

The American Way of War

Cultural Barriers to Successful Counterinsurgency

by Jeffrey Record

Executive Summary

The U.S. defeat in Vietnam, embarrassing setbacks in Lebanon and Somalia, and continuing political and military difficulties in Afghanistan and especially Iraq underscore the limits of America's hard-won conventional military supremacy. That supremacy has not delivered decisive success against nonstate enemies practicing protracted irregular warfare; on the contrary, America's conventional supremacy and approach to war—especially its paramount reliance on firepower and technology—are often counterproductive.

The problem is rooted in American political and military culture. Americans are frustrated with limited wars, particularly counterinsurgent wars, which are highly political in nature. And Americans are averse to risking American lives when vital national interests are not at stake. Expecting that America's conventional military superiority can deliver quick, cheap, and decisive success, Americans are surprised and politically demoralized when confronted by Vietnam- and Iraq-like quagmires.

The Pentagon's aversion (the Marine Corps excepted) to counterinsurgency is deeply rooted in the American way of warfare. Since the early 1940s, the Army has trained, equipped, and organized for large-scale conventional operations against like adversaries, and it has traditionally employed conventional military operations even against irregular enemies.

Barring profound change in America's political and military culture, the United States runs a significant risk of failure when it enters small wars of choice, and great power intervention in small wars is almost always a matter of choice. Most such wars, moreover, do not engage core U.S. security interests other than placing the limits of American military power on embarrassing display. Indeed, the very act of intervention in small wars risks gratuitous damage to America's military reputation.

The United States should abstain from intervention in such wars, except in those rare cases when military intervention is essential to protecting or advancing U.S. national security.

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Introduction

In 2003, shortly after President George W. Bush declared the termination of major U.S. combat operations in Iraq, the avowed neoimperialist Max Boot declared that the American victory was “one of the signal achievements in military history.” Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), even when placed beside the stunning German blitzkrieg against France in 1940, he said, made “such fabled generals as Erwin Rommel and Heinz Guderian seem positively incompetent by comparison.” Boot conceded that Iraqi forces “were not all that formidable to begin with,” that they were demoralized, poorly trained, badly equipped, and incompetently led, all of which would seem to argue against OIF as a signal achievement in military history and Tommy Franks as the 21st century’s American Guderian. Boot nonetheless asserted that the United States had perfected a new way of war relying on “speed, maneuver, flexibility, and surprise” to achieve “quick victory with minimal casualties”—a fair description, it would seem, of the German victory of 1940.¹

The gushing Boot did not anticipate either OIF’s failure to deliver the U.S. political objective in Iraq or the insurgency that was beginning to erupt in that country. Indeed, three years after the launching of OIF, Boot lamented the “horrific and inexplicable failure to undertake adequate preparation for the running of Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein” and declared that the “most criticized aspect of this failure—and rightly so—was not sending enough troops to control a population of 25 million.” He implied that more troops might be needed and then proposed “a thorough spring cleaning at the Department of Defense.”²

The war in Iraq is but the latest demonstration of the limits of America’s power. In Iraq, as in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia, the United States is discovering—or, more accurately, rediscovering—the limited utility of its conventional military superiority against a determined and skilled insurgent foe.

Since the Vietnam War, much has been

written about the phenomenon of great power failure in “small wars,” classically defined over a century ago by British Colonel Charles Edward Callwell as “all campaigns other than those where both sides consist of regular troops.”³ The general consensus is that the weaker side beats the stronger side through possession of superior “fighting power,” defined by Israeli military historian Martin van Creveld as “the sum total of mental qualities that make armies fight.”⁴ Some people argue that the key to insurgent success is asymmetry of stakes. Insurgents have a greater interest in the outcome of the war and therefore bring to it a superior political will, a greater determination to fight and die; the insurgents wage total war, whereas the government or foreign occupying power fights what, for it, is necessarily a limited war.⁵ Others contend that superior strategy best explains insurgent victories—that is, protracted guerrilla warfare against a politically impatient and tactically inflexible conventional enemy.⁶ Still others believe that the stronger side’s type of governance is the place to look; they argue that democracies, as opposed to dictatorships, lack the political and moral stomach to prevail in long and bloody wars against irregular adversaries, especially in circumstances in which the insurgents are, or believe themselves to be, under foreign occupation.⁷

Those explanations are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, I would argue that insurgents defeat great powers through a mixture of stronger political will and more effective strategy, and that insurgents are likely to do better against modern democracies than strong dictatorships. I also believe that receipt of external assistance is the most common denominator among successful insurgencies; few if any insurgencies have won without it.⁸

Varying combinations of weaker political will, inferior strategy, democratic governance, and failure to isolate insurgent access to external assistance go a long way in explaining insurgent wins over great powers. Are there, however, distinctive aspects of America’s history, culture, and way of war

that further disadvantage the United States in wars against materially weaker though committed and resourceful enemies? I believe there are at least two. The first is the American tendency to separate war and politics—to view military victory as an end in itself, ignoring war’s function as an instrument of policy. The second is the U.S. military’s profound aversion to counterinsurgency. The two combine to form a recipe for politically sterile uses of force, especially in limited wars involving protracted hostilities against weaker irregular opponents. Simply put, the United States is not very good at defeating enemies who do not fight like we do, enemies who avoid our strengths while exploiting our weaknesses.

The American Way of War

Much has been written about America’s strategic culture and way of war, beginning with historian Russell F. Weigley’s seminal 1973 book, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*. Both strategy and policy derive from a variety of factors, including national political culture, geography, historical military experience, and comparative strategic advantages and preferences. Particular factors shaping America’s strategic culture include geographic isolation from Europe, success in subjugating a vast continental wilderness, hemispheric domination, an ideology of democratic expansionism and national exceptionalism, and a persistent isolationist impulse. Those and other factors, argues the highly respected British strategist Colin S. Gray in an exceptionally insightful 2005 essay, have produced a strategic culture—more specifically, an “American way of war”—that has 12 specific characteristics:

