Irregular Warfare

One Nature, Many Characters

Colin S. Gray

The conditions of small wars are so diversified, the enemy's mode of fighting is often so peculiar, and the theatres of operations present such singular features, that irregular warfare must generally be carried out on a method totally different from the stereotyped system [for regular war]. The art of war, as generally understood, must be modified to suit the circumstances of each particular case. The conduct of small wars is in certain respects an art by itself, diverging widely from what is adapted to the conditions of regular warfare, but not so widely that there are not in all its branches points which permit comparison to be established.

—Charles E. Callwell, 1906
Small Wars: A Tactical Textbook for Imperial Soldiers

Opening Shots

It is not possible today to talk about irregular warfare and counterinsurgency (COIN) without discussing Iraq. However, I am determined not to allow this article to sink into the great bog of endless opinion pieces on the state of play in that unhappy country. My solution is to say as little as I can about Iraq until I reach my concluding thoughts, when I will release my personal convictions briefly and directly. This should enable you to appreciate the argument but discount my conclusions, should you so choose. The comments on Iraq, in the main body of the paper at least, are intended to be scholarly and pragmatic, not political. Obviously, Iraq must dominate our view of the subject. Steven Metz is correct to assert that "when the United States removed Saddam Hussein from power in

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the spring of 2003, American policy makers and military leaders did not expect to become involved in a protracted counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq. But it has now become the seminal conflict of the current era and will serve as a paradigm for future strategic decisions."[1]

Thomas R. Mockaitis tells us that Iraq "is the insurgency from hell."[2] I suggest that for all regular soldiers all insurgencies are hell-born, though admittedly some are more hellish than others. And to open one of my themes just a crack, William Tecumseh Sherman, a great American general, once said that "war is hell" (actually, those exact words were credibly attributed to him). With our sophistication and scholarship, and now our doctrine mongering, it is necessary to remember that we are talking about war, including a fair amount of warfare.

Insurgency, or irregular war, and warfare are global phenomena, and they always have been. I am providing an Anglo-American perspective because that is what I am and know best. This can appear to bias an analysis because it cannot avoid implying that COIN and counterterrorism (CT), and especially some pathologies in trying to deal with them, are unique to us. They are not.

When Ralph Peters urges a bloody, attritional approach on one of his more colorful days, he is talking the language of Roman generalship under Vespasian and his son Titus in their brutal suppression of the Jewish Revolt in Palestine in AD 66–77.[3] Irregular warfare is an old, old story, and so are the methods applied to wage it, on both sides. Today's motives for irregular warfare—supposedly so modern, even postmodern—lead some commentators to speculate about "new wars" as contrasted with "old wars."[4] If you are strongly of that persuasion, the best I can do is to suggest that you ponder long and hard on Thucydides and his famous and overquoted triptych of "fear, honor, and interest" as comprising the primary motives for political behavior, including war.[5] Irregular warfare, of necessity in common with its Thucydidean motives, is about political power: who gets it, and as a rather secondary matter, what to do with it. That may seem a banal point, but really it is not. COIN is about the control of people and territory, not the remaking of civilizations, or even cultures. Crusaders make bad policy makers; they tend to be disinterested in strategy.

Also, speaking as a strategist, I have a professional dislike for impossible missions. Even if I do the wrong thing, I like to think that I can succeed. We strategists are pragmatic people, and we don't like accepting long, adverse odds in pursuit of benefits of highly dubious worth.

From time to time, by and large deliberately, I will delve into the dark woods of scholarly quibbling, but I am painfully aware that scholars and officials, civilian and military, are apt to be mesmerized by their own conceptual genius. Particularly are they—perhaps are we (mea culpa also)—devoted to the process of analysis by ever finer dissection. We love our categories and our subcategories. Their invention gives us an illusion of intellectual control.[6] We think we can improve our understanding of a subject as diffuse and richly varied as irregular warfare and insurgency by hunting for the most precise definition and subdefinitions. The results all too often are official definitions that tend to the encyclopaedic and are utterly indigestible. Or we discover a host of similar terms, each with its subtly distinctive meaning and probably its unique historical and cultural baggage. So, are we talking about irregular warfare, insurgency, low-intensity conflict, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and so forth? The answer is yes, and more than those. Do the distinctions matter? Well, they can, because some words carry a heavy load of implicit and explicit implied diagnosis, wisdom, and advice. But always remember that conceptual sophistication can be overdone. In the COIN regard, it is a classic example of the sound economic principle of securing diminishing returns to effort. Of course, there is much more to war than warfare, but warfare is warfare, and the most core competency of soldiers is skill in inflicting pain, killing people, and breaking things. Also, just as we need to see irregular warfare in the context of COIN, or vice versa for my preference, so in addition we cannot permit ourselves to forget that insurgency is warfare. Sporadic, episodic, protracted warfare erodes the modern Western, and therefore the international, legal distinction between war and peace. Can we tell a context of war from one of peace? Do we know who are innocents and who are belligerents? Sometimes I feel compelled to return to basics with students to cut through a lot of the overelaborate theorizing and remind them that we are discussing war and warfare.

