutional US military. As
UN forces’ efforts to attack the warlord failed, a special American task force arrived to

92 Westra, Steven K. Beirut’s Lesson For Future Foreign Policy, USMC Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va,
capture the warlord and destroy his command structure.\textsuperscript{96} Again, the institutional US military applied military force as an instrument of destruction, in an environment where defeating an adversary in a fight would not yield a political solution.

It is important to note that neither Lebanon nor Somalia offered straightforward situations for the application of counterinsurgency or irregular warfare doctrine. In Lebanon, the Maronite-led regime’s weakness relative to other factions in the country and their unwillingness to adjust the institutional power-sharing mechanisms made supporting the government against insurgent factions a nearly impossible task. In Somalia, the total collapse of governance left a vacuum, which nearly two decades later has yet to be completely filled. What is instructive is that in each case, the institutional US military’s immediate reaction was to apply firepower and use military force instrumentally to destroy an irregular adversary, rather than seeking to stabilize the situation by securing the population and isolating the populace from the irregular force. This desire to seek out and destroy an enemy reflects the persistence of the conventional mindset, a focus that influenced the Iraq campaign for its first four years.

**Iraq**

The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 has become a much longer campaign than initially anticipated, and its outcome remains far from certain. Nonetheless, the difficulty faced by the institutional US military in transitioning to a counterinsurgency campaign illustrates the persistence of the organizational inflexibility and reluctance to integrate non-military efforts into campaign plans that characterized American failures in Vietnam, \textsuperscript{96} Bowden, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War*, p. 95.
Lebanon, and Somalia. Once again, the institutional US military sought to kill or destroy adversary units, was slow to recognize the emergence of an insurgency, and as an institution faced great difficulty changing its campaign plan to address the irregular threat.

In 2003, as the Sunni-led insurgency emerged, the senior military and civilian leadership failed to recognize the insurgency as an irregular threat. The commander of the Fourth Infantry Division, in Saddam’s home town of Tikrit, “emphatically rejected the idea that he was facing an insurrectionary movement”, 97 while the senior staff in Baghdad claimed “There is no insurgency here”. 98 Not all senior officers were afflicted with this blindness General John Keane, the Army Vice Chief Of Staff in Washington, disagreed and asserted that “a low-level insurgency” had taken root, but neither the Secretary of Defense nor the President recognized the gravity of the situation. 99

Junior commanders quickly adopted tactics appropriate to the situation, as they were faced with immediate failure unless they changed. One Army battalion commander in Kirkuk spoke of his battalion’s role as counterinsurgents, and others developed methods for isolating the Sunni insurgency from the rest of the population. 100 Nonetheless, the senior leadership’s preference for set-piece battle influenced the first battle of Fallujah, in April, 2004. Civilian and Army leaders ordered an abortive ground

99 Ricks, Fiasco, p. 172.
100 Packer, The Assassin’s Gate, p. 302.
assault, contrary to the plan to isolate and marginalize the insurgents that had been established by the Marine commanders.101

In 2005, a new commander sought to address the failure to fight an effective campaign. General George Casey tried to change the existing campaign plan, to “remake his campaign” and adapt to the counterinsurgency fight.102 Casey’s limited ability to influence on pre-deployment training forced him to create a counterinsurgency academy at the American base in Taji, forcing all battalion commanders to attend.103 He also sought to withdraw American forces from the forefront of action, relying on the developing Iraqi forces to secure the population from insurgents, in a role analogous to the one Westmoreland reserved for ARVN troops.

As the failure of Iraqi forces to secure the population highlighted the limitations of Casey’s plan, American leaders conducted a top-level strategic review. The review, however, was sharply limited and failed to ask fundamental questions relating to the objective and methodology of the campaign in Iraq.104 With the civilian leadership unwilling to mandate change in the face of defeat and a military institution that resisted the attempts of its own leaders to change course, an adaptation to address weaknesses in the existing campaign required solutions from outside the military institution.105

The full story of how the Bush Administration accepted a change in course will require the opening of archives likely to be sealed for decades more. But in interviews,

101 Ricks, Fiasco, p. 333.
102 Ricks, Fiasco, p. 394.
104 Ricks, Gamble, p. 14.
105 Ricks, Gamble, p. 19.
authors such as Woodward and Ricks have pieced together an outline of the adoption of what has become known as “the surge”. Dissatisfaction by senior generals in Iraq complemented a new counter-insurgency doctrine being created at the Army’s school in Leavenworth and the writings of several conservative military historians in Washington. Through a combination of personal relationships, the now-retired General Keane facilitated a meeting in which the President was persuaded to send General David Petraeus to Iraq with additional forces and a mandate to change the campaign plan.\textsuperscript{106} At the present time, it seems that the Iraq case is an example of individuals circumventing the same institutional mindset that had operated in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia. Iraq reflects the institutional US military’s ability to recognize the need for change, but highlights the inflexibility that has made adaptation so difficult since the Second World War.

