Part III

Counterinsurgency cases
Professional officers, politicians and the general public have long agreed that the US military’s primary mission (its only mission, some would argue) is to fight and win the nation’s wars. By ‘war’ they mean a conventional conflict between regular armed forces along clearly delineated lines of battle. Unconventional conflict, fraught with ambiguity and rife with problems for regular forces, was at best an inconvenience and at worst a major distraction from their proper mission. When unconventional operations cannot be avoided, they should be gotten over quickly or, better yet, left to Special Forces, whose mission list includes all those activities the regulars wish to avoid.

Counterinsurgency in particular became the dirtiest word in the American military lexicon. This aversion to counterinsurgency stemmed from the experience of Vietnam. ‘Are Americans and their cultural values adaptable to the concept and techniques of unconventional warfare?’ a 1962 article asked in its title. The author concluded that while US forces could engage in such activities, doing so ran counter to popular perceptions of national values (Williams 1962: 86–9). In other words, there was something profoundly un-American about unconventional conflict. While the United States did develop effective counterinsurgency tactics and employed them in Vietnam, the war proved so deleterious to the morale and effectiveness of US armed forces that they wished to avoid any future large-scale counterinsurgency campaign. Not until a year into the Iraq War would the military as whole again become interested in this important form of warfare.

The disdain for counterinsurgency coupled with popular perceptions that this type of conflict was not a core task of the US military led to the misperception that prior to Vietnam the Army and Marines had confined themselves to conventional warfare. As this chapter will demonstrate, nothing could be further from the truth. From the early days of the Republic to the present, US forces have fought in a wide range of unconventional conflicts. They engaged in intermittent irregular warfare against Native American tribes as the country expanded westward. While nineteenth-century Indian wars, clearances, and round ups were not full-fledged counterinsurgency campaigns, they had many of the same characteristics. During the entire span of the twentieth century as well, US forces conducted a series of counterinsurgency campaigns. Study of these campaigns reveals that although the military never liked unconventional operations, it always managed to conduct them effectively albeit after a costly period of trial and error.
The Philippines

The US military’s first full-fledged counterinsurgency campaign took place at the turn of the twentieth century in territory it had acquired following the Spanish-American War. The United States occupied the Philippines as the Spanish withdrew. Emilio Aguinaldo, who had led a revolution against Spain in 1897, aided the Americans during the war with the expectation that his country would receive independence. When the United States decided to remain in control of the islands for the foreseeable future, Aguinaldo realized he had traded one colonial master for another and mounted an insurgency against the new occupiers.

The conflict began with an offensive by Aguinaldo’s Army of Liberation in the spring of 1899. With their superior firepower and organization US forces easily defeated the insurgents in open battle and cleared the Luzon plain of them. They also nearly captured the rebel leader, who fled to a mountainous region in the northeast of the island. Realizing his mistake in using conventional tactics, Aguinaldo shifted to guerrilla warfare. He reorganized his forces into semi-autonomous bands of 30–50 fighters, which carried out hit-and-run operations against American units up to company strength. Aguinaldo created what is today being called a ‘shadow government’ or a ‘parallel state’ in the communities he controlled. The insurgents collected taxes, dispensed justice, requisitioned supplies and recruited members. At the height of the insurgency, Aguinaldo may have had as many as 80,000 fighters operating in familiar terrain among people whose language and culture they understood, thus enjoying a significant advantage in garnering intelligence on US forces (Williams 1962: 86–9).

American troops responded to the insurgency as conventional soldiers often do. Unable to find and destroy the enemy, they took out their frustration on the general population, punishing entire communities suspected of supporting the insurgents, even if that support had been coerced. Soldiers destroyed property, murdered civilians and summarily executed prisoners. A century before the Abu Ghraib scandal they also tortured suspects for information. To deprive the guerrillas of support from sympathetic (or intimidated) civilians, the Army rounded up ordinary people, most of whom had no connection to the insurgency, and detained them in concentration camps, where thousands died of disease. Such brutality declined as the conflict progressed, though it never entirely stopped, but contrary to popular belief, these harsh tactics did not defeat the insurgents (Gates 2007). The United States had too few troops (24,000 at the height of the emergency) to terrorize a population of seven million into submission (Boot 2002: 127). Only an effective counterinsurgency strategy could accomplish that goal.