1. *Apolitical*: “Americans are wont to regard war and peace as sharply distinctive conditions. The U.S. military has a long history of waging war for the goal of victory, paying scant regard to the consequences of the course of its operations for the character of the peace that will follow.”
2. *Astrategic*: “Strategy is, or should be, the bridge that connects military power with policy. When Americans wage war as a largely autonomous activity, leaving worry about peace and its politics to some later day, the strategy bridge has broken down.”
3. *Abistorical*: “America is a future-oriented, still somewhat ‘new’ country, one that has a founding ideology of faith in, and hope for, and commitment to, human betterment. It is only to be expected, therefore, that Americans should be less than highly respectful of what they might otherwise allow history to teach them.”
4. *Problem-Solving, Optimistic*: “The American way in war is not easily discouraged or deflected once it is exercised with serious intent to succeed. . . . The problem-solving faith, the penchant for the ‘engineering fix,’ has the inevitable consequence of leading U.S. policy, including its use of armed force, to attempt the impossible.”
5. *Culturally Ignorant*: Americans are not inclined “to be respectful of the beliefs, habits, and behaviors of other cultures . . . the American way of war has suffered from the self-inflicted damage caused by a failure to understand the enemy of the day.”
6. *Technologically Dependent*: “America is the land of technological marvels and of extraordinary technology dependency. . . . American soldiers say that the human beings matter most, but in practice the American way of war, past, present, and prospectively future, is quintessentially and uniquely technologically dependent.”
7. *Firepower Focused*: “It has long been the American way in warfare to send metal in harm’s way in place of vulnerable flesh. . . . Needless to say, perhaps, a devotion to firepower, while highly desirable in itself, cannot help but encourage the U.S. armed

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forces to rely on it even when other modes of military behavior would be more suitable. In irregular conflicts in particular, . . . resorting to firepower solutions readily becomes self-defeating.”

8. *Large-Scale*: “Poor societies are obliged to wage war frugally. They have no choice other than to attempt to fight smarter than rich enemies. The United States has been blessed with wealth in all its forms. Inevitably, the U.S. armed forces, once mobilized and equipped, have fought a rich person’s war. They could hardly do otherwise.”
9. *Profoundly Regular*: “Few, if any, armies have been equally competent in the conduct of regular and irregular warfare. . . . As institutions, however, the U.S. armed forces have not been friendly either to irregular warfare or to those in its ranks who were would-be practitioners and advocates of what was regarded as the sideshow of insurgency. American soldiers . . . have always been prepared nearly exclusively for ‘real war,’ which is to say combat against a tolerably symmetrical, regular enemy.”
10. *Impatient*: “Americans have approached warfare as a regrettable occasional evil that has to be concluded as decisively and rapidly as possible.”
11. *Logistically Excellent*: “Americans at war have been exceptionally able logisticians. With a continental-size interior and an effectively insular geographic location, such ability has been mandatory if the country was to wage war at all, let alone wage it effectively. . . . A large logistical footprint . . . requires a great deal of guarding, helps isolate American troops from local people and their culture, and generally tends to grow.”
12. *Sensitivity to Casualties*: “In common with the Roman Empire, the American guardian of world order is much averse to suffering a high rate of military casualties. . . . Both superstates had and have armies that are small, too small in the opinion of many, relative to their responsibilities.

Moreover, well-trained professional soldiers, volunteers all, are expensive to raise, train, and retain, and are difficult to replace.” American society, it is said, “has become so sensitive to casualties that the domestic context for U.S. military action is no longer tolerant of bloody adventures in muscular imperial governance.”⁹

Aversion to Limited War

How do those strategic cultural attributes manifest themselves in how Americans approach the use of force? Thomas G. Mahnken contends that America’s geography, history, society, and comparative advantages have produced an approach to war at the strategic level characterized by “a strong and long-standing predilection for waging war for far-reaching objectives.” Americans “have been uncomfortable with wars fought for limited political aims” and prefer “the direct approach . . . over the indirect. . . . The U.S. military has throughout its history sought to close with and destroy the enemy at the earliest opportunity.” At the operational and tactical levels of war, these strategic preferences translate into “a lavish use of firepower,” which among other things saves American lives, and more specifically and recently, “growing reliance on high-technology weapons,” especially those delivered from the air.¹⁰

Permeating the entire fabric of America’s strategic culture and approach to war, especially the aversion to fighting for limited political purposes, is an unwillingness to accept war as a continuation of politics. Clausewitz repeatedly reminded his readers that “the only source of war is politics—the intercourse of governments and peoples,” and warned that “it is apt to be assumed that war suspends that intercourse and replaces it by a wholly different condition, ruled by no law but its own.” War, he repeated, “is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means.” Most Americans, however, do not accept the wartime subordination of military operations to political considerations even though, as Clausewitz pointed out, “subordinating the

political point of view to the military would be absurd, for it is policy that creates war. Policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa.”¹¹

General Douglas MacArthur spoke for most Americans when he declared, in an address to a joint session of Congress on April 19, 1951: “Once war is forced upon us, there is no other alternative than to apply every available means to bring it to a swift end. War’s very object is victory, not prolonged indecision. In war there is no substitute for victory.”¹² When he uttered those words, MacArthur had just been fired as commander of U.N. forces in Korea because he had publicly challenged President Truman to widen the Korean War by bombing and blockading mainland China, a course of action Truman and the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed. They did not want an open-ended war with China at a time when Europe remained defenseless against a Soviet attack. MacArthur, on the other hand, rejected the very idea of politically restricted military operations. War was, for him, a substitute for policy, not its continuation. Another national icon, John Wayne, summed up the American distaste for half-measures: “If we are going to send even one man to die,” he declared to an interviewer in 1971, “we ought to be in an all-out conflict.”¹³

This insistence on politically immaculate military operations underpins the conventional wisdom in the United States regarding the failed prosecution of the Vietnam War. Meddling politicians and Defense Department civilians, it is said, snatched defeat from the jaws of victory; if they had just gotten out of the way and let the military professionals do their job, the United States would have won the war.¹⁴ One need look no further than the Gulf War of 1991, so this reasoning goes, to see what happens when the civilians stand aside, or no further than Bosnia and Kosovo to see what happens when they resume their interference.

Conventional wisdom conveniently overlooks the reality that limited war necessarily entails restrictions on the use of force (and the Gulf War was no exception); otherwise, it would not be limited war. Military means are proportional to the political objective sought;

thermonuclear weapons are not used against insurgency.¹⁵ Letting MacArthur attack mainland China would have involved a use of force excessive to the limited objective of restoring South Korea’s territorial integrity. Even in OIF, whose object was the overthrow of a hostile regime via invasion of its homeland, extensive restrictions were placed on ground force size and aerial targeting.

Perhaps worse still, the conventional wisdom is dangerously narcissistic. It completely ignores the enemy, assuming that what we do determines success or failure. It assumes that only the United States can defeat the United States, an outlook that set the United States up for failure in Vietnam and for surprise in Iraq. Custer may have been a fool, but the Sioux did, after all, have something to do with his defeat along the Little Big Horn.

Military victory is a beginning, not an end. Approaching war as an apolitical enterprise encourages fatal inattention to the challenges of converting military wins into political successes. It thwarts recognition that insurgencies are first and foremost political struggles that cannot be defeated by military means alone—indeed, that effective counterinsurgency requires the greatest discretion in the use of force. Pursuit of military victory for its own sake also discourages thinking about and planning for the second and by far the most difficult half of wars for regime change: establishing a viable replacement for the destroyed regime.

