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Learning the lessons of counterinsurgency

Ian Roxborough

Although the long-term outcome of the present conflict in Iraq may be difficult to foresee, it seems clear that initial US efforts to cope with the insurgencies in that country have followed a predictable course. American forces initially focused on overthrowing the existing regime, and accomplished this successfully. They were, however, largely unprepared for the support and stability operations, and then the counterinsurgency, that were to follow. There were several reasons for this, not least the hubris of the top civilian policy-makers, who believed that the invasion of Iraq would be a repeat of the liberation of France in 1944, with a rapid and unproblematic transition to democracy. In this article, I focus on one thread in a complicated story: the role of US military doctrine in explaining the approach to counterinsurgency adopted in Iraq.

After 9/11, the American military found itself engaged in not one, but two, major counterinsurgencies as well as in a number of smaller operations around the globe. To make matters worse, several analysts had come to the conclusion that the global war on terror would be a protracted war, lasting decades, and would entail what military strategists increasingly came to call “global counterinsurgency” (Morris 2005; Hammes 2004). This definition of the strategic environment foresaw counterinsurgency as the principal task of military land forces for decades to come.

Counterinsurgency is a difficult, and poorly understood, business. The intrinsic difficulties facing a counterinsurgent are compounded by a generally inadequate understanding, on the part of academic theorists and military practitioners, of the dynamics of insurgency and counterinsurgency. There is, at best, a list of “best practices” (Cohen et al. 2006; Sepp 2005). Military practitioners are, therefore, largely groping in the dark.

Counterinsurgency is a time-consuming and difficult process, with no guarantee of success. The procedures of counterinsurgency run against the grain of “standard” military practices and thinking: it is seen as something different from “war,” which is taken to be the “real” concern of military organizations. As a result, expertise in counterinsurgency is often restricted to a small handful of officers, whereas the larger institutional military is generally reluctant to embrace the methods required for successful counterinsurgency. In short, organizational identity militates against organizational learning.
Insurgencies can be and have been defeated. But success is most frequently a result of a combination of sustained effort, trial, and error, with a heavy admixture of luck, rather than the application of a well-understood analysis of the dynamics of insurgency and counterinsurgency.

When US forces invaded Iraq in 2003, counterinsurgency thinking was an institutional orphan in the US armed forces and the lessons of previous conflicts had not been thoroughly assimilated throughout the military. Only a handful of experts in the military knew much about (or were interested in) counterinsurgency. Thus, the initial phases of US counterinsurgency operations relied on the default military response (the “kinetic” approach) to treat the insurgents as an opposing military force to be destroyed by firepower.

Only later did US military forces grapple seriously with the specific demands of counterinsurgency. The unpreparedness of the US military for counterinsurgency was intellectual as well as organizational. Consequently, the conceptual ambiguities and debates that had characterized much of counterinsurgency thinking in the 1960s were reproduced, with similar negative results. This delay in coming to terms with the insurgency has had deleterious consequences.

There are deeply rooted organizational reasons (largely having to do with issues of organizational identity and self-definition) why the US military finds it difficult to learn from its many previous experiences in counterinsurgency. Partly because of this, lessons that are learned are often mistaken or inapplicable. Only after the shock of finding that standard operating procedures do not suffice for counterinsurgency has the US military attempted to learn how to conduct counterinsurgency more effectively. Because there has been little incentive to institutionalize these lessons, they have never been properly diffused; each time the US military has confronted an insurgency, it has had to rediscover counterinsurgency theory ab initio. One is naturally led to ask whether the current relearning of counterinsurgency in Iraq will prove as ephemeral as previous cases.

Central theoretical issues in counterinsurgency

There are five central, unresolved issues in counterinsurgency theory. The first is the relationship between the kinetic activity of military organizations and the political goals of counterinsurgency. The second concerns the weight to be attached to the struggle for the “hearts and minds” of the population. The third is the role of coercion and population control in defeating an insurgency. The fourth area of debate concerns how best to cope with the fact that counterinsurgency operations are protracted and highly political. Finally, the difficulties of controlling various kinds of security forces and militias are poorly addressed by counterinsurgency theory.