After its initial failures, the Army developed such a strategy and the tactics to implement it. US forces employed what later would be called a ‘hearts-and-minds’ approach, identifying and addressing the causes of unrest. Washington promised the Philippines eventual independence and offered some degree of local autonomy immediately. The administration of William McKinley created the Philippine Commission to oversee civil administration of the islands and appointed William Howard Taft to direct it. The military and civil efforts combined in what today are known as ‘clear-and-hold’ operations. The soldiers handed control of pacified areas over to the Commission, which appointed and paid Filipinos to run their own affairs.

The Army also adapted its approach to combating the guerrillas. Rather than focus on killing and capturing them, they concentrated on breaking the link between the insurgents and their supporters. However, instead of re-concentrating people into squalid concentration camps, they deployed troops both to prevent subversion and to protect the population from insurgent retaliation. The army created four military districts, subdivided into smaller units in which commanders were deployed for extended periods, so that they got to know the area and its people...
well (Linn 1989: 163–70). This approach prefigured the French ‘oil stain’ strategy in Morocco and the British ‘framework deployment’ in Malay. General Orders No. 100, which had first been issued by President Abraham Lincoln to govern occupied Confederate territory during the Civil War, provided the legal framework for the counterinsurgency campaign.

Although they would be considered harsh by today’s standards, most contemporary legal experts considered the Orders humane (Linn 2002: 63–4). The Orders promoted unity of effort by vesting both civil and military power in a governor general who had the power to impose severe penalties on insurgents and those who supported them, including capital punishment. The Orders also insisted that civilians and captured insurgents be treated humanely. ‘Military oppression is not Martial Law’, they asserted. ‘It is the abuse of the power which that law confers…. It is incumbent upon those who administer it to be strictly guided by the principles of justice, honor, and humanity (General Order No. 100).’

In addition to avoiding counterproductive measures, military commanders also took positive steps to win popular support. American soldiers built schools and roads, improved sanitation, and inoculated Filipinos against smallpox. Military commanders appointed mayors and local councillors, empowering them in turn to hire labourers for public works projects. This ability to dole out patronage gave the mayors leverage and credibility with local populations (Deady 2005: 59). This hearts-and-minds effort facilitated military operations by reducing support for the insurgents and inducing people to provide intelligence on their whereabouts.

The US Army also employed Filipino scouts, who spoke the local language and knew the terrain. In March 1901, one of these indigenous units finally helped secure the capture of Aguinaldo, who on 1 April swore an oath recognizing American authority over the Philippines. He then issued a proclamation calling on his followers to lay down their arms. A generous amnesty induced many insurgents to surrender. In July 1902, Congress passed the Philippine Organic Act, which called for the establishment of a local legislature and extended the US Bill of Rights to the islands. The insurrection ended that month, and President Theodore Roosevelt pardoned those who had taken part it.

The Philippine insurrection required the United States to mount its first full-scale counter-insurgency campaign. While US forces did develop an effective strategy, victory occurred under very favourable circumstances. The insurgency occurred primarily within a single ethnic group and was confined to two islands of the vast archipelago. Naval supremacy enabled the United States to prevent supplies reaching the guerrillas. Because they fought on islands, the insurgents lacked a safe haven across a friendly border. Although its conduct improved as the conflict progressed, the Army never completely abandoned the brutal methods it had employed early in the campaign. However, these qualifiers notwithstanding, the US Army and civil administration devised a sound counterinsurgency strategy and implemented it effectively. Unfortunately, the army did not preserve the lessons of the Philippine insurrection in formal doctrine, and so the lessons of the campaign were largely forgotten.

**The Caribbean**

Following the First World War, US forces once again found themselves confronting internal unrest, this time much closer to home and handled by the Marine Corps rather than the Army. Between 1898 and 1940, the era of ‘gunboat diplomacy’, the Leathernecks intervened in Cuba, Panama, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Nicaragua. Intervention stemmed from a strategic desire to forestall European colonial expansion in the region, the perceived need to safeguard American economic interests, and a desire to protect the Panama Canal. In each of these cases, the United States had to do much more than project force ashore. The Marines were
called upon to restore order and promote stability, which often required application of sound counterinsurgency principles.

