

# The Age of Irregular Warfare SO WHAT?

By SEBASTIAN L.V. GORKA

*[F]uture adversaries are more likely to pose irregular threats.*

—Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept 2.0, April 2010

**A**s the new Joint Operating Concept for Irregular Warfare hits combatant commands and doctrine shops across the U.S. military, we find ourselves searching for new intellectual aids and policy tools that can provide certainty in an age that seems increasingly unpredictable and “irregular.” We look back longingly to an age in which the battlefield was understandable, in which we thought we knew the enemy and the methods and means at his disposal. Even in this ninth year of an epoch-defining conflict, which for most Americans began on September 11, 2001, fundamental questions remain unanswered. What is the nature of the enemy? Is it an organization, network, movement, or ideology? What are the long-term objectives of this enemy? Does it have a Clausewitzian center of gravity? Should we even use the term *enemy*, or should the vast resources that Washington dedicates to national security be spent instead on ameliorating the “upstream factors” behind violent extremism (to quote a phrase used by a close advisor to President Barack Obama)?<sup>1</sup>

*It is now time to recognize that a paradigm shift in war has undoubtedly occurred.*

—General Sir Rupert Smith

ISAF troops approach building where militant activity was suspected in Wardak Province, Afghanistan

U.S. Army (Jordan J. Huettl)

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## The American Context

If we turn to Sun Tzu to answer such fundamental questions, we must start with ourselves. We must understand who we are and what we represent before we can hope to identify what threatens us and our value system. The gross if superficial outline is clear. America is today the world's sole superpower. Yet despite its immense power advantage over other states, 9 years ago it suffered the deadliest nonconventional or irregular attack in modern history. As a result, it is now involved in two nontraditional conflicts, one in the Middle East and one in Central Asia (neither area having dominated the work of military planners during the decades of the Cold War). At the same time, America is focusing much of its remaining national security capacity on neutralizing the threat of terrorist attack against the homeland.

But who we are and, therefore, where we need to go are not so simple. Just as the Human Terrain Teams deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan are meant to set the stage for military operations and explain the human context in which our forces are to function, we must understand our own context—our own human terrain—beyond the most recent crisis and at a level of analysis that is deeper than that supplied by the mass media or talking heads.

Some would call this an exercise in having an appreciation for the strategic culture of the United States. That may be a useful approach, but given the events of the last 70 years, it would be more accurate to talk of having an appreciation of the evolution of U.S. strategic culture rather than depicting it as a static reality fixed in the post-9/11 environment.

As a result, in order to appreciate fully the difficulties we face in today's irregular context and to have a hope of overcoming them, we must see the larger picture and the trend lines that have shaped it, for how we think strategically is an aspect of who we are. After all, strategic culture influences how we approach threats, and it challenges and shapes our responses. World War II and the Cold War left us emphasizing firepower, technology, and nuclear deterrence. Then came the strategic reality of the 1990s, which lacked any similarity to the preceding 40-plus years and thus had a distinctly negative impact on our ability to think about what national security really meant in a post-Cold War world. Now we must honestly assess how the intelligence-gathering and forecasting habits of World War II and the Cold War have created systemic

obstacles to providing basic informational support to the types of missions we are now expected to execute.<sup>2</sup> While we have invented new capabilities, such as offensive unmanned aircraft system platforms and stealth technology, and while we have written new doctrine for current missions (for example, Field Manual 3-24, the latest counterinsurgency manual), neither of these facts proves that we have fundamentally reworked the entrenched culture and architecture of a U.S. national security establishment predicated on neutralizing nation-state threats.

## The Global Context

In addition to delving into the premises underpinning our strategic culture, we must ask similar fundamental questions about the context in which the rest of the world finds itself at the beginning of the third millennium. Without getting into the lucrative but unscientific black art of long-range projection, we must ask questions related to relative power, the role of ideology, and the influence of demographics on actors who in the past were not of concern to us, or who simply did not exist in an age of bipolar conventional standoff. Nation-state actors and non-nation-state actors alike are affected by new drivers of change.<sup>3</sup> Power can no longer be measured simply in terms of gross domestic product or tank regiments. As Ralph Peters eloquently pointed out over a decade ago, survival may have far more to do with a given community's desire and capacity

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to absorb and manipulate large amounts of information than with classic metrics of power.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the vulnerability of a given state may be measured more in terms of its access to clean drinking water or the size of its male population under the age of 20 than by its proximity to malevolent neighbors.

## The Conceptual Context

Lastly, and perhaps most difficult of all, it is the duty of all senior officials involved in providing for national security to seriously and most candidly reassess core assumptions upon

which our existing systems of analysis and planning are based. We must evaluate how apt these central concepts still are and formulate new principles should they be found wanting. Beyond the foundational core values of the Nation, such as those enshrined in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, we must recognize that no concepts are immune to critique and reappraisal when it comes to securing the homeland. America's founding values are sacrosanct and immutable, yet we must be ever imaginative and flexible in how we realize and protect them. For example, should the "Wondrous Trinity" of Clausewitz be found wanting in an age of globally dispersed nonstate actors and cyberwarriors, it must be discarded—or at least significantly reworked if it is to have utility in an age of proliferating nonstate actors, the likes of which the Prussian theorist could never have imagined.