From kinetics to politics

The standard operating procedure is to focus on the kinetic task of killing and defeating the insurgents: the “iron fist” approach to counterinsurgency. This orientation is almost always counterproductive. Brute force operations alienate local populations and generate more recruits for the insurgents (e.g. US Army 2004: 2–13). Whether or not this matters depends on the kind and degree of legitimacy required to suppress the insurgency, and on the degree of population control exerted by either side (Kalyvas 2006).
There was considerable variation in how different military units approached the task of occupying Iraq in 2003.

With some exceptions (i.e. the 1st Marine Division, the 101st Airborne, and Special Forces), early efforts at counterinsurgency in Iraq by the US Army relied heavily on the iron fist approach. Some of these early military efforts in Iraq (like the vast sweep operations) may well have been counterproductive. No one takes kindly to having their homes burst into by heavily armed soldiers, particularly when they are culturally different and do not speak the local language. For many Iraqis, whatever benefits the American occupation may have brought, it also brought with it massive and often arbitrary violence, on the roads, at checkpoints, in prisons, and in homes. Whereas the revelations of abuse of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison may have come as a shock to Americans, it simply confirmed what many Iraqis already knew or suspected.

The US Army at the time of the Abu Ghraib abuses had come to understand that its intelligence on the insurgency was inadequate. It recognized that it was up against a serious enemy, but had no clear idea about the identity of this enemy. In response to the absence of good intelligence, in late summer and early fall of 2003 the US Army decided to “fight for intelligence” by initiating a series of offensive sweeps. Thousands of Iraqis were pulled into the net; somehow or other actionable intelligence was to be extracted from them. The intelligence and custodial services were simply not up to the task: facilities were overloaded, and military police were poorly trained and inadequately supervised. This was a classic instance of counterinsurgent forces slipping out of control, in this case stimulated by pressures from top commanders to develop better intelligence on a determined and poorly understood opponent.

By 2005, many US military units had learned a lot and had greatly modified their tactics in Iraq. But by then the question had arisen of whether it was too late to suppress the insurgency.

Hearts and minds?

It is often said that counterinsurgency is a struggle for the “hearts and minds” of the population. This intuitively appealing slogan turns out, on closer examination to have various possible meanings, and policies designed to win hearts and minds turn out to be difficult to design and implement.

Classic counterinsurgency thinking conformed to the “triangular” model: there were only two contending forces (government and the insurgency) and a third, largely inert, population whose allegiance was the object of struggle. The conflict in Iraq was not like this. There were many contending forces, few of which were “controlled” in any meaningful sense by the leadership of either the insurgents or the Iraqi government. This was not something that counterinsurgency thinkers properly understood, with their more or less explicit contrast between “insurgency” and “civil war.” The complex and hybrid nature of the Iraqi conflict was something for which they were intellectually unprepared.

In the absence of solid social science knowledge, there has been a lack of careful discussion, and the substitution of “common sense” for analytic thinking. This kind of approach to winning hearts and minds is well illustrated by injunctions in the Marine Corps manual (published in 1980 but still current in 2006) and in the Army’s 2004 interim counterinsurgency manual, rushed into print during the current conflict in Iraq.

Treating the population with “respect, tolerance, kindness, and understanding” (US Marine Corps 1980: 135) is an entirely laudable objective. But it is, at most, a necessary
rather than a sufficient condition for the suppression of an insurgency. Further, the
notion that improvements to the material standards of living of the population will win
hearts and minds (US Army 2004: c-3) is an unexamined and frequently mistaken
assumption; instead of simply improving conditions, rewards should be contingent upon
government success (see Race 1972).