Next, because politicians, officials, and at least some strategists—not usually the more academic ones—are professional problem solvers, they are always in the market for answers. The revolution in military affairs (RMA) project has suffered from providing very expensive answers to an unknown question, at least to a question that was hugely underexamined. But now, with COIN and the irregular challenge, the defense community again has a challenge it believes it can get its teeth into. The problem is that some challenges are much more taxing than others. To excel at COIN, for

Americans, is infinitely more difficult than to excel at regular conventional warfare. However, the American is an optimistic public culture, and its military cultures have a host of all but genetically programmed "can-do" agents, so COIN is the flavor of the decade. I might add the ancient reminder that "to the person who doesn't have to do it, nothing is impossible." COIN is an activity toward which the American public, strategic, and military cultures have been, and I suspect remain, deeply hostile. But it is not the American way to do things by halves. In Britain, we tend to use quarter measures when half measures are called for. In the United States, the error lies in the opposite direction. In the troubling words of that distinguished American political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington of Harvard, writing in the Weinberger-Powell era of the mid-1980s: "The United States is a big country, and we should fight wars in a big way. One of our great advantages is our mass; we should not hesitate to use it. . . . Bigness, not brains, is our advantage, and we should exploit it. If we have to intervene, we should intervene with overwhelming force."[7]

This just goes to show that a chair at Harvard carries no guarantee of wisdom, or does it? Huntington reflected the ethos of the mid-1980s, but also—the reason I quote him—he does suggest a reason why the United States has had a hard time with COIN. When policy demands effectiveness in COIN, the government—the military in particular, naturally—blows dust off its ancient manuals if it can find them; unearths "classic writings" by Charles E. Callwell, the US Marine Corps, David Galula, Robert Taber, Mao Tse-tung, Robert Trinquier, Frank Kitson, and T. E. Lawrence; and rediscovers what previous generations knew, even if they didn't always practice it well.[8] Of course, the contexts have changed, and every work of theory, founded on the experience of the life and times of its author, is stuffed full of inappropriate as well as much good advice. No matter, when COIN—or whatever is the challenge of the hour—is king, whatever is to hand is rushed to the front to serve. Every piece of fashionable jargon, every execrable acronym, every dodgy idea is hijacked for the bandwagon. The bandwagon now is COIN. To cite but a few of the lightweight notions that are pretending to be heavy metal: so-called fourth-generation warfare, network-centric warfare, effects-based operations, culture, and a totally integrated approach. The defense community has made the remarkable discovery that what in Britain we call grand strategy—in the United States, national security strategy—is a good idea. It always was. In point of fact, I thought that the whole aim of having a

National Security Council structure was to enable a grand strategy, but perhaps the distribution of power in Washington is too exquisitely diffuse to permit that. Dare I call it another "mission impossible"?

What I am suggesting, admittedly rather ungenerously, is that when we confront a truly difficult challenge, one that American cultural programming is not well prepared to meet, we look for the "silver bullet," the big comprehensive solution. So today we learn, again, how to do COIN; we discover the virtues of cultural understanding; we rediscover that war and warfare is about politics; and we grasp the necessity for an integrated approach, otherwise long known as grand strategy. It would seem that in desperation we are liable to believe many extravagant promises. Why? Because we want to believe that there are solutions or, better still, that there is a single, dominant solution.

I apologize for opening in so censorious a manner. That was not really my intention. But sometimes the armchair strategist has to go where his brain commands, for good or ill. To close this initial broadside on a slightly upbeat note, I will say that what matters most, indeed what should be adopted as a principle, is to "get the big things right enough because the small errors eventually can be fixed." Rephrased, pursue the path of minimum regrets. May our mistakes be modest and correctible.

What of the plan of attack here? The body of the discussion—yes, we will get to it, in fact we nearly have—is organized to pose and answer four central questions:

1. What is the nature of irregular warfare, and how does it differ from regular warfare?
2. Why do regular forces have great difficulty waging irregular warfare effectively?
3. Is COIN winnable by regulars?
4. What are the leading fashionable errors about irregular warfare?

This agenda should suffice to stir the needful opinion, expertise, and prejudice.

What Is the Nature of Irregular Warfare, and How Does It Differ from Regular Warfare?

Irregular warfare does not have a distinctive nature. Warfare is warfare, and war is war, period. But it does have an often sharply distinctive

character. In fact, irregular warfare can take a wide variety of forms and be practiced in different modes, even within the same conflict. We are in the challenging realm of what the Chinese call "unrestricted warfare": in principle, anything goes, anything that might work.[9] After all, that is the very essence of strategy. In the timeless and well-quoted words of Bernard Brodie, "Strategic thinking, or 'theory' if one prefers, is nothing if not pragmatic. Strategy is a 'how to do it' study, a guide to accomplishing something and doing it efficiently. As in many other branches of politics, the question that matters in strategy is: Will the idea work?"[10]