Of all these small wars, the intervention in Nicaragua came closest to being a full-blown counterinsurgency campaign. In 1927, the United States intervened to resolve a civil war that had destabilized the country in an area of vital American interest. US representative Henry L. Stimson succeeded in reconciling the various factions, with the exception of one rebel leader. Augusto Sandino switched to guerrilla operations after suffering defeats in conventional battles with government forces and their American backers. Sandino made excellent use of the mountainous country between Nicaragua’s Pacific and Atlantic regions, which also divided the country ethnically. The Spanish and mestizo peoples lived on the Pacific side; European settlers occupied the few towns on the Atlantic coast, where Muskito Indians made up the majority, who also dwelt in the interior along with the indigenous Sunu people. Most American-based economic activity (mining and fruit production) occurred in the Atlantic region. Sandino operated in a remote area along the Honduran border, which gave him access to both regions and safe haven in Honduras.

The US campaign against Sandino was led by Marine Captain Merritt ‘Red Mike’ Edson. After considering the situation, Edson decided that controlling the Rio Coco, which runs 400 miles from the Honduran border to the Caribbean Sea, would restrict Sandino’s ability to operate. He could use the river as an avenue to invade Sandino’s territory and blockade it to restrict the insurgents’ movement between eastern and western Nicaragua. Controlling the river required befriending the native population living along it and hiring them as river guides, boatmen and interpreters. Edson also hoped to exploit the animosity of the Indians towards the Spanish-speaking Nicaraguans.

Edson devised a three-phased strategy to defeat the insurgents. He would first lead his forces on a reconnaissance mission up the Rio Coco. The Marines would then garrison the lower reaches of the river near the Atlantic. Finally, Edson would launch an offensive from the east deep into Sandino territory coordinated with a corresponding attack out of Managua from the west. The first phase of the plan went well as Marines reconnoitered the river from the Atlantic to the central mountains. Garrisoning the lower reaches of the Coco proved more problematic. The Indians posed the same difficult questions that have often been asked of American intervention forces ever since. How long will you stay, and what will happen to us when you leave? Uncertainty over the Untied States’ long-term commitment made recruiting locals difficult. Their reluctance to support such an uncertain ally proved well founded. In 1934, President Herbert Hoover withdrew the Marines and left the counterinsurgency campaign to the Nicaraguan National guard supported by US advisors. The Guard abducted and murdered Sandino during peace talks in 1936 and his rebellion collapsed.

Despite limited success due to conditions beyond his control Edson understood modern counterinsurgency. ‘It was my belief’, Edson concluded, ‘that, if we were to succeed in our mission of eradicating the bandit element in Nicaragua, we should make every effort to gain the friendliness and cooperation of the peaceful citizenry’ (Edson 1936). He lived among the people to learn their language and customs and to protect them from insurgent reprisals. Given time and enough troops his strategy might have worked.

While the Philippine conflict made little impression on US Army doctrine, the Marine Corps produced an entire volume on irregular warfare. Published in 1940, the Small Wars manual contained over 400 pages of theoretical and practical guidance on combating insurgency. In language similar to General Petraeus’ pronouncements on Afghanistan, it warned that ‘the application of purely military measures may not, by itself, restore peace and order because the fundamental causes of the condition of unrest may be economic, political, or social’ (Small Wars
Manual 1940). Force had to be combined with efforts to address these underlying causes (Small Wars Manual 1940: I-9, 16). Unfortunately, the Marines forgot most of this wisdom when they shifted to conventional operations during the Second World War.