Claims to the contrary notwithstanding, American counterinsurgency, in theory and in
practice, continues to operate on the assumption that improvements in material condi-
tions are the key to winning hearts and minds. Throughout the conflict in Iraq, Amer-
ican policy-makers have worried about the delivery of services to the Iraqi population:
electricity, security, jobs, construction, etc. The general climate of insecurity, together
with poor planning and implementation, has meant that much of this effort has been
futile. However, even if the US had been more effective in the reconstruction of Iraq,
there are reasons to doubt whether this would have had much impact on the insurgency.
The notion that grievances can be ameliorated by improving government services, or by
increasing the standard of living of the population, derives from a common sense (and
very Western) notion of the origins of grievances. Anti-government behavior is seen as a
response to poverty rather than to inequality and injustice or to issues of ethnic or sec-
tarian identity. In this optic, incremental improvement rather than reform is the solution.
For those who stress the importance of the delivery of services in creating legitimacy,
“hearts” are won by the provision of material goods (see Metz 1995: 13).

A slightly different take on the question of hearts and minds was to cast the issue not as
one of material improvements but as one of the government addressing grievances,
which would undercut the appeal of the insurgents. Unfortunately, governments (parti-
cularly those based on a narrow segment of the population) are seldom willing to
recognize that subject populations might have legitimate grievances. Even if they recog-
nize this, their ability to do anything about it without undermining their social base of
support might be restricted. Recent counterinsurgency doctrine usually is quite explicit
about the need to address grievances (see US Army 1990: 1–3, 2–1, and 2–9).

In practice, the counterinsurgent state might do little to address grievances, and at the
extreme may simply not recognize the existence of legitimate grievances at all. Certainly,
it will seldom admit that the nature of the state itself might be the problem.

There is sometimes a tendency to imply that satisfaction of grievances is a necessary
and a sufficient condition for putting an end to an insurgency. It is not at all clear that
the historical evidence supports such a proposition. In macro terms, as Jeff Goodwin
(2001) suggests, the key variable is the openness of the political system.

Perhaps more pertinent, 1980s counterinsurgency theory argued that governments
that were not seen to be appropriately “representative,” that were seen as repressive, or
that were seen to be hand-in-glove with foreign occupying forces, were all likely to be
“the problem” rather than the solution.

Nevertheless, by the 1980s American counterinsurgency doctrine had come to view
addressing grievances as the center of the counterinsurgency effort. This generally
required reforms typically of four kinds. First are efforts to promote land reform, usually
one of the central concerns of peasants. Even the limited amount of land reform in the
Philippines was enough to take the wind out of the Huk insurgency (Kerkvliet 1977).
Reform of this kind seems not to be an issue in Iraq. Second are efforts to reform the
army and control the militias so that military operations do not create unnecessary ene-
mies. This has been a central issue in Iraq. Third, and often part of what a war is being
fought about, is democratization. El Salvador is an exemplary case. The insurgency
disappeared once meaningful elections were institutionalized and the military moved away from the center of power. The issue of meaningful elections in Iraq has been central to the conflict there. Fourth is national sovereignty, particularly in colonial situations or where foreign armies are present as occupation forces. Insurgencies have been most successful against colonial regimes and states relying principally on foreign military forces (as in Vietnam). The issue of national sovereignty is a central one in Iraq, and the US government is clearly intent on withdrawing from the limelight as rapidly as possible. The difficulty lies in creating an effective state and fostering a political accord that will enable the Americans to withdraw without major political costs.

A foreign power will almost always have little legitimacy precisely because it is foreign. Inevitably, the burden of reform and of counterinsurgency will have to be passed to the host nation. To the extent that indigenous state institutions are non-existent, weak, corrupt, or at the service of illegitimate elites, the ability of the host nation to assume these tasks is limited. The foreign power thus finds itself in a race against time to build up the indigenous state so that it can withdraw from direct conflict as rapidly as possible. The strategy of Vietnamization is testimony to the difficulties entailed. The difficulties are not so much military as political. As of the fall of 2006, whether Iraqification would succeed was an open question.