The U.S. Military and Counterinsurgency

The U.S. military’s aversion to counterinsurgency (the Marine Corps is the prominent exception) is a function of 60 years of preoccupation with high-technology conventional warfare against other states and accelerated substitution of machines for combat manpower, most notably aerial standoff precision firepower for large ground forces. Indeed, evidence mounts of growing alienation between the kind of war the United States prepares to fight and the kinds of war it has actually fought in

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recent decades and will likely fight in the future. To put it another way, U.S. military force posture appears increasingly at odds with the emerging strategic environment. Hostile great powers, once the predominant threats to American security, have been supplanted by rogue states, failed states, and nonstate actors—all of them pursuing asymmetrical strategies to offset U.S. military strengths. This new threat environment places a premium on what until recently the Defense Department termed “military operations other than war” (MOOTW)—in other words, operations other than the powerful conventional force-on-force missions for which the U.S. military is optimized. Such operations include peace enforcement, counterinsurgency, security and stabilization, and state building.

Like the Vietnam War before it, however, the Iraq War has exposed the limits of conventional military power in unconventional settings. OIF achieved a quick victory over Iraqi conventional military resistance, such as it was, but did not secure decisive political success. An especially vicious and seemingly ineradicable insurgency arose, in part because coalition forces did not seize full control of the country and impose the security necessary for Iraq’s peaceful economic and political reconstruction. The Office of the Secretary of Defense, encouraged by the easy American win over the Taliban in Afghanistan, was determined to demonstrate that minimum force was sufficient to topple the Baathist regime in Iraq. Francis Fukuyama believes that Americans entered the 21st century believing the success of their technology enabled them to wage only cheap and clean wars in the future, but the Iraq War has shattered this illusion. High-technology conventional warfare runs afoul of insurgency. Precision-guided weapons “cannot distinguish between insurgents and noncombatants or help soldiers speak Arabic,” he observes. “Indeed, the very model of a professional, all-volunteer military that was established in Vietnam’s waning days works only for short, high-intensity wars. If the United States were serious about regime change and the use of its military to promote

political goals in countries around the world, it would need a military different in many ways from the one [it now has].”¹⁶ Michael Gordon and Bernard Trainor, coauthors of the best single analysis to date of OIF’s planning, implementation, and aftermath, believe there were “profound and irreconcilable tensions between Rumsfeld’s push to enact his principles of transformation by beginning the attack with a lean force and the administration’s rationale for the war, disarming Iraq and preventing WMD [weapons of mass destruction] from falling into the wrong hands.” The “surprising contradiction” between means and ends was that the

United States did not have nearly enough troops to secure the hundreds of suspected WMD sites that had supposedly been identified in Iraq or to secure the nation’s long, porous borders. Had the Iraqis possessed WMD and terrorist groups been prevalent in Iraq as the Bush administration so loudly asserted, U.S. forces might well have failed to prevent the WMD from being spirited out of the country and falling into the hands of the dark forces the administration had declared war against.¹⁷

Technology Mania

OIF followed not only three decades of determined U.S. Army disinterest in the counterinsurgency mission but also more than a decade of steady cuts in active-duty U.S. ground forces, especially Army infantry.¹⁸ Most MOOTW, however, including counterinsurgency, are inherently manpower intensive and rely heavily on special skills—for example, human intelligence, civil affairs, police, public health, foreign language, foreign force training, psychological warfare—that are secondary, even marginal, to the prosecution of conventional warfare. Forces capable of achieving swift conventional military victory thus may be quantitatively and qualitatively unsuited for postvictory tasks of the kind that the United

States has encountered in Iraq. Antulio Echevarria, director of research at the U.S. Army War College's Strategic Studies Institute, believes the United States "is geared to fight wars as if they were battles, and thus confuses the winning of campaigns . . . with the winning of wars." He further contends that "the characteristics of the U.S. style of warfare—speed, jointness, knowledge, and precision—are better suited for strike operations than for translating such operations into strategic successes."¹⁹ Strategic analyst David Lonsdale observes that America's strategic culture stresses "technological fixes to strategic problems" and "the increasing removal of humans from the sharp end of war," resulting in postmodern warfare "in which precise, distant bombardment dispenses with the need to deploy ground forces in a combat role and thereby relegates them to a constabulary function."²⁰

Former West Point history professor Frederick W. Kagan also believes that the primary culprit in delivering politically sterile victories is the Pentagon's conception of war. The reason why "the United States [has] been so successful in recent wars [but has] encountered so much difficulty in securing its political aims after the shooting stopped," he argues, "lies partly in a 'vision of war' that see[s] the enemy as a target set and believe[s] that when all or most targets have been hit, he will inevitably surrender and American goals will be achieved." Unfortunately, this vision ignores the importance of "how, exactly, one defeats the enemy and what the enemy's country looks like at the moment the bullets stop flying."²¹

But target destruction is insufficient and perhaps counterproductive in circumstances where the United States is seeking regime change in a manner that gains support of the defeated populace for the new government. Such circumstances require large numbers of properly trained ground troops for purposes of securing population centers and infrastructure, maintaining order, providing humanitarian relief, and facilitating revived delivery of such fundamental services as electrical power, potable water, and garbage collection. "It is not enough to consider simply how to pound the

enemy into submission with stand-off forces," Kagan continued. "The only hope for success in the extension of politics that is war is to restore the human element to" the U.S. military's conduct of war."²²

Infatuation with perfection of military means can cause the user to ignore the broader political purpose of conflict. Did the Pentagon simply lose sight of the ultimate political objective in Iraq, which was not the destruction of Iraqi military forces but rather the establishment of the requisite security environment for Iraq's successful economic and political reconstruction? To be sure, the former was a precondition for the latter, but was the latter an especially, perhaps impossibly, tall order for a military that was, in the words of foreign policy analysts David Hendrickson and Robert Tucker, "obsessed with stupendous deeds of fire and movement rather than the political function that war must serve"?²³

The Limits of Transformation

Accelerated military speed may in fact be strategically counterproductive. "[T]he United States is winning wars faster and with fewer casualties," observe former presidential national security advisers Samuel Berger and Brent Scowcroft. "But that 'transformation' has had an unintended consequence. Rapid victory collapses the enemy but does not destroy it."²⁴ If adversaries go underground and regroup, the ensuing insurgency campaign can drag on for longer periods of time, and require far more troops, than the initial period of violent combat. Colin Gray contends that military transformation may produce the appearance of accomplishment but has almost always failed to achieve a decisive long-term victory. Why? Because future enemies will fight us asymmetrically—in other words, in ways that do not test our strengths—because we cannot prevent the global diffusion of our technology; and because "there is more to war than warfare. War is about the peace it will shape." Gray is skeptical that "military transformation will prove vitally useful in helping to improve America's strategic performance." "Sometimes one is moved to the