**Cold War counterinsurgency**

Following the Second World War the United States planned on reducing its armed forces as it had after the Civil War and the First World War. The advent of the Cold War and the outbreak of the Korean Conflict in 1950 made this reduction impossible. Defending Western Europe from a Soviet attack would be the primary mission of US forces deployed overseas and protecting South Korea (and with it Japan) a close second. At the same time, the United States and its allies faced the problem of communist ‘wars of national liberation’ supported by Moscow and/or Beijing. The nuclear stalemate, which made the cost of a confrontation between the US and the USSR unacceptably high, encouraged both sides to pursue their agenda through proxy wars, localized internal conflicts in which they supported one side in the hopes of either gaining an ally or forcing the other superpower to mount a costly intervention. The Soviets used the Vietnam War in this way, and the Americans returned the favour when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan.

The first such conflict occurred in Greece (1946–9), where communist insurgents challenged an American and British-backed government. Fiscal constraints forced the British to withdraw support in March 1947. With communist governments controlling Yugoslavia, Albania, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, Greece looked to be the last bastion of democracy in southeast Europe. Determined that the country should not fall, President Harry Truman provided $723.6 million in aid plus 800 military and 700 civilian advisors (McClintock 1992: 12). The Americans pursued a conventional approach, insisting that the Greek infantry move in to fix the enemy so that artillery could destroy them (Birtle 2006: 47–8).

This conventional approach, which under different circumstances would have cost the government popular support, succeeded largely because of insurgent mistakes and fortuitous circumstances. Believing that conditions favoured moving to the phase of mobile war in Mao’s model, the communists reorganized their forces from small bands of 50 to 100 into formal ‘brigades’ and ‘divisions’ (Birtle 2006: 52). These larger formations could be more easily targeted by the regular Greek forces supported by the Americans. The following year the Soviet Union broke off relations with the communist leader Josef Broz Tito, who responded by closing the Yugoslav border to the Kremlin-backed Greek insurgents, depriving them of the safe havens and supply bases. Thus with minimal attention to winning hearts and minds, the Greeks achieved a conventional military victory over an unconventional foe.

**HUK revolt**

Like so many national liberation movements, the Hukbalahap (Filipino acronym for ‘People’s Liberation Army’) developed out of the political chaos at the end of the Second World War. The ‘Huk’, as they were generally known in the West, were the military wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines. During the war they had allied with other guerrilla groups to fight the Japanese. When the United States granted the islands independence in 1946, the Huk launched an insurgency against the new government. The United States assisted its ally with military equipment and advisors via the Joint US Military Assistance Group (JUSMAG).

The Huk based its rural insurgency on poor peasants, primarily in central Luzon, promising them land in return for support. Despite their distrust of the government, only about 10 per cent of the population supported the insurgents, 10 per cent opposed them and 80 per cent remained
neutral, preoccupied with the day-to-day struggle to survive (Tierney 2007: 55). At the height of the insurgency, the Huk had around 12,000 fighters supported by approximately 150,000 civilians out of a total population of two million in the affected area (Bohannan 1962: 21). They faced an American trained and equipped Filipino force of 25,000 (Bohannan 1962: 21). Under the circumstances victory might well go to the side that succeeded in winning over the 80 per cent of undecided peasants.

Initially, the Philippine government made the usual mistakes of a state threatened by insurgency. It refused to engage in land reform or take any significant measures to address the causes of unrest that fuelled the insurgency. It sought a purely military solution to the conflict, and the military for its part engaged in conventional operations learned from the Americans. These operations consisted of large sweeps supported by the air force. Over-reliance on firepower, requisitioning of supplies, and ill-treatment of civilians undermined government legitimacy and did little to hamper the elusive guerrillas.

The situation changed with the appointment of two outstanding individuals. In 1948, Colonel Edward Lansdale took charge of JUSMAG, and in 1950, Ramon Magsaysay became Philippine Defense Minister. The two men understood counterinsurgency and thoroughly revised the government strategy. With Lansdale’s support Magsaysay launched the ‘All-out Friendship or All-out Force’ programme. This strategy combined an extensive hearts-and-minds campaign with aggressive counter-guerrilla operations. To begin with, the government engaged in genuine reform enabling poor peasants to acquire their own land. By providing medical assistance, digging wells, building schools and engaging in other development projects, they won over the peasant population, who were concerned more with their quality of life than with political ideology. Magsaysay also energized the military aspect of the campaign, replacing large-scale sweeps with small-unit counter-guerrilla patrols. The new approach produced dramatic results in a relatively brief time. By 1954 the Huk had been reduced to an active strength of around 200 (Bohannan 1962: 25–8).