There is no need for us to devote attention to the nature of war; that vital task has been performed more than adequately by Carl von Clausewitz. And since all war has the same nature, it matters not whether it is regular or irregular. You will find scholars and others who try to persuade you that war is changing its nature as its many contexts alter, and especially that irregular war has a nature quite unique to itself. It is nonsense. There are no regular or irregular wars. There are only wars. In search of advantage or, as often, to avoid disadvantage, warfare may be waged by methods that contemporary norms regard as irregular. That really is a matter of detail, albeit important detail. I am highlighting a distinction that is not always well understood between *war* and *warfare*. As often as not, the terms are employed synonymously, usually in ignorance of their crucial difference in meaning. A security community will embark upon a war for the purpose stated by Clausewitz on the first page of his masterwork, *On War*: "*War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will*" (emphasis in original).[11] That is it. One does not set out to wage a regular or an irregular war. Rather, the mode, or more likely the mix of modes, is dictated by strategic circumstances.

There is no need to explore the nature of irregular war because it is identical to the general nature of war. A true glory of the three preeminent classics of strategic thought—Clausewitz's *On War*, Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, and Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*—is that they tell us all that we need to know about war's unchanging nature.[12] Read properly, they explain the nature of all war in all periods, among all belligerents, employing all weapons, and deploying an endless array of declared motives. This may sound pedantic; I hope it just sounds obvious. I emphasize the authority of Clausewitz, and particularly his insistence that "all wars are things of the same nature," in order to help demystify this rather amorphous beast, "irregular war."[13]

Not only is it an error to reify irregular war, which after all is only a method, as a distinctive phenomenon, it can also be a serious mistake to divide the realm of warfare neatly into the regular and the irregular. Many wars are neither purely regular nor purely irregular. In fact, if one side adheres strictly to the irregular code, it is all but certain to be defeated. Irregular forces do not win unless they can translate their irregular gains into the kind of advantage that yields them military, strategic, and ultimately political effect against their regular enemy. Unless the state loses its nerve and collapses politically, the initially irregular belligerent can only win if it is able to generate regular military strength. Let us pause to summarize a few important points.

1. War is war, and warfare is warfare. Clausewitzian theory is rich but austere. He gives us his remarkable trinity of "primordial violence, hatred, and enmity"; "chance and probability"; and "reason"; his identification of war's "climate"—"danger, exertion, uncertainty, and chance"; the insistence that war must be a political instrument; and his reminder of the ubiquitous role of "friction."[14]

2. There are no irregular wars obedient to some distinctive nature of their own.

3. Many, perhaps most, wars are characterized by belligerents resorting to a range of combat modes on the regular-irregular spectrum.

4. Because generally they are the legal instruments of legal entities (i.e., states), regular armed forces typically think in terms of a neatly binary context of peace or war. This can be unhelpful. Belligerents in irregular mode are wont to hover, to move back and forth perhaps, between peace and war. Indeed, recalling the late and unlamented Soviet Union, there are ideologies whose agents must always be at war with prescribed enemies, though the war will rarely involve active violence.

5. Finally, whether or not they recognize the fact, all belligerents function grand strategically. We should not be overimpressed by the recent rediscovery of the strategic wheel in this regard. The fact that there is more to war than warfare, or fighting, was as well known to Alexander the Great as it should be to us.[15] The apparent recent strategic epiphany that has revealed to us the true breadth of behaviors

> relevant to the conduct of irregular warfare is, frankly, recognition of the blindingly obvious.

Since there is no case for asserting, or fearing, that irregular warfare comprises anything other than the standard set of ingredients present in all warfare, albeit distinctively mixed, just what is it that we are analyzing?

There are two rough but ready ways to distinguish regular from irregular warfare. The first is by the character of the combatants. Writing a century ago, Colonel Callwell of the British army employed the contemporary term of art, "small war." He defined it thus: "Practically it may be said to include all campaigns other than those where both the opposing sides consist of regular troops."[16] In other words, a small war is waged between state and nonstate adversaries. The legal and political status of the belligerents defines the irregularity. The second approach, in contrast, focuses upon modes of operation. Irregular warfare is waged by such irregular methods as guerrilla warfare preponderantly, probably with precursor and then adjunct terrorism. Scholars of strategic arcana like to debate their conceptual choices. Sometimes these matter. Is our subject insurgency, or is it irregular warfare?[17] The latter risks diverting us unduly into a military box canyon at the expense of shortchanging the implications of the eternal truth that there is more to war than warfare. Indeed, in some parts of this world even referring to war and warfare can mislead by suggesting the possibility of their opposites, peace and stabilization. A territory may be locked in a condition of permanent war *and* peace. That is conceptually—as well as politically, legally, and socially—confusing to tidy-minded academics and drafters of doctrine manuals.