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despairing conclusion that Clausewitz wrote in vain," he laments, "for all the influence he has had on the American way of war."²⁵

None of the foregoing is to argue against continued conventional military perfection. U.S. conventional military primacy is inherently desirable because it deters enemy attack in kind and effectively eliminates conventional warfare as a means of settling disputes with the United States. Those are no mean accomplishments. Conventional primacy also enables the United States to crush the conventionally weak and incompetent, like the Taliban in Afghanistan and the Baathist government in Iraq. Primacy, at least of the kind sought by Pentagon transformationists, also permits increasing substitution of technology for blood, which in turn has reduced U.S. casualty rates to historic lows and arguably increased public tolerance for the use of force overseas (a very mixed blessing, to be sure). The same primacy that has yielded conventional deterrence, however, has pushed America's enemies into greater reliance on irregular warfare responses that expose the limits of conventional primacy. The Pentagon remains mesmerized by the notion "that machines can replace human beings on the battlefield," contends Ralph Peters. "We are seduced by what we can do, whereas our enemies focus on what they must do. We have fallen so deeply in love with the means we have devised for waging conceptual wars that we are blind to their marginal relevance in actual wars."²⁶

The language and recommendations of the Defense Department's much-awaited *Quadrennial Defense Review* (QDR) of February 2006 hardly demolish the reality of a growing disconnect between U.S. force planning and the evolving global strategic environment. The QDR formally acknowledges what has been self-evident for 15 years—namely, that "irregular warfare has emerged as the dominant form of warfare confronting the United States."²⁷ The QDR calls for heightened servicewide investment in foreign language training and cultural awareness. It also calls for expanded special operations forces, which can have considerable utility in counterinsurgency operations but are tasked to perform

other missions as well, "especially long-duration, indirect and clandestine operations in politically sensitive environments and denied areas."²⁸ But the QDR calls for no increases in overall U.S. ground force levels and stands pat on all major Cold War legacy weapons systems. Though it makes occasional passing references to the war in Iraq, it is technology and future-war obsessed. Four years of war against a deadly unconventional enemy have not disturbed the progress of any Navy or Air Force conventional weapons system in the acquisition pipeline even though those two services are supporting players in counterinsurgent operations.²⁹ The QDR leaves U.S. forces organized, trained, and equipped largely for traditional warfare and therefore represents a major if predictable victory of entrenched service preferences and contractor interests, which are vested in the big-ticket conventional weapons procurement programs.

The American strategic analyst Carnes Lord, writing in the early 1990s, warned against the Pentagon's unpreparedness for what in the professional jargon of the day was termed "low-intensity conflict." Noting that "the record of U.S. involvement in contingency operations as well as protracted revolutionary warfare in the less developed world is spotty at best, with serious flaws apparent even in victory," Lord went on to educate his readers:

In low intensity warfare, non-military instrumentalities of national power may have an equal or even greater role to play than military forces. What this means in practice is either that military forces must perform essentially non-military functions, or else that special means must be devised to coordinate and integrate military forces with non-military agencies of government.³⁰

Lord went on to observe that the United States was peculiarly ill-suited to dealing with low-intensity wars because of the national tendency "to view war and peace as sharply delineated activities" and because "the American national security establishment as a whole is

not structured in a way that facilitates coordination between the armed forces and other agencies of government.”³¹

Cultural Barriers to Counterinsurgency

The policy question is not whether the United States should continue to maintain its hard-won and indispensable conventional primacy but whether, given the evolving strategic environment, it should create ground (and supporting air) forces dedicated to performing operations other than war, including counterinsurgency, or simply abandon direct military intervention in foreign internal wars altogether unless there is a compelling national security interest at stake and intervention commands broad public support. Extant Army forces and tactical doctrines are hardly optimized for the counterinsurgent mission, which demands the utmost restraint and discrimination in the application of force. In counterinsurgency warfare, firepower is the instrument of last rather than first resort. There is no big, easily identifiable, compact enemy to close with and destroy, but rather countless individuals and small groups operating within threatened civilian populations that must be protected in ways that minimize collateral damage. Conventional ground force preparation for counterinsurgency and other MOOTW requires major doctrinal and training deprogramming of conventional military habits and reprogramming with the alien tactics, doctrines, and heavy political oversight of MOOTW.³² Needless to say, forces so reprogrammed—commonly manpower intensive and relatively low firepower—will not be optimized for big, high-tech conventional conflicts.

In his *Insurgency in Iraq: An Historical Perspective*, counterinsurgency expert Ian F. Beckett argues that

the essentials of counterinsurgency . . . have remained fairly constant . . . since 1945 [and include] first, a recognition of the need for a political rather than a purely military response to insurgency; second, a need for coordination of the civil and military response; third, a need

for the coordination of intelligence; fourth, a need to separate the insurgents from the population; fifth, a need for the appropriate use of military force, which generally means the minimum necessary in any given situation; and, last, the need to implement long-term reform to address grievances that led to support for the insurgency in the first place.³³

Given the fundamental differences between conventional and counterinsurgent warfare, Harvard University’s Ivan Arreguin-Toft, author of *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict*, concludes that each type of warfare requires its own force structure and doctrine,

one to defend U.S. interests in conventional wars, and one to defend them in small wars against terrorists. It also highlights the importance of politics and diplomacy in combating insurgencies and terrorists. Determined insurgents and terrorists are difficult to defeat. But where strong actors have succeeded, they have done so most dramatically by preceding *discriminate* military attacks with political and economic reforms—reforms that effectively isolated guerrillas and terrorists from their base of social support.³⁴

Whatever the arguments for the establishment of MOOTW-dedicated forces (and there are serious arguments against), they are not likely to find favor in the Pentagon, which like any other large bureaucracy has organizational preferences based on what it likes to do and does well. The Pentagon is exceptionally good at conventional warfare but not particularly good at fighting irregular adversaries to a politically decisive finish. Small war expert Thomas X. Hammes points out that though war against an unconventional enemy “is the only kind of war America has ever lost,” the Defense Department “has largely ignored unconventional warfare. As the only Goliath in the world, we should be

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worried that the world's Davids have found a sling and stone that work. Yet the internal DOD debate has largely ignored this striking difference between the outcomes of conventional and unconventional warfare."³⁵

Institutional resistance is especially strong inside the Army, despite recent growth in its special operations force components. Though the Marine Corps is comfortable with counterinsurgency because of its long history of small wars and policing operations (in 1990 it reissued its 1940 *Small Wars Manual*), the Army, notwithstanding considerable experience in small wars, has never viewed counterinsurgency as anything other than a diversion from its main mission of conventional combat against like enemies.