During the 1960s, the US Army considered defeat of the Huk a textbook case of effective counterinsurgency. Although it employed the right principles in an effective strategy, the campaign also benefited from the favourable circumstances in which the government conducted it. The insurgents operated primarily on a single island, isolated from outside support and with no safe haven across a friendly border. Once the government began to engage in real reform, the Huk could not win a bidding war for the hearts and minds of the local people. Finally, defeat of the Huk did not end the communist threat to the Philippines, which flared up in later decades. Nonetheless, it was an impressive victory.

**Vietnam**

No conflict in American history has been so traumatic to the US military as Vietnam. The war lasted more than a decade, took 58,000 lives, and left the Pentagon with what many called a ‘broken’ army. Diehards still insist the United States never really lost the war in Vietnam but on the American home front. A conversation between an American and a North Vietnamese colonel following the war captures the frustration of the US military and makes an important point about insurgency. ‘You never defeated us on the battlefield’, the American observed. ‘That may be so’, the Vietnamese replied. ‘It is also irrelevant’ (Taw and Leicht 1992: 12).

Vietnam was the most complex conflict the American military had faced to date. The United States inherited the war from the French following their withdrawal and division of the country into North and South in 1954. Concerned that the communist North would overrun the South, the United States gave the Saigon government $85 million a year in aid and sent in advisors to assist
Trends in American counterinsurgency

its military (Herring 1986: 59). Emphasis on heavy armoured divisions and conventional-war training at the expense of counterinsurgency left the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) ill prepared for the war it would have to fight (Krepinevich 1986: 23–4). That war was a hybrid affair in which ARVN and US forces faced both a conventional threat along the demilitarized zone separating North and South Vietnam and an insurgency in the Mekong Delta and the heavily populated coastal zone (Dunn 1985: 77).

The military mistakes in Vietnam have been thoroughly analyzed and can be briefly summarized here. As the conflict escalated, the United States poured in more and more troops. However, the mission suffered from a very poor tooth-to-tail ratio. Of the 543,000 men and women deployed at the peak of the conflict, only 80,000 were combat troops (Krepinevich 1986: 197). These troops used conventional means that made a bad situation worse, especially excessive use of force. The commander of Military Assistance Command Vietnam, General William Westmoreland, maintained that the answer to insurgency was ‘firepower’, while Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara insisted the measure of effectiveness in the conflict should be ‘body count’ (Krepinevich 1986: 194–7). Westmoreland also concentrated disproportionately on search-and-destroy operations in the central highlands and neglected control of the delta and the coastal plain, where 90 per cent of the population lived (Boot 2002: 301).

These failures notwithstanding, US forces did develop some effective counterinsurgency programmes. These programmes fell into the operational category known as ‘pacification’, what today would be called ‘clear and hold’. Based on its experience in Latin America during the interwar period, the Marine Corps developed the Combined Action Platoons (CAPs) initiative. Each CAP consisted of a Marine Rifle section (12–15 men) and a South Vietnamese Popular Forces (militia) platoon (30 men) stationed in a village. The CAP lived among the locals, built trust, engaged in patrolling, and gathered intelligence on the Viet Cong (Boot 2002: 304–8). Another successful counterinsurgency operation targeted the insurgent organization. Run by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), the Phoenix programme concentrated on taking out the Viet Cong political leadership. By the end of the war, the programme had killed 26,000 insurgents and persuaded 22,000 others to work with the South Vietnamese government. The CIA considered those it turned far more important than those it killed, as they provided intelligence on their erstwhile comrades (Boot 2002: 310). Finally, the creation in 1967 of an office of Civil Operations and Rural Development brought disparate programmes under a single roof.