It is undeniable that in some important ways insurgency is a more satisfactory concept than is irregular warfare. It refers to a purpose, typically to take power by means of a tolerably, certainly variably, popular campaign of violence to destabilize and ultimately defeat the established government. However, I am reluctant to surrender the irregular label completely to so definite a political mission. For me, at least, the attractions of the broad church of irregular warfare include its ability to welcome regulars behaving irregularly. I must confess to some unhappiness with definitions that err on the side of exclusivity. Probably it is sensible to decline to choose. Instead, we should not waste effort on the merits and demerits of insurgency and irregularity. The former is obviously politically superior, but the latter all but compels us to think innovatively and, dare I say it again, in an "unrestricted" way.

Let us cut to the chase. I will identify those characteristics of irregular warfare that we may elect to regard as the eternal nature of the genre. Please recall that I am appearing to violate my earlier Clausewitzian argument to the effect that all war has the same nature. It is helpful, actually it is essential for our limited purpose here, to locate those features most characteristic of what we mean by irregular warfare. Only by proceeding thus can we enter the lists to do intellectual and practical combat with the beliefs and practices of the seriously misinformed.

Irregular warfare can have no fixed character; its irregularity is determined by specific historical and cultural circumstances. In common with the Chinese ch'i and cheng, unorthodox and orthodox, Liddell Hart's indirect as opposed to direct approach,[18] and symmetrical contrasted with asymmetrical warfare, irregularity is defined by its opposite. This is not terribly helpful. It tells us that irregular warfare is not regular warfare. But what is regular warfare? And to whom? To a strategic culture that favors raiding, presumably a strategy of open warfare would be irregular. Theorists can pass many a happy hour trying to define the indefinable. The truth is that *irregular*, *indirect*, and *asymmetrical* are all inherently empty concepts, definable only with reference to their opposites. And those opposites, similarly, are bereft of definite meaning. But let us not despair. When faced with a theoretical conundrum such as this, one is obliged to resort to that old reliable, common sense. It so happens that we do have a good enough working understanding of irregular warfare, one which grants the distinctiveness of each case. If we itemize irregular warfare's principal features, leaving subtleties aside for the moment, we should be close enough to finding the answer to this first question. What is distinctive about irregular warfare?

1. Irregular warfare is warfare waged in a style, or styles, that are nonstandard for the regular forces at issue. The enemy is unlikely to be in the service of a state.

2. Irregular warfare is waged in order to secure the acquiescence, if not the support, of the local people. Military defeat of the irregular enemy is desirable, but not essential. It is his political defeat, his delegitimation, that is crucial.

3. The decisive combat occurs in and about the minds of civilians, not on the battlefield. Protection of the people must be job one.

4. Intelligence rules! But actionable, which is to say real-time, intelligence is attainable only from defectors or a sympathetic public. And for such information to be available, its agents must believe that you are the winning side. Prudence dictates such caution.

5. Irregular warfare, as contrasted with common banditry, crime, or recreational brigandry and hooliganism, needs an ideology. At least, it needs some facsimile of a big idea or two. Ideas and culture usually do matter in warfare. But for an insurgency to mobilize and grow, it has to have a source of spiritual and/or political inspiration. When combating an irregular enemy, one cannot help being in competition with that big idea. There is an unhelpful asymmetry in the structure of the context. The insurgent is bidding with promises; you are counterbidding with what must be a somewhat flawed performance. And bear in mind that the irregular foe will be striving with imagination and perhaps some competence to make your claims for better governance look like lies.

6. Of course, all warfare is about politics. It is only the political dimension that gives meaning to the bloody activity. But, in regular warfare, at least for the soldiers, politics typically takes a backseat until the military issue is settled. Not so in irregular warfare. In the latter case there will probably be no recognizable military decision. Military behavior must be conducted for its political effects because those effects, in the minds of the public, comprise the true field of decision.

7. Culture matters greatly. This is yet another claim that is not unique to irregular warfare, but it is of greater significance in that mode of conflict. Since irregular warfare is above all else a contest for the acquiescence and allegiance of civilian locals, their beliefs, values, expectations, and preferred behaviors are authoritative. If we do not know much about those beliefs and values, we are unlikely to register much progress in persuasion, except by accident. Indeed, by behaving like strangers in a strange land—true aliens—our regular soldiers and officials are as likely to do more harm than good to their mission. Always be alert to the malign workings of the law of unintended consequences. You might wish to marry that law to the maxim that "no good deed shall go unpunished."

8. Finally, regular warfare the American way has the highly desirable characteristics of offensiveness, aggressiveness, seizing and keeping

> the initiative, and maintaining a high tempo of operations. The object is to defeat, indeed annihilate, the enemy in short order by a combination of maneuver and firepower. The idea that time is a weapon is somewhat alien—certainly it is unwelcome. But in irregular warfare, an enemy who is greatly disadvantaged materially is obliged to use time against you. He expects to win by not losing because he believes that he can outlast you. The war will not be won or lost in the local barrios and swamps, but in America's sitting rooms. The irregular is not attempting to inflict an impossible military defeat upon you. Steve Metz points to the meaning of strategic effectiveness in irregular warfare when he writes that "insurgency, after all, is armed theater."[19] All competent strategists of irregular warfare recognize this fact. Their regular opponents, time after time, have resisted such comprehension. Michael Collins orchestrated his Irish Republican Army campaign against Britain in 1919–21 in obedience to this principle, as did Vo Nguyen Giap. Needless to say, perhaps, if an irregular force enjoys military success, its leaders are always vulnerable to the temptation to change the rules. They may seek to accelerate the pace of history by going directly for political gold by means of a swift military victory. As often as not, such hubris brings them close to military and political nemesis.