The Army in Vietnam

In a landmark 1986 assessment of the U.S. Army's performance in Vietnam, Andrew Krepinevich, a serving Army officer, set out to answer the question:

How could the army of the most powerful nation on Earth, materially supported on a scale unprecedented in history, equipped with the most sophisticated technology in an age when technology had assumed the role of a god of war, fail to emerge victorious against a numerically inferior force of lightly armed irregulars?³⁶

Krepinevich contended that the Army, in the person of General William C. Westmoreland, insisted on applying its own concept of war in an Indochinese strategic, operational, and tactical environment for which the concept was not suited; the Army neither understood nor wanted to understand the nature of the war it was entering. The concept, rooted in the Army's victories of World War II, had two characteristics: "a focus on . . . conventional war and reliance on high volumes of firepower to minimize [U.S.] casualties." Unfortunately,

the Army's experience in war did not prepare it well for counterinsurgency,

where the emphasis is on light infantry formations, not heavy divisions; on firepower restraint, not its widespread application; on the resolution of political and social problems within the nations targeted by insurgents, not closing with and destroying the insurgent's field forces.³⁷

Army leaders looked upon irregulars with disdain and believed that conventional forces that had defeated German armies could readily handle a bunch of rag-tag Asian guerrillas, an attitude reflected in Army Chief of Staff (1962–64) Gen. George Decker's assurance to a skeptical President John F. Kennedy that "any good soldier can handle guerrillas," and in chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (1964–70) Gen. Earle Wheeler's declaration in 1964 that "the essence of the problem in Vietnam is military."³⁸

Westmoreland rejected a strategy of isolating the insurgents militarily and politically from the population in favor of a "search-and-destroy" strategy of attrition that boiled down to killing as many Communists as possible in the hope of pushing the enemy to the point where he could no longer replace his losses and would therefore quit. In so doing, Westmoreland displayed an utter obliviousness to the political nature of the war—namely, that the war was at bottom a contest for political allegiance. Westmoreland's strategy failed not only because it misread the nature of the war but also because it mistakenly assumed that the enemy would lose control of his own losses because U.S. forces would retain the tactical initiative. In fact, the Communists initiated 80 to 90 percent of all firefights and were thus in a position to control their losses, which, given North Vietnam's population and birth rate, never approached the "irreplaceable" crossover point.³⁹

Criticism of Vietnam Strategy from within the Military

Attrition was not without its critics even inside the Army. The Marines opposed Westmoreland's strategy and, to Westmoreland's great dismay, exploited their pacification experience by pursuing in their area of operations in Vietnam (the I

Corps Tactical Zone, which encompassed South Vietnam's five northernmost provinces) a population protection strategy that integrated civil and military operations as well as Marine Corps rifle squads into South Vietnamese regional force platoons. These "Combined Action Platoons" lived among the locals and concentrated on pacification activities while other Marine Corps units patrolled and conducted civic action programs. The commander of Marine Corps forces in the Pacific defended population protection by pointing to the improved security it delivered and by pointing out that Westmoreland's body count strategy "can be a dubious index of success since, if their killing is accompanied by devastation of friendly areas, we may end up having done more harm than good."⁴⁰

There were limits to the Marine Corps' strategy. Even had Westmoreland supported a population protection strategy countrywide, prospects for successful counterinsurgency were always limited in South Vietnam by pervasive governmental corruption at the national and provincial levels and the questionable political legitimacy of a Saigon government that was largely the creation of the United States and run by military officers who were disproportionately Catholic and who had served on the French side during the First Indochina War. Marine Corps forces in I Corps also had to contend with conventional military threats posed by Hanoi's People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) units, and it is not clear that the Marines ever resolved the dilemma—the same the British faced against colonial rebels in America—of dealing simultaneously and effectively with regular and irregular threats.⁴¹ And of course counterinsurgency offered no solution to the conventional PAVN invasion that brought down South Vietnam in 1975.

The Marines were not the only ones to question Westmoreland's attrition strategy. In the spring of 1965, U.S. Army Chief of Staff Gen. Harold K. Johnson had such doubts that he commissioned a study, "A Program for the Pacification and Long-Term Development of Vietnam"—known as PROVN. The study, which was conducted by 10 carefully chosen officers under the leadership of Gen. Creighton Abrams

(Westmoreland's successor in South Vietnam), was to develop "new courses of action to be taken in South Vietnam by the United States and its allies, which will, in conjunction with current actions, modified as necessary, lead in due time to successful accomplishment of U.S. aims and objectives."⁴² The final report of the PROVN study, which was submitted to Gen. Johnson in March 1966, essentially repudiated Westmoreland's search-and-destroy strategy and called instead for a population protection strategy. The report declared that success in Vietnam could be achieved only "through bringing the individual Vietnamese, typically a rural peasant, to support willingly the GVN [Government of Vietnam]. The critical actions are those that occur at the village, district, and provincial levels. This is where the war must be fought; this is where that war and the object which lies beyond it must be won."⁴³ Those who conducted the PROVN study clearly recognized what Westmoreland did not: that the object of war extends beyond defeat of the enemy's military forces to the securing of the political object for which war is waged.

Predictably, the PROVN study was rejected by Westmoreland. Indeed, he put it completely out of his mind; he mentioned it in neither his memoirs nor his official report on the war. So too Wheeler, who never saw the war in any but narrowly military terms and who was in any event, along with the Air Force and Navy chiefs, much more preoccupied with obtaining a relaxation of White House restrictions on the air war against North Vietnam than with the fighting in the South. As for Gen. Johnson, although he believed that the PROVN study was valid, he could not, in the end, bring himself to overrule the strategy choice of a commander in the field.⁴⁴

Sixteen years after Andrew Krepinevich's *The Army and Vietnam* appeared, another serving Army officer, John Nagl, published *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, which examined if and how "two armies learned when they were confronted with situations for which they were not prepared by training, organization, and doctrine: the British army in the Malayan

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Emergency and the American army in the Vietnam War.”⁴⁵ Nagl concluded that organizational culture was the key to the ability to learn from unanticipated conditions, and that the British army’s organizational culture produced successful counterinsurgency in Malaya whereas the American Army failed to do so in Vietnam. More disturbing, he also concluded that though 30 years had passed since the last U.S. combat forces departed Vietnam, “the U.S. Army has failed to form a consensus on the lessons of Vietnam and has not accepted the idea that revolutionary war requires a qualitatively different response from the conventional warfare it knows so well how to fight.”⁴⁶ If anything, much of the Army’s leadership drew the worst possible lessons from the war, at least to the extent that Col. Harry G. Summers Jr.’s highly influential 1982 book, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War*, became, as Nagl asserts, “the U.S. Army’s approved version of why it lost the Vietnam War.”⁴⁷

Rewriting History

Summers, a combat veteran of Korea and Vietnam serving on the staff of the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College, used Carl von Clausewitz’s *On War* as the yardstick for judging U.S. political and military performance, and he mercilessly condemned both. He censured the Johnson administration for failing to mobilize the national political will via dramatic exhortation and a formal declaration of war, and he indicted the military for having lost touch with the art of war, including the imperative not to confuse the administrative requirement involved in preparing for war with the operational requirements for waging war. Summers argued that the United States waged a half-hearted war with no intention of winning; it lacked even a concept of victory, notwithstanding repeated official proclamations of the vitality of U.S. interests in Vietnam.