However, these effective measures were a classic example of too little too late. They could not redeem a flawed strategy or compensate for the over-reliance on firepower. The 1968 Tet Offensive, which revealed that the enemy was far from defeated, and the end to college draft deferments the same year eroded popular support in the United States for continuing the struggle. Anti-war protests rocked college campuses and disrupted the 1968 Democratic Convention. Despite campaigning on a promise to end the war, the new President Richard Nixon prosecuted it with renewed vigour, switching to Vietnamization only in 1973. Two years after the American withdrawal, Saigon fell to North Vietnamese troops.

From Vietnam to 9/11

Counterinsurgency was one of the casualties of the Vietnam War. After the debacle in Southeast Asia, the Pentagon wanted nothing to do with it. A sea change in strategic thinking reflected this attitude. The Nixon doctrine eschewed direct participation in favour of ‘foreign aid for internal defense’. The new approach promised to provide ‘military and economic assistance when required’ but insisted that the host nation must ‘assume the responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense’ (Nixon 2010). Military doctrine adopted the same posture, subsuming
counterinsurgency into broad task categories such as ‘Low-Intensity Conflict’ (LIC) and ‘Operations Other than War’ (OOTW) catch-all terms for tasks it wished to avoid. The 1986 Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act created Special Operations Command, an entity to which the military could gladly hand responsibility for counterinsurgency. As a result of these changes, counterinsurgency became a specialized task which few conventional soldiers learned. This approach worked well enough until 9/11; afterwards it had disastrous results.

In the three decades between the advent of the Nixon Doctrine and the beginning of the Global War on Terrorism the United States participated in only one protracted counterinsurgency campaign. The Salvadoran Civil War (1980–92) developed out of widespread poverty and a gross inequity that left 15 families with 90 per cent of the country’s assets. When the army moved to block land reform in 1979, a series of resistance groups combined to form the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a Marxist organization committed to political reform and social change. From 1980 to 1983, the FMLN fought so successfully against the Salvadoran armed forces filled with reluctant conscripts that US advisors warned that without a massive infusion of US aid, the insurgents might very well win the war (Stanley 2006: 102). The US government responded with an infusion of cash and arms. It also sent a small number of advisors, most of them Special Forces, to advise the Salvadoran military. Although willing to accept tactical training from the Americans, Salvadoran officers resisted pressure to cease human rights violations, which were costing the government popular support. They understood that the Reagan administration cared more about fighting communism than it did about promoting human rights or fostering political reform (Schwarz 1991: 9, 44).

By the end of the 1980s, however, circumstances conspired to make possible a negotiated settlement of the conflict facilitated by the United States. The administration of George H.W. Bush was more willing than its predecessor to pressure the Salvadoran government into reform, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The Marxist Sandinistas’ electoral loss in Nicaragua also made fighting communism less of an imperative. That same year the FMLN launched an offensive against the capital San Salvador, occupying some of its wealthy neighbourhoods and disproving optimistic claims by the army that they were winning the war. The two sides had achieved a strategic stalemate, a situation that allowed the United States to work towards a negotiated settlement by making aid conditional upon an improved human rights record by the Salvadoran military and by nudging the government towards the bargaining table. By 1992, the United Nations (UN) had facilitated a peace accord that reduced the power of the Salvadoran army, incorporated FMLN fighters into a new civilian police force, and provided land grants to veterans from both sides (Mockaitis 2011).

While El Salvador was the United States’ last major counterinsurgency effort before 9/11, US forces did deploy on missions with a striking similarity to counterinsurgency. In December 1992, the Marines intervened in Somalia to protect humanitarian aid shipments. They handed responsibility to a UN mission with a hefty US Army contingent the following spring. American forces found themselves in the midst of an escalating conflict that culminated in the infamous 3 October 1993 ‘Blackhawk Down’ incident. The United States had to choose between a protracted counterinsurgency campaign and withdrawal. It chose withdrawal.

Bosnia confronted the United States with a similar dilemma, although one it could not as easily escape. After witnessing three years of genocide and brutal civil war, the United States finally intervened with its NATO allies to end the conflict with an air campaign in the autumn of 1995. Following the Dayton Peace Accords signed that December, it contributed 20,000 troops to the International Stabilization Force sent into Bosnia. However, the Clinton administration kept that contingent on a short leash, leading to charges that avoiding casualties was more important than any other goal. A similar mentality characterized the mission to Kosovo four years later. The
United States willingly led an air campaign against Yugoslavia to end genocide against the Kosovars, but it kept US troops in the Kosovo Force safely behind barbed wire or in heavily armed convoys. Clearly the ghosts of Vietnam had yet to be exercised.