It is necessary to highlight the differences between regular and irregular warfare. But I must confess to considerable unease with such a neat and convenient binary distinction. There is an Oriental strategic theorist lurking somewhere within me, and that elusive person favors a both/and approach rather than an either/or one. When the American defense community makes a great discovery, in this case the phenomenon of irregular warfare, it tends to overdiscovery. By and large, the long-belated rediscovery of what has really always been known about irregular warfare and insurgency is very welcome. However, to cite yet another law, diminishing returns to effort rapidly set in. I would be less troubled were I seeing a more holistic approach to strategy and warfare than I notice today. I suspect both that the COIN enthusiasm will not long endure, but that while it does we will overreach and overreact. This is one reason why I have tried to argue that our subject is war and warfare and that they have a permanent nature. As I shall explain, I believe that the current commendable drive for greater effectiveness in COIN is going to promote new strategic errors.

Why Do Regular Forces Have Great Difficulty Waging Irregular Warfare Effectively?

If it is any consolation, you should be aware that very few armies have been equally competent in the conduct of regular and irregular warfare. The principal reason is glaringly obvious. Armies generally are organized, equipped, and trained to fight other armies with characteristics similar to theirs. In regular warfare one seeks victory though the decisive defeat of the enemies' forces on the battlefield. Although the enterprise is thoroughly political in motivation and meaning, the proximate behavior is, and has to be, military. An army commander may contribute to a dialog on strategy with his political masters, but corporals, sergeants, captains, colonels, and even one- and two-star generals will not.[20] They will be fully occupied fighting the war. The problem is that in irregular warfare there is an armed enemy in the theater, but his military defeat or humiliation is not the prime objective of the COIN effort. This is not to say that such defeat is unimportant, a vital matter to which I shall return.

The primary COIN challenge is strategic. This is perhaps unfortunate because truly it can be said that the United States does not really do strategy. Rather, it tends to jump straight from policy to operations and tactics.[21] The dominant approach to strategy that one finds in American strategic culture is more than casually reminiscent of the view of the most admired soldier of the second half of the nineteenth century—Robert E. Lee always excepted, of course—Field Marshal Helmuth Graf von Moltke. The field marshal declared in 1871 that "strategy appropriates the success of every engagement and builds upon it. The demands of strategy grow silent in the face of a tactical victory and adapt themselves to the newly created situation. Strategy is a system of expedients."[22] We know how that approach fared under fire. To lose two world wars in 27 years was quite a strategic achievement.

In regular warfare, the soldiers know how to win, and the generals understand the task that they must set the troops to. COIN is different. The familiar connection between tactical, even operational, military excellence and strategic success is either absent or tenuous. You win a military engagement by standard metrics, but so what? Can insurgents be beaten militarily? If they cannot, just how can they be defeated? If COIN is all about political effect, what kind of military and other behaviours generate, or undermine, that political effect? These are not exactly new questions. It is not even true to claim that COIN today confronts new forms of insurgency. Strategic history has been here before. Contexts certainly

change. As Edward N. Luttwak reminds us, the option of out-terrorizing terrorists and encouraging social discipline through the generation of serious fear is not open to us as it was to General Vespasian when he elected to teach the revolting Jews in AD 67 why it was not a good idea to revolt against Rome.[23] Changing norms—a globalized technology of news and opinion reporting—have altered crucially the contexts of warfare, especially COIN warfare. Regular forces are still trying to come to grips with the media dimension to their behavior.

The chief difficulty for regulars is to decide upon a strategy that might work. Military operations and tactics are far from irrelevant, but they are not the keys to success. It is worth noting, however, that they can prove to be the keys to political failure. Recall Dien Bien Phu and, potentially, Khe Sanh. The regular has to change his mind-set and adopt a view of military activity that has it integral to a holistic approach to a problem that is largely, though not entirely, political. Since soldiers have fighting as their most distinctive core competency, and given that they are best prepared to wrestle with other regular soldiers, the military cultural challenge is profound. Rephrased, typically when a regular force is committed to COIN, although it has some inherent advantages, it is being asked to perform in ways, and for purposes, for which it is relatively ill prepared. If proof of this claim is required, just consider Iraq. Often it is said that it is more difficult to expel an old idea than to introduce a new one. Because we only have one army, we cannot afford to deprogram our regulars, even were such mental surgery possible. After all, we may well need them to perform in a regular way, even in pursuit of COIN success. I might mention that I have always believed that the first requirement for special operations forces (SOF), "fit for purpose" as the saying goes today, is an unconventional mind-set.[24] Unless SOF are employed by people who can think unconventionally, and unless they themselves have unconventional minds, they must perform far short of their potential. As always, the problem is strategic. What effect is it necessary to generate, and how is that to be done? It is always essential to be able to answer the most critical question posed by strategy, so what—what difference does it make?