**Population control and coercion**

Many counterinsurgency thinkers have been unconvinced by the hearts and minds school of thought. They believe either that the key dynamic is a competition in terror and coercion, and that the population will support the government or the insurgents because they see them as the lesser of two evils, and/or that the way to defeat an insurgency is to separate the insurgents from their base in the population. Control and coercion thinkers have argued that what is important is the passive support of the population, not what they think. Whether the population positively accords legitimacy to the government is less important than whether they pay taxes, support the police, refuse to aid the insurgents, and whether enough informers are willing to come forward. Adherents of this school of thought argue that legitimacy might be accorded to government simply because it is “there” and its presence is taken for granted.

There is much sociological merit to this view, but, like the hearts and minds approach, it turns out to be a cluster of distinct, and not always mutually compatible, ideas. Three main positions can be identified: balance of terror, population control, and the formation of “self-defense” forces.

By punishing communities for harboring or assisting guerrillas, by indiscriminate use of artillery and aerial bombardment, or by widespread detentions and “disappearances,” a counterinsurgent military can induce such levels of terror into the general population that they will shun the insurgents and perhaps move to areas controlled by incumbent forces. This approach may succeed if the counterinsurgent is willing to countenance high and sustained levels of violence against the civilian population (e.g. Central America in the 1930s, Guatemala during the Cold War, and Argentina in the 1970s). However, in Iraq, where the intent is to create a democratic government, seeking to terrorize the population is counterproductive.

The second variant, population control (e.g. the Spanish in Cuba; the British in the Boer War [1899–1902] and in Malaya between 1948 and 1960 [Nagl 2002; Stubbs 1989]; and in Vietnam), is simple: to help separate the guerrillas from the population and then to defeat them militarily.
The notion that the task of a counterinsurgent is to separate the guerrillas from the population (or vice versa, as is generally the practice) is a largely unchallenged assumption in much counterinsurgency writing. A different view of counterinsurgency might be to envision it as a political struggle over the terms of incorporation of that section of the population that supports the insurgents. In this view, the key task is not to drive a wedge between the guerrillas and their popular base, but to find ways to address the grievances of that section of the population and develop institutional ways for them to participate fully in political activity. It was unclear whether such measures were appropriate to Iraq.

The third variant consists of the creation of a variety of local “self-defense” forces by the government. These militias are intended to provide local defense against guerrilla attacks until regular military forces can arrive. This frees up the regular forces for offensive operations against the insurgents.

Creating effective self-defense forces is difficult. First, many of the villagers may actively support the insurgents. Arming self-defense forces is thus simply channeling weapons to the insurgents. Even where there is no active support, the poorly equipped and trained self-defense forces may be afraid to engage insurgents. The reluctance of at least some recently formed Iraqi police and army units to engage in firefights with insurgents illustrates the difficulties inherent in attempting to create effective self-defense forces.

The role of self-defense organizations in defeating an insurgency has, moreover, often been narrowly understood as a purely military matter. Counterinsurgents have come to appreciate that organizing the rural population to defend itself is efficient. Local self-defense forces (together with some population reconcentration) enable villages to stave off insurgent attacks. But the political aspects of local self-defense organizations are perhaps equally, if not more, important.

In places where self-defense forces were closely linked to the defense of fortified villages and where they were under the control of government agencies (often the military), a form of near-totalitarian political control over the adult male population was achieved. This may not have been intended, but it worked to crowd out any space for independent organization among the villagers, subjecting them all to surveillance by the military. The local self-defense forces in Guatemala, in Peru, in Vietnam, and in Kenya all seem to have monopolized political activity and suppressed dissent (Stern 1998; Stoll 1993; Dunkerley 1988; Sorley 1999).

A prolonged and political struggle

Because counterinsurgency is primarily a political operation, it is a slow, prolonged struggle over who has influence over the state. In theory, this is recognized in American counterinsurgency doctrine, but is often not accepted as a matter of practical policy. Counterinsurgency practitioners make the point that successful counterinsurgency requires patience. However, patience is often in short supply. Managing the tension between the need for protracted operations and the need to minimize the political costs of counterinsurgency is seldom adequately addressed in counterinsurgency manuals.