**Iraq**

Ironically, President George W. Bush, who had campaigned on a pledge to avoid nation-building committed the United States to the two biggest nation-building missions in its history. However, the administration never envisioned either the Afghanistan or Iraq operation as a protracted counterinsurgency campaign. Once the US forces reached Kabul and Baghdad, they were to hand each country over to a pro-Western government and withdraw as soon as possible. This narrow approach devoid of any real contingency planning not only contributed to the outbreak of insurgencies in both countries, but guaranteed that those insurgencies would be more difficult to counter than they might have been had the United States prepared for them.

Although the regime of Saddam Hussein had not been involved even indirectly in 9/11, the Bush administration used the climate of fear created by the terrorist attacks to argue for an invasion of Iraq. Following the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan but before the Taliban and al-Qaeda were decisively defeated, the Pentagon began to prepare for the invasion of Iraq. However, rather than use the existing invasion plan devised by former Central Command Commander General Anthony Zinni, Rumsfeld demanded a new plan that would require far fewer troops. Recognizing that the real challenge would come not from defeating the Iraqi Army, but from the need to occupy and control a country of 26 million just over twice the size of Idaho, OPLAN 1003–98 called for an invasion force of 400,000 troops (Gordon and Trainor 2006: 29–30). In 1999, Zinni’s staff conducted a table-top seminar exercise to test the assumptions of the plan, during which they identified all of the problems the United States eventually encountered in Iraq (Desert Crossing Seminar 1999). Despite the predictions of the exercises, Rumsfeld ignored it. Consequently, the United States entered Iraq with more than enough troops to defeat Saddam’s hollow military but not nearly enough to stabilize Iraq.

Mistakes made during the first year of the war have been thoroughly documented and exhaustively analyzed and can be briefly summarized here (Ricks 2006). A shortage of troops and lack of counterinsurgency training left the Army and Marines ill-prepared for a complex insurgency involving several resistance groups and foreign terrorists. Widespread looting wrecked an already fragile infrastructure and alienated ordinary Iraqis, who remarked bitterly that they had been better off under Saddam Hussein. In the face of escalating violence, soldiers defaulted to conventional tactics, relying on firepower to compensate for numbers. The decision to disband the Iraqi Army without pay and ban former Ba’ath Party members of a certain rank from holding office in the new Iraqi government further alienated people (Mockaitis 2008).

By 2006, many analysts considered Iraq a lost cause and advised withdrawal of American troops sooner rather than later. That autumn the bipartisan Iraq Study Group issued its report, warning that the situation was ‘grave and deteriorating’ (Baker and Hamilton 2006: 6). In an effort to reverse this trend, the White House adopted a surge strategy, sending in more than 20,000 additional troops to combat the insurgents. While putting additional boots on the ground certainly helped, success may have depended more upon the ‘Anbar Awakening’, the decision of concerned local citizens’ committees to work with the US-led coalition to get rid of foreign mujahideen led by al-Qaeda in Iraq. This grassroots approach began to produce significant results. At the same time, the United States concentrated on training Iraqi military and police to take over security. By 2010, the situation in Iraq had improved to the point where the United States could reduce its troop strength from over 120,000 to 55,000.
Afghanistan

Although the United States has finally adopted an effective counterinsurgency strategy, the situation in Afghanistan is far more precarious than that in Iraq. The United States overthrew the Taliban in December 2001 by providing logistics and air support to the Northern Alliance leavened by CIA and Special Forces teams. No sooner did US troops reach Kabul, however, than Rumsfeld pushed to start withdrawing them. A State Department Advisor to the Bush administration argued for a continued US deployment of 25–30,000 US troops combined with an equal number of NATO personnel to maintain security in the post-conflict phase, but his proposal received no support (Haass 2010). The White House did not wish to become embroiled in a protracted nation-building mission. The International Stabilization Force (ISAF) that did deploy is a polyglot mission of 47 nations with differing mandates and rules of engagement and little unity of effort, never mind command. Numerous international, non-governmental, intergovernmental and private volunteer organizations descended on Afghanistan to engage in humanitarian aid, development and capacity building. Unfortunately, much of their effort has been characterized by ‘incompetence, incoherence, and conflicting strategies’ (Rashid 2008: 21). Finally, the US military focused on killing and capturing terrorists rather than employing a comprehensive counterinsurgency strategy.