Though Summers reintroduced the Army to Clausewitz, he did so by rewriting history to confirm the Army’s rejection of counterinsurgency. He argued—in complete contradiction to the historical record—that the Army failed in Vietnam because it was not suffi-

ciently *conventional* in fighting the war! He claimed the Army in the early 1960s had become mesmerized by counterinsurgency to the point of doctrine becoming dogma and, accordingly, that the Army focused on the internal insurgent threat in South Vietnam (which in his view the South Vietnamese government should have handled) rather than the external conventional threat from North Vietnam. Summers even denied that the Communists’ strategy of protracted irregular warfare was a strategy at all, suggesting that it was a ruse to deflect U.S. attention away from the external conventional threat.

[Our] basic mistake . . . was that we saw their guerrilla operations as a strategy in and of itself. Because we saw it as a strategy, we attempted to understand it in terms of “people’s war” theories of Mao Tse-tung, and devised elaborate theories of counterinsurgency. . . . Our new “strategy” of counterinsurgency blinded us to the fact that the guerrilla war was tactical and not strategic. It was a kind of economy of force operation on the part of North Vietnam to buy time and to wear down superior U.S. forces.⁴⁸

Summers conveniently ignored two facts: that the Vietnamese Communists understood their own strategy in terms of the people’s war theories of Mao Tse-tung, and that it was the Communists’ very “economy-of-force” operation that was decisive in destroying America’s political will to fight on to a military victory. The Johnson administration’s post-Tet Offensive decision to abandon the main U.S. war aim—defeating the Communists militarily—in favor of seeking a way to extricate the United States from Vietnam, was made in 1968 and was not contested by the incoming Nixon administration, which not only accepted (for three years) an inherited suspension of the bombing of North Vietnam but also initiated a series of unilateral troop withdrawals without reciprocal concessions on the part of Hanoi. Summers did not acknowledge that in 1968 PAVN forces accounted for only 20 percent of armed Communist

strength in the South and that it took Hanoi another seven years to muster the conventional military strength to win the war. Summers also ignored South Vietnam's abject political and military incapacity to deal with the internal insurgent threat. It was that incapacity, after all, that prompted U.S. ground combat intervention in the first place. As Robert Osgood observed:

In the final analysis, all of the controversies over how the Vietnam War should have been fought are less significant in explaining defeat or the prospect of victory than the likelihood that no military success could have enabled the government of South Vietnam to maintain independence by its own efforts, or perhaps even with the continued presence of American forces.⁴⁹

Finally, Summers failed to recognize that U.S. interest in the outcome of the conflict was limited, which necessarily imposed limits on the amount of blood and treasure any political administration could expend on behalf of winning the war.

The Weinberger-Powell Doctrine

It is little wonder that the Vietnam War reinforced the Army's aversion to counterinsurgency. If Summers's book formed the conventional wisdom of why the Army lost the war, the Weinberger-Powell doctrine was the Army's prescription for avoiding another Vietnam. Rather than confront the painful thought that the Army might have failed in Vietnam because it rejected counterinsurgency, was it not better to focus on avoiding the mission altogether? "No more Vietnams" meant no more lost wars, but it also meant no more counterinsurgency. The Weinberger tests for using force, including the connection of the military mission to U.S. vital interests, the assurance of public support, a determination to win militarily, and the use of force only as a

last resort, coupled with Powell's insistence that force, when used, be used overwhelmingly, represent the distillation of the professional military's take on the lessons of the Vietnam War. The doctrine deserves recapitulation and further discussion because it was the Vietnam "syndrome" prescribed as official doctrine, because it essentially rejected limited use of force, and because it reflected the traditional American preference for divorcing the military from the political.

Weinberger enunciated his doctrine two years after Summers's book was published, in a November 1984 speech before the National Press Club. The doctrine consisted of six "tests" (his term) to be passed before the United States committed force—tests that by implication were flunked in Vietnam and in the subsequent case of the disastrous U.S. intervention in Lebanon (which Weinberger had vigorously opposed):

1. "The United States should not commit forces to *combat* overseas unless the particular engagement or occasion is deemed vital to our national interest or that of our allies."
2. "If we decide that it *is* necessary to put *combat* troops in a given situation, we should do so wholeheartedly and with the clear intention of winning."
3. "If we *do* decide to commit forces to combat overseas, we should have clearly defined political and military objectives."
4. "The relationship between our objectives and the forces we have committed—their size and composition—must be continually reassessed and readjusted if necessary."
5. "Before the U.S. commits combat forces abroad, there must be reasonable assurance [that] we will have the support of the American people and their elected representatives in Congress."
6. "The commitment of U.S. forces to combat should be a last resort."⁵⁰

Weinberger identified "gray area conflicts" as "the most likely challenge to peace," yet

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Consistent though the Weinberger-Powell doctrine was with America's strategic culture and way of war, it provoked condemnation by civilian policymakers.

warned that they were “precisely the most difficult challenges to which a democracy must respond.” He further cautioned that unless “we are certain that force is required in any given situation, we run the risk of inadequate national will to apply the resources needed.”

The secretary of defense reserved his heaviest fire, however, for those “theorists [who] argue that military force can be brought to bear in any crisis,” who “are eager to advocate its use even in limited amounts simply because they believe that if there are American forces of *any* size present they will somehow solve the problem.” The United States had to abandon the employment of force “as a regular and customary part of our diplomatic efforts” because using force “would surely plunge us headlong into the sort of domestic turmoil we experienced during the Vietnam War.” Weinberger viewed the “intermixture of diplomacy and the military” as inherently dangerous because it meant “that we should not hesitate to put a battalion or so of American forces in various places in the world where we desired . . . stability, or changes of government, or support of governments or whatever else.” Weinberger, in sum, saw force, not as an arm of diplomacy, but rather as a substitute for it—something to be used only when diplomacy failed.