Not all military institutions have equal difficulty with COIN. Public, strategic, and military cultures differ among countries. For example, the waging of warfare against irregulars of all persuasions and in most kinds of terrain has long been a core, if not the core, competency of the British army. Very occasionally, though relatively briefly, that army would change its game

dramatically when continental demands had to be met. But the British army was organized as an imperial police force. It was transported by the navy on expeditions of conquest. Then it policed the empire, providing aid to the civil power. And finally it conducted a lengthy, and not wholly unsuccessful, imperial retreat, serving as the rearguard for the long process of devolution after 1945. One could argue that the British army was still engaged in imperial policing in Northern Ireland until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. We need to beware of casual generalization. The question I pose is, I believe, valid and important: why do regular forces have great difficulty waging irregular warfare effectively? The scale of the difficulty varies with the subject. The British army has a long tradition of performance in irregular warfare. It has not always covered itself with glory in COIN campaigns. However, British military culture has no basic difficulty with such warfare. It is what the army expects to be asked to do. And historically, irregular warfare has been the preponderant British military experience.

The United States and its Army is another case altogether. Despite 300 years of irregular warfare in North America against Native Americans, American military culture never designated irregular warfare, or COIN, as a required core competency, at least not until today, rather belatedly. This is not the occasion to explain why this has been so. I simply record it as a historical fact. The United States has a preferred way in warfare of long standing that is, on balance, highly dysfunctional for COIN. More and more American analysts have come to recognize this, but recognition and effective response are rather different. Even as the US Army and Air Force appreciate the differences between regular and irregular warfare insofar as they bear upon their behaviors, it remains an open question whether or not American culture and institutions are able to make the adjustments necessary for much greater effectiveness in COIN.

At some risk of overstatement, I will hazard the proposition that almost everything that is regarded near universally as "best practice" in COIN contradicts the American way in warfare.[25] To excel in COIN an army needs to:

1. Understand that all military action is political theater. Irregular warfare does not, cannot, have a military outcome.
2. Appreciate that the conflict is for the acquiescence or support of the people. Dead insurgents are a bonus; they are not a reliable mark of success.

3. Be prepared to tear up its doctrine manuals for regular warfare. Its first job is to protect the people.
4. Adopt different priorities among its skills. Being highly agile in maneuver and lethal in firepower are not especially helpful. Can it be that our military transformation was, or is, heading in a direction irrelevant, or actually harmful, for effectiveness in COIN?
5. Accept that COIN requires a long-term commitment, typically 10 years. Also, it requires security forces in large numbers. Historical analysis seems to show that one needs roughly 20 members of the security forces for every 1,000 people in the general population.[26] Tactical skill and technology are not very relevant. They are nice to have, but the basis of success is numbers in the right ratio.

If your armed forces are shaped by and wedded to a military culture of rapid maneuver for decisive victory, if they seek to exploit firepower as the longest of friendly long suits, and if they draw a sharp distinction between the political and the military realms, COIN will be the source of endless frustration. Not only is an army excellent in the conduct of regular warfare unlikely to shine at COIN, that excellence will also prove a hindrance to understanding and responding to the different challenges posed by a context of irregular hostilities. The picture looks grim, perhaps unduly so. Are there grounds to hope for success in COIN?

Is COIN Winnable by Regulars?

The answer to this question is a resounding yes. I say this not just as an affirmation of faith but also on the basis of historical evidence. Insurgencies have a distinctly uneven record of strategic and political success. We theorists tend to be overimpressed with structural factors. We happily list reasons for and against the prospects for COIN advantage. But we are notoriously weak at dealing with the human dimension of COIN. Similarly, we are not as eloquent as we should be on the subjects of Clausewitz's "climate of war" and friction. People matter most, not least in relatively low-technology hostilities. Leaders count. Political charisma and strategic inspiration are priceless assets. In warfare of all kinds, regular and irregular, morale is by far the most important generator of effectiveness. In a protracted irregular conflict, the morale of the rival armed forces can be literally decisive. The skillful leader works to depress the morale of the enemy's spear carriers.

On the obverse side of inspired leadership, it is important to allow analytical space for human error. It is always a mistake to discount folly, incompetence, and sheer bad luck. Many campaigns that should have been won were, in fact, lost because the troops were poorly led. Every war, regular and irregular, is a duel, as Clausewitz maintains. It is also a struggle between two or more learning institutions.[27] Everyone makes mistakes in war. Not all mistakes are fatal, but the course of events is shaped, even determined, by which side learns the fastest and adapts more quickly.

While an army must discard most of its doctrine for regular warfare in order to be effective in COIN, it must not try to discard the essential facts of its regularity. It is the army of the established order. It provides aid to the civil power. It has all the material advantages of official sanction and resources. It has legitimacy; at least it should have legitimacy. While a COIN campaign requires a regular army to reorganize, retrain, and reequip, it does not require, it cannot require, the regulars to ape the irregulars. The regular army and its adjuncts are the face of order and stability. It needs to look and behave as if that is so. What do we know from historical experience, from logic, and from common sense about the prospects for success by regular forces in COIN?