Not only are national-level political conditions in the metropolis not conducive to prolonged counterinsurgency, but the mind-set of most modern military organizations finds the protracted and indecisive nature of counterinsurgency operations uncongenial. Soldiers are usually trained to act decisively, and to seek swift victory. For soldiers with this mind-set, the prolonged and indecisive nature of counterinsurgency operations can be frustrating. Again, aside from platitudes and bromides, counterinsurgency manuals...
seldom directly address the tensions arising from the fact that low-intensity military operations demand a quite different set of attitudes and skills, an entirely different habitus, from those required by conventional combat.

Because insurgency and counterinsurgency are political struggles about the terms of incorporation of various groups in the polity and about the nature of the state, the “solution” to an insurgency is often ultimately a matter of politics. Where insurgencies are small and isolated from a large popular support base (e.g. some guerrilla focos in Latin America immediately following the Cuban revolution), it may be possible to end the insurgency by killing or capturing the guerrillas. But where the insurgents have a meaningful social base, pacification almost always involves some sort of negotiated political bargain between the insurgents and the government. From the point of view of the counterinsurgent state, the role of military force is twofold: on the one hand, the insurgents must not be allowed to overthrow the state; on the other hand, constant military pressure must be exerted on the insurgents to convince them that they cannot win militarily. From this perspective, time is on the side of the government: so long as the insurgents do not win, the government can wait until the conditions are ripe for a political settlement. Many states have learned to live with protracted insurgencies. These insurgencies often fizzle out and fade away in fits and starts as peace agreements succeed temporarily, collapse, and are renegotiated.

Key to ending insurgencies is the establishment and consolidation of a meaningful democracy. As electoral politics increasingly come to be seen as a viable and legitimate road to power, political struggles can be demilitarized. Finding settlement terms acceptable to all conflicting parties is often exceedingly difficult. At times, the solution may involve the breakup of a state into smaller entities, as occurred in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. These major issues about the nature of the Iraqi state were, at the time of writing, still very much in the air: could the Sunnis be reconciled and integrated into a national polity? Would there be, indeed, a meaningful central state in Iraq, or would the country split into three or more entities?

**Controlling security forces, militias, and death squads**

The fifth major unresolved issue in counterinsurgency thinking concerns the need to reform the host nation’s armed forces so that they became an effective agent of the government. First, the counterinsurgent armed forces themselves need to be brought under tight control. This is by no means an easy task. A whole series of principal-agent issues bedevils the conduct of military and police operations. To be concrete, if the political leadership is concerned not to alienate large numbers of the indigenous population, how can they stop soldiers from killing or injuring non-combatant civilians or damaging their property? In Iraq, the concern has not primarily been the control of US and British forces (although many of their actions, official and unauthorized, have been counterproductive), but the control of various Iraqi security forces.

Military forces in the Developing World in an insurgency or civil war are seldom accountable to, or under the effective control of, the political leadership. They act with considerable impunity, and lower-level leaders often effectively operate without restraint. Indeed, a central task of US counterinsurgency efforts is to attempt to create a “modern” bureaucratic military that is an obedient servant of the political leadership.

Better training of officers and men, clear rules of engagement, close supervision, and punishment for offenders are all necessary, but extremely difficult to implement in
practice. Building an effective and responsible military force is difficult and expensive; that is why military forces in the Developing World are often undisciplined. Poorly resourced, corrupt, and politicized, they often fall far short of the ideal type of a rational bureaucracy.