Weinberger's doctrine was carried into the George H. W. Bush administration by Gen. Colin Powell, who became chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1989 and a key player in the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990–91. Indeed, Powell's doctrinal allegiance during the crisis and his emphasis on the application of overwhelming force at minimum cost in U.S. casualties led many commentators to start using the term “Weinberger-Powell” doctrine. Powell had, in fact, served as Weinberger's military aide and helped the secretary of defense draft his famous speech. “War should be the politics of last resort,” he wrote in his best-selling memoirs. “And when we go to war, we should have a purpose that our people understand and support; we should mobilize the country's resources to fulfill that mission and then go on to win. In Vietnam, we entered a half-hearted war, with much of the

nation opposed or indifferent, while a small fraction carried the burden.”⁵¹

Those words essentially restated the Weinberger doctrine. Use of force should be highly restricted. It should be avoided in situations where political restrictions threaten to impede its effective use, where a clear and quick military win is not attainable, and where public and congressional opinion is indifferent or even hostile to the purpose for which force is being used. In short, force, except in cases of enemy attack, should be used only in ideal political and military conditions. Weinberger-Powell was in effect a recipe for military inaction for fear of embracing the inherent risks of military action. According to Matthew Morgan, a fellow of the Inter-University Seminar on Armed Forces and Society, the doctrine displayed “a strategic frame of mind that is both apolitical and absolute.” The “all-or-nothing approach that has dominated past strategy,” Morgan went on to say, “is inappropriate for the entire spectrum of conflict, especially those missions that have emerged in the post-Cold War era.”⁵²

Consistent though the Weinberger-Powell doctrine was with America's strategic culture and way of war, it predictably provoked condemnation by civilian policymakers who valued strategic flexibility and regarded coercive diplomacy as an essential tool. Robert McNamara, secretary of defense during most of the Vietnam War, lamented in 1995 that the “U.S. military and the American people may have learned the wrong lesson from the war,” namely that U.S. military forces “should be used only where our firepower and mobility can be directed with overwhelming force against a massed enemy.” He warned that “No More Vietnams’ . . . has become the watchword for the military as well as for those generally opposed to U.S. military intervention anywhere.”⁵³ Former secretary of state George Shultz pilloried the doctrine in his memoirs, calling it the “Vietnam syndrome in spades” because it excluded the use or threatened use of force “in situations where a discrete assertion of power is needed or appropriate for limited purposes.”⁵⁴ For Bill Clinton's first secretary of defense, Les Aspin, the doctrine reflect-

ed “the ‘all-or-nothing’ school [that] says if you aren’t willing to put the pedal to the floor, don’t start the engine.”⁵⁵

Making the Same Mistakes in Iraq

Thus the Army ignored counterinsurgency until it encountered insurgency again in Iraq. The Army studiously avoided any systematic appraisal of counterinsurgency lessons learned in Vietnam because such an appraisal would have suggested a responsibility to prepare for future insurgencies. One insurgency out of sight was all insurgencies out of mind. “Iraq underscores . . . the overwhelming organizational tendency within the U.S. military not to absorb historical lessons when planning and conducting counterinsurgency operations,” concluded a 2005 RAND Corporation study delivered to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. The study recommended that U.S. military personnel engaged in counterinsurgency operations in the future have “training and skills similar to special operations forces, i.e., the language and culture of the country, and in the critically important political, economic, intelligence, organizational, and psychological dimensions of counterinsurgency warfare.” The RAND report also urged “serious” study of the creation of “a dedicated cadre of counterinsurgency specialists and a program to produce such experts.”⁵⁶

As if to confirm the Army’s willful refusal to learn lessons from past counterinsurgency campaigns, Krepinevich returned to the fray in 2005 with a condemnation of U.S. counterinsurgent operations in Iraq. Asserting that the failed search-and-destroy strategy continues to exert a strong pull on the U.S. military because it is about killing the enemy rather than performing potentially more effective but less heroic tasks, Krepinevich argued that, as in Vietnam, U.S. operations against insurgents in Iraq

put too great an emphasis on destroying insurgent forces and minimizing

U.S. casualties and too little on providing enduring security to the Iraqi people; too much effort into sweeping maneuvers and no enduring presence and too little into effective coordination of security and reconstruction efforts; and too high a priority on quickly fielding large numbers of Iraqi security forces and too low a priority on ensuring their effectiveness.⁵⁷

A senior British officer serving in Iraq was even more critical of the U.S. Army’s bull-in-the-china-shop counterinsurgency operations in Iraq. Brigadier Nigel Aylwin-Foster, publishing his scathing observations in, ironically, *Military Review*, the journal of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, said that, “the U.S. Army has developed over time a singular focus on conventional warfare, of a particular swift and violent style, which left it ill-suited to the kind of operation it encountered as soon as conventional warfighting ceased to be the primary focus of OIF.”⁵⁸

Notwithstanding such harsh criticism, there were signs by the summer of 2006 of U.S. Army movement away from search-and-destroy to population protection. By then the Army was also busily rewriting its counterinsurgency doctrine in general conformity with British doctrine.⁵⁹ But new strategy and doctrine offered no guarantee of success against the Iraqi insurgency, nor did they offer insurance that the Army would remain interested in counterinsurgency once it departed Iraq. Indeed, the Army may well leave that country with an “Iraq syndrome” as hostile to counterinsurgency as was the “Vietnam syndrome.”⁶⁰ Looking forward, observes *Wall Street Journal* defense expert Greg Jaffe, in a survey of the Army’s recent interest in why it failed in Vietnam,

the big question is whether the Army’s newly popular Vietnam views survive after the war in Iraq. If things go badly, there is likely to be intense pressure from within the Army to blame the political leadership for not sending enough troops, the news media for negative cov-

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erage, or the American public for its unwillingness to stick it out. None of these analyses, however, recognize the Army's own failings—particularly in the first years of the war.⁶¹

The argument here is not that the Defense Department is hopelessly inflexible. It is true, however, that the military's force structure is heavily biased toward conventional combat, that bias is long standing and well entrenched, and overcoming it will entail fundamental change in how U.S. military forces are organized, equipped, manned, and trained. For example, personnel policies that constantly rotate individuals from one assignment to another and promotion policies prejudiced against development of specialized area knowledge and language skills are antithetical to the requirements of successful counterinsurgency.

Bureaucratic opposition may be sufficiently powerful to block requisite change absent forceful outside intervention by the White House or Congress, and even outside intervention is no guarantee of change. In the early 1960s the Army essentially blew off President John F. Kennedy's demand that it take counterinsurgency seriously.⁶² Two decades later, on the other hand, Congress successfully jammed jointness down the screaming throats of the "Joint" Chiefs of Staff and the secretary of defense. What was once anathema to the Pentagon became mantra. Indeed, jointness can claim much credit for America's conventional military effectiveness.