First, although every insurgency is unique, each has some features common to them all. This convenient fact means that a COIN doctrine is both feasible and necessary.[28] We know what constitutes best practice in COIN, if only because we have access to an abundance of evidence of the consequences of poor practice. The beginning of COIN wisdom is to grasp the implications of Clausewitz's famous rule. He insisted that "the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test [of fit with policy] the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive."[29] We know that COIN is a contest for the minds of the people. To that end, we know that the military instrument has to be subordinate to civilian authority and in the background behind the police. Also, we know that the use of force should be minimal. The entire COIN effort requires coordinated central civilian direction. There is no need to dwell on these familiar details. The point is that there is nothing whatsoever mysterious about best practice in COIN, at least in principle. We have a glittering array of variably outstanding classic texts and an even more glittering array of historical

episodes of both failure and success in COIN. The charge today is not to comprehend the COIN challenge. That is easy. Rather, it is to persuade our institutions to change their preferred behaviors while being alert to the possibility that institutional, strategic, and public cultures may not permit the necessary adjustments.

Second, COIN can and does succeed if the contexts of the conflict are permissive. For example, COIN was always much more likely to be successful in the Philippines, Malaya, and El Salvador than in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Not all tasks are doable, even to a gifted strategist. Iraq today bears all the hallmarks of mission improbable. Following our initial errors, the security situation has deteriorated, probably beyond rescue. The conflict is now so complex it even makes World War II Yugoslavia look simple by comparison, and that is quite an achievement. The strategist should be a pragmatist. Whether the prospective conflict is regular, irregular, or a messy, untidy combination of the two, it may not be winnable at bearable cost. Strategy is about making hard choices based upon cost-benefit guesswork. Even a sound, well-tested COIN doctrine, to be implemented by a suitably coordinated civil-military effort, may stand no reasonable chance of succeeding. Situational awareness is key. Do not assume that COIN is always doable. A host of showstoppers can rain on the parade.

Third and lastly, for COIN to succeed abroad it has to work politically for us at home. If the American (and British) public loses patience or confidence in the endeavor, the exercise is doomed. This point is so obvious as to verge on the banal. When I raised it in a speech a year ago, I was not popular. I predicted a surge of bumper stickers saying "No more Iraqs." The audience was not impressed at that time. If the United States believes that it faces a generation and more of irregular challenges, it is going to have to address this potentially fatal weakness in its staying power. Irregular warfare is protracted and apparently indecisive. It is difficult to understand in detail, its course is hard to describe, evidence of progress is elusive, and its future is almost impossible to predict. If Americans cannot accept these structural facts, the country cannot succeed at COIN.

What Are the Leading Fashionable Errors Believed about Irregular Warfare?

If you like maxims, try this one: "For every complex problem there is a simple solution, and it is always wrong." It is noticeable that the current

understandable flurry of theory and advice on irregular warfare has encouraged the promotion of a number of just such simple solutions. I must preface my negative comments by saying that the ideas I will cite are all excellent in themselves. What I shall criticize is the view that any of them is the answer for which we have been searching. I must risk exaggeration in order to highlight the argument that an inherently good idea rapidly becomes a much less good idea when its limitations are not appreciated. The four simple ideas that currently are being invested with miraculous properties for the successful prosecution of irregular warfare are culture, COIN doctrine, the use of SOF, and the dominance of political over military behavior.

First, the US defense community has discovered culture. With all the enthusiasm of the convert, our military is being encouraged to believe that understanding local culture is the key to victory.[30] We must comprehend the people and the society that we aspire to rescue from chaos and capture by dangerous creeds. This is an excellent idea, as it always has been. The main problem is that it is not achievable. Some cultural empathy certainly is attainable. But to acquire anything more than a superficial grasp of local mores and social structure demands years, if not a lifetime, of exposure and study. Our practice of tours of duty with rapid rotation is incompatible with the acquisition of cultural expertise. Still, there is everything to be said in favor of our doing what we can to understand the people whose minds comprise the battlespace in irregular warfare.[31] I should add that even if a handful of American anthropologists and historians do secure a good measure of cultural expertise, what do we do with it? Recall the strategist's question, so what? So, now the US defense establishment knows that culture is important. Good. But what can it do with that general knowledge that would be really useful?