**Counter-hypotheses**

There are several counter-hypotheses for why the institutional US military has failed to campaign effectively in the irregular environment worth addressing in some detail. Leadership by the chief executive, the military’s focus on its largest adversary, evolving military technology, changes in military culture, the role of isolation in counter-insurgency, and the rise of the military-industrial complex are all plausible factors, and certainly could contribute to the institutional US military’s inflexible theory of victory and failure to integrate non-military mechanisms. The most persuasive counter-hypothesis is one that incorporates the mechanisms that might cause institutional

inflexibility, and thus the role of the military-industrial complex may be worth further examination in a future study.

Avant notes the role of executive leadership making personnel decisions in promoting flexible military approaches to the irregular environment, but the case of the Banana Wars would seem to undermine that as a viable counter-hypothesis. In the American cases, the increased scope of US responsibility in world affairs might limit the ability of any President to replicate McKinley’s ability to focus on the Philippines in 1900, and the American reaction to Lebanon and Somalia seems to support that notion. But Kennedy correctly identified insurgency as the immediate challenge in Vietnam, and Bush belatedly did the same in Iraq: neither was able to turn that focus into an impact on the military campaign plan. No president since Truman has seen fit to relieve a theater-level commander, which may be the true test of this counter-hypothesis: if either General Sanchez or General Casey had been relieved, the Iraq campaign might have proceeded differently.

The institutional US military has obvious incentives for planning to fight the largest possible adversary: such a state poses a potential threat to the existence of the US, and justifies the acquisition of a large and technically advanced military. This preference runs counter to the incentive to avoid defeat in the immediate conflict, which when combined with civilian pressure should be expected to produce a change relevant to the immediate fight. By this logic, the reason for the institutional US military’s inflexibility is a conscious decision to risk losing in Vietnam rather than risk losing in the Fulda Gap. Alternately, it may reflect an inability to train two types of forces at once: light infantry
for the irregular fight and mechanized infantry for the regular. Evidence that the senior leadership of the US military made the first choice consciously is lacking, but the problem of training two types of forces is one that all four Services will confront under Secretary Gates’ announced budgetary plan.

A third argument posits that evolving technology makes irregular adversaries more equal as barriers to acquiring high-quality weapons and equipment fall. This is not a terribly convincing argument for several reasons. The light infantry weapons technology is generally obtainable by any interested party, and in the late 19th century was actually on the side of the insurgents. The Sioux and Cheyenne had superior rifles to Custer’s cavalry outgunned at Little Bighorn, and the Boers had superior artillery to that of the British at start of their war. Neither was enough of an advantage to prevail against a determined great power foe, which leads some authors to instead identify resolve as the key variable in irregular war.107

A fourth argument claims that the military culture of the US is unsuited to irregular warfare. Gray argues that US “public, strategic, and military culture is not friendly to the waging of irregular warfare, which is to say, not friendly to the conduct of the only kind of warfare that can be effective against irregular enemies.”108 This assertion assumes that a radically different American military culture was present in the Philippines and in the Caribbean, which may be true, but does not account for the

108 Gray, Irregular Enemies And The Essence Of Strategy, p. 6
observed shift in the Iraq campaign plan which had overwhelming support among the military and the public at large.

An additional counter-hypothesis is that insurgencies cannot be defeated unless they can be isolated from sympathetic states, thus the American failures reflect problems of geography and politics rather than institutional failures.¹⁰⁹ This perspective relies exclusively on post-World War Two data, and neglects to explain Castro’s success in Cuba, which was isolated, and British success in Kenya, which was not. The ability of the North Vietnamese to move men and materiel through Laos and Cambodia helped equip the VC and allowed NVA units to rapidly exit the battlefield, and partly explains American commanders’ focus on taking the war into Cambodia. Crucially however, the NVA and VC units could never have mounted a legitimate challenge to the Saigon regime if American commanders had isolated the insurgency from the population by applying the CIDG or CAP initiatives or adequately funding CORDS.