All of this suggests the dogged persistence of cultural barriers to America's strategic effectiveness in small wars. The very attributes that have contributed to the establishment of unchallenged and unchallengeable American conventional military supremacy—impatience, an engineering approach to war, confidence in technological solutions to nontechnological problems, preference for decisive conventional military operations, sensitivity to casualties, and, above all, the habit of divorcing war from politics—are liabilities in approaching war against motivated and resourceful irregular enemies. The United States is simply not very

good at winning small wars except under the most favorable political and military conditions, and talk of establishing forces dedicated to the prosecution of small wars, to accomplishing the myriad complex military and non-military tasks of counterinsurgency, has remained just that: talk. Barring profound change in America's political and military cultures, the United States runs a significant risk of failure in entering small wars of choice, and great power intervention in small wars is almost always a matter of choice. That was the case in Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq (where a U.S. invasion provoked an insurgency and stimulated sectarian violence). Most such wars, moreover, do not engage core U.S. security interests other than placing the limits of American military power on embarrassing display. Indeed, the very act of intervention in small wars risks gratuitous damage to America's military reputation.

Staying Out of Foreign Internal Wars

If this analysis is correct, the policy choice is obvious: avoidance of direct military involvement in foreign internal wars unless vital national security interests are at stake. Such wars are primarily political struggles and only secondarily military contests, and the very presence of foreign combat forces can provoke insurgent attack and undermine the legitimacy of the host government. Avoidance of such conflicts means abandonment of regime-change wars that saddle the United States with responsibility for establishing political stability and state building, tasks that have rarely commanded public or congressional enthusiasm. Neither the Pentagon nor the U.S. government as a whole is properly organized or sufficiently motivated to meet the challenges of political reconstruction in foreign lands, especially in conditions of persistent insurgent violence. Notwithstanding the exceptional cases of Post-World War II Germany and Japan, the United States has demonstrated—in Vietnam, Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and Afghanistan—

that it lacks the will and skills required to effect the enduring rehabilitation of failed states. U.S. success in post-World War II Germany and Japan was the product of unique military, political, and strategic conditions that have not since been repeated and are most unlikely to reappear in the future. Both Germany and Japan formally surrendered, and there was no insurgent resistance in either country to U.S./Allied occupation. Occupation authorities also enjoyed absolute political and military authority in both countries, and in the case of Japan, the American occupation was legitimized by the retention of the emperor, through whom MacArthur ruled. In addition, unlike Iraq, neither Germany nor Japan was plagued by severe ethnic and sectarian divisions.⁶³

America's strategic culture and way of war are hostile to politically messy wars and to most military operations other than war. Counterinsurgency and imperial policing operations demand forbearance, personnel continuity, foreign language skills, cross-cultural understanding, historical knowledge, minimal employment of force, and robust interagency involvement and cooperation. None of those are virtues of American statecraft and warmaking. Americans view war as a suspension of politics; they want to believe that the politics of war will somehow sort themselves out once military victory is achieved. Thus the White House assigned an eager Defense Department complete responsibility for regime change in Iraq. Predictably, the Pentagon immersed itself in planning to accomplish the first (and easier) half of regime change—toppling Saddam Hussein by force—at the expense of thinking about, much less seriously planning for, the far more difficult half: securing the country and establishing the stability requisite for Iraq's successful political reconstruction.

Why should the United States continue to enter wars that it is not very good at winning (and for which sustaining domestic political support is inherently problematic)? A policy of abstention from small wars of choice would mandate a realistic foreign policy that placed the protection of concrete interests ahead of

crusades to promote the overseas expansion of abstract American political values. A foreign policy based on realism would have spared the United States the agonies of Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia, places where the United States lacked strategic interests justifying intervention. Realism also would have blocked the expansion of a necessary war against al-Qaeda into a war against an Iraq that, while monstrosly governed, posed no undeterrable threat to the United States.

Notes

1. Max Boot, "The New American Way of War," *Foreign Affairs*, July–August 2003, pp. 42, 44.
2. Max Boot, "No Shortcuts," *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 2006.
3. C. E. Callwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice*, 3d ed. (1896; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 21. The 1940 U.S. Marine Corps manual on small wars, republished verbatim in 1990, defined a small war as one "which does not involve a major effort in regular warfare against a first-rate power." See *Small Wars Manual, United States Marine Corps* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), p. 1.
4. Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German and U.S. Army Performance, 1949–1945* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1982), p. 3.
5. See Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27, no. 2 (1975): 175–200.
6. See Ivan Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).
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8. See Jeffrey Record, "External Assistance: Enabler of Insurgent Success," *Parameters*, Autumn 2006 (forthcoming).
9. Colin S. Gray, "The American Way of War: Critique and Implications," in *Rethinking the Principles of War*, ed. Anthony D. McIvor (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), pp. 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33.

The very act of intervention in small wars risks gratuitous damage to America's military reputation.

10. Thomas G. Mahnken, "The American Way of War in the Twenty-First Century," in *Democracies and Small Wars*, ed. Efram Inbar (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2003), pp. 74, 75, 77, 78.
11. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 605, 607.
12. Reprinted in Jay M. Shafritz, *Words on War: Military Quotations from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 425.
13. Interview with *Playboy*, May 1971, quoted in Randy Roberts and James S. Olson, *John Wayne, American* (Lincoln, NE: Bison Books, 1998), p. 581. Wayne, though a leading tough guy on screen and qualified to perform military service during World War II, managed, with the help of his studio, to avoid the draft.
14. See, for example, U.S. Grant Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio, 1978); and C. Dale Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable Defeat in Vietnam* (Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2002).
15. That does not mean that each and every restriction imposed on force is necessary and consistent with the political object being pursued. Civilian decisionmakers, especially those prone to err on the side of caution or captivated by notions of finite gradations of coercion, can and do get it wrong.
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17. Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), pp. 82, 504.
18. See Robert M. Cassidy, "Back to the Street without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Other Small Wars," *Parameters*, Summer 2004, pp. 73–83; John Waghelstein, "Counterinsurgency Doctrine and Low-Intensity Conflict in the Post-Vietnam Era," in *The American War in Vietnam: Lessons, Legacies, and Implications for Future Conflicts*, ed. Lawrence E. Grinter and Peter M. Dunn (New York: Greenwood, 1987), pp. 127–37.
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22. *Ibid.*, pp. 44–45.
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31. *Ibid.*, p. 208.
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34. Arreguin-Toft, p. 226.
35. Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (St. Paul, MN: Zenith, 2004), pp. 3, 5. See also Steven Metz and Raymond Millen, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, November 2004).
36. Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 4.

37. Ibid., p. 5.
38. Ibid., p. 37.
39. See Jeffrey Record, *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), pp. 80–82.
40. Quoted in John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 157. For an early and well-informed if hardly dispassionate account of the Marine Corps' CAP program in Vietnam, see William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968).
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42. Quoted in Nagl, p. 159.
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