Second, as problem solvers our officials and soldiers are always in the market for solutions to the question of the day. Andrew F. Krepinevich spoke to this market and told many people what they were desperate to hear when, in 2005, he offered drink to the thirsty and food to the hungry with his timely article, "How to Win in Iraq."[32] What Krepinevich provided was a first-rate summary, and application to Iraq, of standard COIN theory. He explained best practice in COIN as revealed by historical experience. Obviously, this unexceptional essay came as a revelation to many Americans who somehow had missed the COIN lectures in their professional education. It would not be fair to compare Krepinevich with Gen Robert Nivelle, the French general who promised desperate and

despairing politicians victory "at a stroke" on the western front in 1917. Among other differences, Krepinevich was recommending a sound doctrine. But Krepinevich, Nivelle, and more recently, the advocates of a military "surge" in Baghdad do share one important common feature. They are all people who claim to have the answer to the problem of the hour. "How to Win in Iraq" and similar, if less competent offerings, are quintessentially Jominian. If you recall, Antoine Henri de Jomini, the Swiss theorist, promised victory to those who applied the correct doctrine.[33] The idea has taken root that the solution to our irregular warfare nightmares is adoption of the right COIN doctrine. This is a half-truth at best. In historical practice, each case is so unique that although there are some valid principles which should govern irregular warfare, there can be no reliable template for all contexts.

Third, at long last SOF have become fashionable and, dare I say, popular. In and of itself, a new appreciation for SOF is entirely welcome. But what do we expect of our SOF? What are their roles in irregular warfare? Are they key to success in COIN? The answer is not really, except in the context of the total protracted civil-military effort that COIN requires. SOF can only be as effective as circumstances allow and as the chain of command permits. In particular, in COIN they either play with the team or their unique talents are largely wasted. If the wrong strategy is pursued, SOF will not rescue the enterprise. There is always the danger that a regular military establishment deeply encultured in conventional maneuver warfare, and wedded indissolubly to firepower solutions, will use its SOF assets to do better what it already does well. Specifically, SOF will be employed as target spotters for stand-off weaponry. Recall that in 2001–2 an allegedly new American way of war, vitally enabled by SOF target spotting, was proclaimed and celebrated as the experience in Afghanistan.[34] So little careful thought has been devoted to the strategic effectiveness of SOF in different roles that it is easy to see why exaggerated estimates of their potential are not hard to come by. We lack persuasive theory on SOF. In fact, the genuinely strategic literature on SOF and special operations is almost entirely absent. I commend James Kiras's excellent recent book to you.[35] It is a lonely item on an otherwise empty shelf. Some may also find value, inspiration at least, in Derek Leebaert's recent work.[36] Although most of those who have latched onto SOF as the principal answer to our COIN troubles are not wholly in error, they really do not know what they

are talking about. There is, and can be, no SOF solution. SOF are a vital part of the solution, where a solution is possible, that is.

Fourth and finally, the defense establishment appears to be in the process of overreaching with the dazzling insight that the military dimension is subordinate to the political in irregular warfare. Yet again, this is a powerful and correct insight. But when taken too far, when reduced to an article of faith, it becomes a dangerous error. Of course, insurgents of all noxious breeds cannot win militarily, at least not unless the COIN forces commit truly appalling strategic mistakes. However, COIN in all its nonmilitary dimensions can only flourish in a context of physical security for the public. The traditional American way in warfare is highly dysfunctional for COIN, as I have suggested already and as is generally recognized today. However, we need to be careful lest we overbalance away from according the military dimension its proper due. It is important—actually it is essential—for the public to see the COIN regulars succeed in battle. They have to believe that the insurgents are being, and will continue to be, defeated. Naturally, one must not pursue narrowly military objectives regardless of the political costs of so doing. But I detect signs today of an undue willingness to demote and discount the military element. Without physical security for the people, a COIN campaign is going nowhere useful, no matter how sophisticated its doctrine or well coordinated its centrally civilian-directed efforts.

To summarize the argument just advanced: beware of the great oversimplifications. Look out for the falsely promised silver bullets. Caveat emptor. I have suggested that culture, COIN doctrine, SOF, and the paramountcy of the political have all been adopted as iconic solutions to the hideously complex challenges of COIN. While each is valuable, none is *the* answer.

Concluding Thoughts

I close with half a dozen thoughts that are as spare and direct as much of the preceding discussion has been rather indirect and sometimes hedged with typical academic qualifiers. These concluding points are a mixture of the obvious and the controversial.

1. Irregular warfare is highly variable in form and is always complex.
2. Irregular warfare calls for cultural, political, and military qualities that are not among the traditional strengths of Americans. America excels

in the conduct of large-scale regular warfare. Moreover, airpower is the essence of the American way in warfare.

3. We need to beware of drawing too sharp a distinction between regular and irregular warfare. Most wars have elements of both. And warfare is warfare, whether it is regular or irregular.

4. Few armies excel at both regular and irregular warfare. America's irregular warfare deficit is historically common among states. It is not at all extraordinary.

5. Irregular warfare matters, but it matters a great deal less than would, or will, the return of great-power rivalry and antagonism. We have to be careful lest we overreact to the menace of the decade—irregular warfare—only to discover that the COIN challenge was a distraction from more serious security international business.

6. It follows from these concluding thoughts, and from the argument in much of this paper, that the United States should undertake little irregular warfare. It would be a political and strategic mistake to identify irregular warfare, COIN especially, as America's dominant strategic future. If the country should make the mistake of committing itself to extensive COIN projects, it will require a much larger army. Technology will not substitute anywhere near adequately for numbers of Americans on the ground. SSQ

Notes

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