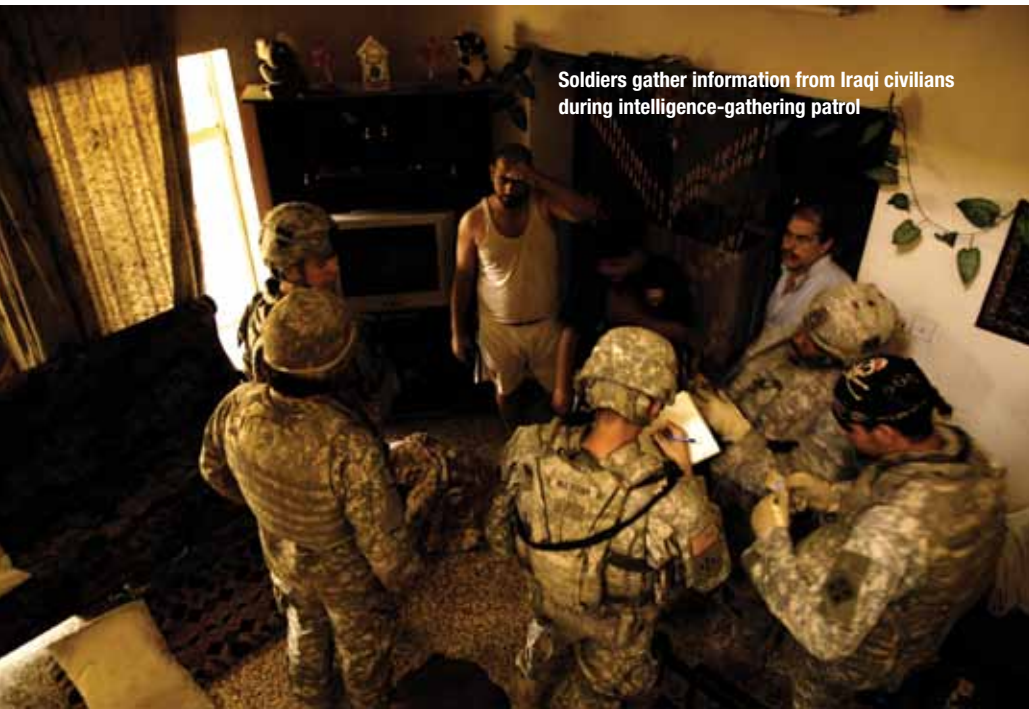
## The Context of Classical War Theory

With regard to this last point, we would be well served by engaging in an even more sweeping survey of our current context to include century-long trends. The blogosphere, professional military education journals, and

Army engineer and firefighter view damage at Pentagon caused by terrorist attack on 9/11







Soldiers gather information from Iraqi civilians during intelligence-gathering patrol

U.S. Air Force (Manuel L. Martinez)

President Obama speaks at memorial ceremony for Servicemembers killed during shooting rampage at Fort Hood



DoD (Cherie Cullen)

civilian publications provide ample reading on the core issues of how irregular war differs from conventional warfare. Nevertheless, we should take our quest seriously and in a way that steps beyond the theoretical navel-gazing of purely semantic debates. When Clausewitz gave us his immortal dictum on war as the continuation of politics, he was writing in a specific historical and socioeconomic context.

No matter how useful his analysis may seem, it cannot be divorced from the age in which it was born, an age when conventional war dominated strategic thought.

Clausewitz's *On War* must be understood as one man's forceful attempt to impose meaning on the clash of national arms. More specifically, it must be appreciated as an act of intellectual pilgrimage by an officer seeking to

explain the destruction of his military culture by an upstart foe successfully using the radical approach of *levée en masse* to decimate its professional enemy. That is why in his Wondrous Trinity, Clausewitz makes rational government ends the driver behind the actions of his skillful commander, who harnesses the passion and hatred of his troops (the population).

Clearly, the (Westphalian) nation-state construct informs everything Clausewitz wishes to achieve. We are therefore fully justified in reassessing his model in an age that sees violence applied most often in non-Westphalian ways—by nonstate actors. Similarly, context also applies to the other great strategist, Sun Tzu, who is also a victim of his age. Why else the emphasis on victory without combat being the ultimate goal? Unless we see Sun Tzu as a product of the Warring States Period before China was united, we cannot understand that his writings were driven not by the desire to destroy the enemy but to co-opt the political entities that would become the building blocks of a new empire.