As a result of this lacklustre approach, the United States missed a window of opportunity from late 2001 through 2004 in which it might have finished off the Taliban and built a stable Afghanistan. Instead, the insurgents and their al-Qaeda allies regrouped in the Federally Administered Tribal Area of Pakistan. (See Chapter 17 and 18 in this volume.) They gained sufficient strength to go on the offensive in Afghanistan and become a major security threat to Pakistan. Funded by opium cultivation and trafficking, which they taxed, the Taliban expanded their control (Peters 2009: 6–22). While the Taliban do use intimidation, much of their success comes from exercising effective ‘shadow governance’ in the areas they occupy. For example, Taliban courts have a greater reputation for fairness than the official Afghan courts (Kilcullen 2009: 276).

To recoup the deteriorating situation, the United States adopted a new strategy in December 2009. ‘Clear and hold’ replaced ‘kill or capture’ as the central strategic concept. President Barak Obama ‘surged’ an additional 30,000 troops to augment the 32,000 already deployed, promising to begin withdrawing them by the summer of 2011 (Obama 2010). The United States and its NATO allies ramped up training Afghan security forces, emphasizing counterinsurgency. Whether this new strategy achieves the desired result or proves to be too little too late remains to be seen.

The future of US counterinsurgency

Since 2001, the US military has undergone a dramatic change in its attitude towards and approach to counterinsurgency. The Army and Marine Corps accept it as a core task, no matter how much they may dislike it, and have adapted doctrine and created educational and training institutions to prepare for counterinsurgency operations. In 2006, they produced the first major overhaul of counterinsurgency doctrine since the Vietnam era. FM 3–24: Counterinsurgency examines the origin and development of insurgencies and contains a wealth of theoretical and practical information on how to combat them. Based upon the experience of past campaigns and the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan, the manual sets military operations within the context of a comprehensive campaign employing all elements of national power (FM 3–24 2006).

In 2009 the Military Affairs Bureau of the State Department produced a strategic document explaining how to integrate those elements into a unified strategy. U.S. Government Counterinsurgency
Trends in American counterinsurgency

The Guide identifies security, economic development and information operations as crucial to success in counterinsurgency. These elements, the Guide maintains, need to be integrated by a political strategy combining them in a unified effort (U.S. Counterinsurgency Guidelines 2009: 17). However, because its counterinsurgency campaigns support threatened allied governments, the United States cannot easily get those governments to engage in the kind of reform necessary to defeat a counterinsurgency campaign. It faces the added difficulty of maintaining public support for protracted, often expensive, wars in which the survival of the country is not at stake. The overwhelming public support for the invasion of Afghanistan following 9/11 has declined as the conflict has surpassed Vietnam as the United States’ longest war.

The future of US counterinsurgency will depend in large measure on how the military processes and preserves the experience of Afghanistan and Iraq long after those conflicts end. It might, as it did during the Second World War and the Cold War and following Vietnam, reject counterinsurgency as a core task. Since the Pentagon realizes that such a policy proved disastrous on both occasions, however, it seems unlikely that the US military will once again forget its own experience. The continuing challenge will be to develop and maintain a military capable of conducting both conventional and unconventional operations. The reorganization of the division-based army into brigades that can be combined in various ways for specific missions has produced flexibility absent from the pre-9/11 military. Nonetheless, as US armed forces emerge from the two present wars, the tension between preparing for conventional versus unconventional conflicts will remain. No matter how the Pentagon deals with this tension, one thing is certain: insurgencies will occur for the foreseeable future and the United States will undoubtedly get involved in some of them.

Recommended readings


References