The final counter-hypothesis is the most compelling. Arguably, the rise of the military-industrial complex during the early Cold War created a constituency for major military programs and lent the institutional US military unprecedented political influence. This influence enabled the military to resist the combination of battlefield reversals and civilian pressures to change that Posen identifies as a crucial combination. The combined interest of the military in large programs and of industry in building equipment for those programs then produces military leaders eager to use firepower and technology at the expense of more human-oriented political and economic initiatives. The role of the Joint

IED Defeat Organization (JIEDDO) in the present conflict illustrates this principle: rather than address the socioeconomic factors that drive individual Iraqis or Afghans to emplace IEDs, the institutional US military’s effort focuses on developing a technical solution to a social problem.

The weakness of this last counter-hypothesis lies in the ill-defined nature of the military-industrial complex. As a proxy, the political influence of the institutional US military may be a more measurable variable, with an observable impact on legislation and lobbying efforts that coincide with those of defense contractors and defense-related industries. This counter-hypothesis is also closest to this study’s observation of the inverse correlation between the growth of the US military’s political influence and the decline in its adaptability to the irregular environment.

Conclusion

Since World War Two, the institutional US military has repeatedly demonstrated an inflexible theory of victory when faced with an irregular adversary. By narrowly construing the methods for employment of military forces, the US military as an institution has generally failed to integrate non-military initiatives to address the irregular environment, and has suffered reverses in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia, with considerable difficulty in the present campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. This paper has illustrated the difference between the institutional US military’s campaign planning before and after World War Two, and concludes that the relative decline in flexibility corresponds to the relative increase in political influence of the military. In contrast to the UK, where British commanders had learned that political leaders rewarded
innovation, American commanders understood that their career progress was independent of the preferences of the political leadership.\textsuperscript{110}

So while the proximate cause of American frustrations against irregular adversaries lies in the military’s difficulty in adapting its organization and tactics to the immediate campaign, the broader issue seems to be the political leverage of the military as an institution and its corresponding political allies. These interests combine to reinforce the status quo in a variety of manners, channeling the decisionmaking of the senior uniformed leadership in combat and in Washington, and raising the barrier to both civilian and military leaders seeking change.

This study has important implications for policymakers and military leaders seeking to address the irregular warfare challenges that American statesmen predict for the future. In the immediate future, the campaign plans for Iraq and Afghanistan need to be examined to ensure that they reflect a communicative theory of victory, seeking to coerce the least intransigent adversaries to join the political process and leave the battlefield. In contrast, recent plans have focused on killing specific individuals identified as hostile, an instrumental use of military force that might pay dividends in tandem with a more flexible overall campaign plan.

To successfully defeat the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, the respective plans for each country will have to incorporate non-military efforts to increase the legitimacy of the local government through economic and political initiatives. For Iraq, this will require strengthening existing institutions and building sufficient transparency to

\textsuperscript{110} Avant, \textit{The Institutional Sources of Military Doctrine}, p. 426.
alleviate perceptions of threat from competing ethnic groups, as well as devising a system for sharing oil revenues in an equitable and generally accepted manner. In Afghanistan, the governmental institutions are so weak and corrupt as to be irrelevant: an effective campaign plan will enable local governance structures, with greater perceived legitimacy, to execute most functions of government until a reliable, legitimate government in Kabul can be established.

More broadly, civilian and military planners need to ensure that the institutional US military is both flexible enough to address irregular adversaries and powerful enough to deter potential peer competitors capable of posing and existential or territorial threat to the US. To be successful, this effort will probably require the institutional military to relinquish much of its political influence. For example, a proconsul to Iraq or Afghanistan might be appointed to replicate the roles of Taft and Templer in the Philippines and Malaysia. A retired senior diplomat or senior military officer in charge of both political and military operations, not working for the UN as Howe was in Somalia, would likely have the expertise and personal credibility to provide unified direction to the campaign plan.

The recent effort by Secretary Gates at re-prioritizing the military budget to reflect the immediate threats in Iraq and Afghanistan appears to have won acquiescence from the military services. It is still too soon to say if the institutional military will develop the degree of flexibility necessary to address irregular adversaries with multi-faceted campaigns that address their economic and political strengths as well as their military capabilities.
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