In the Iraqi case, the US had to create a new Iraqi army from scratch. It took the Americans some time to appreciate the urgency of the need to re-establish Iraqi security forces; once understood, it then became a race against time. The creation of new Iraqi security forces became the central plank in an American exit strategy. Although necessary, it was unclear whether the creation of a new Iraqi army would be a sufficient condition for suppression of the insurgency. Even if an effective Iraqi army were created, what would this new army do, and what would be its strategy for counterinsurgency? What would ensure that it operated as an effective agent of a central state, rather than responding to the tug of particularistic interests? What would be the relationship between the national army, on the one hand, and the Kurdish Peshmerga and the vast number of local militias on the other? To what extent would it be a Shiite, rather than a national, army?

Besides the question of the national army, there were unresolved questions about control of the militias and death squads and about how the numerous police and security forces outside the regular army would be controlled. This is partly a question of state capacity and partly a matter of political will. It remains unfinished business.

The problem of the control of armed force is compounded in many Developing World conflicts by the emergence of a variety of “self-defense” militia forces and “warlord” armies formed by local groups opposed to the “insurgents.” They may be motivated by a desire to protect themselves and their property, to wreak vengeance on the insurgents, to dispossess the insurgents, or to establish the political domination of their class, ethnic group, or sect. Self-defense militias provide the government with a vast pool of manpower, which can be used to free up regular forces from static defense. Since they are familiar with local conditions, militias are often highly effective in certain kinds of military tasks. They are often better at generating intelligence, and they are often unconstrained by the rules of engagement and laws of war that, in principle at least, restrain the actions of regular forces.

The organization of self-defense forces can exacerbate conflict and divide communities. Given their local knowledge and relative autonomy from the “official” forces of the counterinsurgent state, they are often able to impose a reign of terror and assassination outside government control. Although sometimes these militias and death squads can act as proxies for (and with the tacit approval of) the government, there is a tendency for them to get out of hand. When that happens, re-establishing government control is often difficult.

It is striking that after half a century of serious thinking about counterinsurgency, so many of the key conceptual and theoretical issues remain unresolved. This may perhaps be a manifestation of a deeper conceptual blindness in American strategic culture: “Western democracies knew how to deal with war and knew how to deal with peace. They were confused, however, by conflicts overlapping and blending the two” (Metz 1995: 8).

Debate tended to be artificially aligned between proponents of kinetic approaches to destroy insurgent armed forces, those who sought to win hearts and minds, and those who gave priority to various population-control measures. At times, a superficial consensus around a set of “best practices” or fundamental principles of counterinsurgency would emerge (Sepp 2005; Cohen et al. 2006), which usually stressed the
counterproductive nature of the kinetic approach, emphasized the importance of creating
a legitimate government, recognized that ultimately the conflict was about political
rather than strictly military goals, that it would be long and drawn out, that good intel-
ligence on the insurgents was crucial, and that insurgents should be isolated from their
potential supporters. It was usually argued that respect on the part of the counter-
insurgent forces for the human rights of the population and of the guerrillas was an
important way to win hearts and minds. Minimal force was to be used, and local host-
nation military forces were to be relied on wherever possible.

Such lists of counterinsurgency principles represent a clear advance on the purely
kinetic approaches that, I argue, are the reflex response of modern military organizations.
But these lists of principles fail to address fundamental questions about how to gain
legitimacy for the government, about how the population is to be controlled and for
what purposes, and which kinds of reforms are required to undercut the insurgency.

Before the invasion of Iraq there were profound organizational forces steering the US
Army, Marine Corps, and Special Forces away from any serious intellectual engagement
with the issues entailed in counterinsurgency operations. In none of these venues did
counterinsurgency thinking find a congenial and welcoming home. As may be seen in
their acquisition programs, each service remained wedded to a vision of itself that cen-
tered on fighting hi-tech wars. As far as any innovative thinking (indeed, any thinking at
all) about counterinsurgency was concerned, the US military was a reluctant learner.

This meant that when the US military was confronted once again (in Iraq) with an
insurgency, it turned for intellectual guidance to works written in the 1960s. There was
no intellectual continuity; the wheel of counterinsurgency doctrine had to be reinvented.
But returning to the “classics” of counterinsurgency thinking was no solution. These
works had failed to resolve central issues, were conceptually ambiguous, and relied on
naive theories of grievances and legitimacy.

Will the US military now assimilate the lessons
of counterinsurgency?

This chapter argues that the US military does learn from its counterinsurgent experience,
but in a cycle of learning and “forgetting,” which means in practice that there is no
sustained organizational learning. As I argued earlier in this article, modern military
organizations (and certainly the US military) are predisposed to define war in terms that
they find familiar and intellectually comforting. World War II (WWII) is the master
template. War is seen as a massive clash of conventional armored forces. All other forms
of war are basically seen as deviations, complications, or lesser-included cases (labeled
“unconventional” or “irregular”). These preferences were developed during WWII and
consolidated during the Cold War. By comparison with the ghastly slaughter and stale-
mate of World War I, WWII was seen by the services as a shift from attrition to mane-
uver, from impasse to decisive action. Swift, decisive victory became the acme of
military professionalism and the rod against which all operations (including counter-
insurgency) were measured.

Military officers intend to conduct “rapid, decisive operations” to produce “decisive
victory.” Much emphasis is put on being “offensively minded.” Who, after all, would
want to conduct “slow, indecisive operations” – unless, of course, they were conducting
a counterinsurgency campaign?
The military mind-set, if one can talk in such reified terms, emphasizes actions and qualities that are probably not appropriate in counterinsurgency operations. Counterinsurgency is almost always slow and indecisive. Military operations play a subordinate role in the complex political struggles that define the insurgency–counterinsurgency dialectic. So long as “regular” military forces (and even some “special” forces) prepare for “conventional” war as their primary mission, there will be little intellectual readiness to deal with the challenges of counterinsurgency. Proponents of counterinsurgency need an organizational niche, and this they have failed to find.

American military officers are smart, professional, and highly motivated. We can be sure that, now that the initial phase of trying to do things using the regular playbook is over, there will be rapid learning. They will become more effective at counterinsurgency operations. The thought that Iraq might not be an isolated case, but merely one campaign among many in a protracted global counterinsurgency, might well serve to focus attention on counterinsurgency doctrine. Moreover, there is an important difference between the current security environment and that of the Cold War. With the possible exception of China, there is no other large modern military organization that the US military must confront. Perhaps this change in the security environment, and the concomitant notion that the global war on terror will be a “long war” with many campaigns, will mean that US ground forces embrace counterinsurgency as one of their central missions. There are certainly proponents of such a view scattered throughout the Army and Marine Corps (see Roxborough 2002, 2004, 2006).

The key issue is the conditions under which deeply rooted organizational identities and cultures are subject to change. As Jeffrey Legro (1995) and numerous writers on military doctrine and innovation have suggested, although some processes of endogenous change in military culture clearly occur, often as a result of the intervention of civilian politicians (Avant 1994; Cohen 2002), external shocks such as defeat in war are by far the most common precipitants of change in organizational culture. Key works include Doughty (1985), Goldman and Eliason (2003), Harris (1995), Johnson (1998), Kier (1997), Kiesling (1996), Mahnken (2002), Murray and Millett (1996), Posen (1984), Rosen (1991), Roxborough (2000), Samuels (1995), Winton (1988), and Winton and Mets (2000).

On the other hand, the US military is overstretched, and there are insistent calls from parts of the political spectrum for a more cautious approach to world politics. Not surprisingly, public support for the war in Iraq has declined. A scenario could easily be imagined in which the experiment in bringing democracy to that country collapsed in catastrophic failure. US forces might get bogged down in an unproductive quagmire which might well produce a decision on the part of the Armed Forces (as after Vietnam) not to get involved in that sort of messy conflict again. If American forces were to exit Iraq relatively quickly, and if there is not another “Iraq” in the pipeline, then perhaps institutional history will reassert itself and the American military will return to its somnolence as far as counterinsurgency doctrine is concerned. We will see.

Note

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