Sun Tzu's context was the drive for unity in the China of the Warring States. Clausewitz's was the Napoleonic revolution in warfare and a young Westphalian system. As such, *On War* was crucial to understanding the Westphalian period. However, although much can be said of the post-9/11 age, Westphalian is not what springs to mind. As Martin van Creveld noted in a recent speech at the National Defense University, "What [Clausewitz] never imagined was a world in which many, perhaps even most, belligerents consist of nonsovereign, non-territorial organizations."<sup>5</sup>

Hence, we can ask some obvious but new questions and ascertain whether the old models apply. When discussing actors who engage in irregular warfare against us, how Clausewitzian is the enemy's understanding of the purpose of war? For example, is al Qaeda, or even Iran, driven by the same functional approaches to the use of violence as we are?<sup>6</sup> *On War* may remain the key text about nation-on-nation conflict between actors operating on logical cost-benefit lines directly connected to obvious political gains. But how is such calculation factored into an understanding of the utility of violence when we are facing a religiously motivated foreign-fighter brigade in Iraq, a unit of the Quetta Shura in Afghanistan, or a suicide bomber on a commercial flight crossing the Atlantic?



Soldiers engage enemy in Badula Qulp, Afghanistan, during Operation *Moshtarak*

U.S. Air Force (Efren Lopez)

Clausewitz was right about the immutable nature of war,<sup>7</sup> but his Westphalian context drove his understanding of the role of *raison d'état* and the trinity of forces that the state both embodied and leveraged. Those forces still exist, but the new actors we face—whether they be the Taliban in Afghanistan or al Qaeda in Yemen—have mixed these ingredients in new ratios and combinations, wherein rational, policy-oriented cost-benefit analysis and justifications have been trumped or qualified by less dispassionate and more otherworldly influences.

The triangle of Government, People, and Army (or Commander), which respectively represent reason (or policy), passion, and skill, is less than useful for many of the irregular threat groups we are fighting today because they are not nation-states. Take, for example, al Qaeda. Since the loss of its Afghan base of operations, there is no specific government or

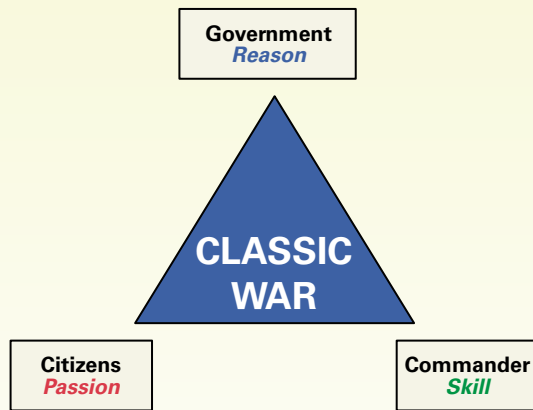
nation that is associated primarily with this foe. The violence of al Qaeda is not instrumental to an endstate akin to the policy goals of a “normal” government. Its ends are driven by the religiously fueled visions of ideologues, some alive today, but many, such as Sayyed Q'utb and Abdullah Azzam, deceased. None of these ideologues or irregular elites politically represented a nation in the Westphalian sense, making the triangle/trinity out of date.<sup>8</sup>

Simultaneously, the role of the military commander is not filled by a professional warrior subordinated to a political elite in the case of the irregular enemy. Osama bin Laden is a self-taught warrior, a mujahideen who never spent time at a war college or wore the uniform of a national army. Furthermore, his skill is not measured solely in the way that concerned Clausewitz, prowess on the battlefield. Rather, he must be understood in nonmilitary terms as an ideologue in his own

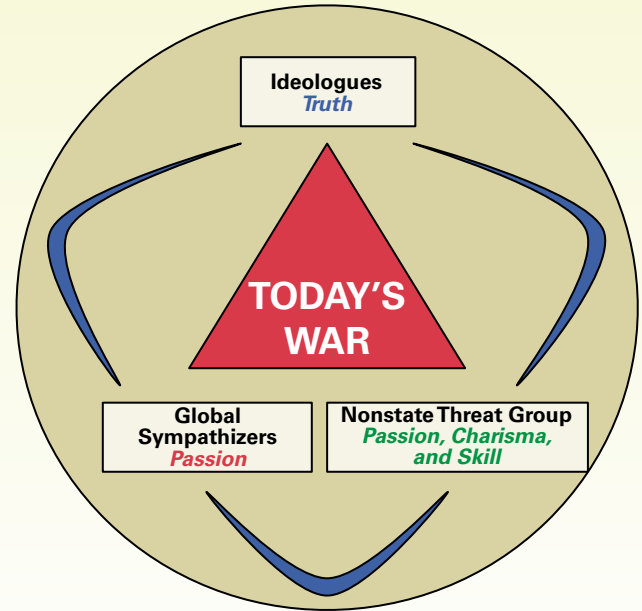
right, an information warrior who inspires by personal example. The commander of the Clausewitzian Trinity was judged by his ability to prevail despite the friction and fog of war. Bin Laden is measured less by his success on the battlefield—which has been minimal since 9/11—than by his authenticity as a “true believer.” He is an example of a holy warrior, prepared to die not for a political endstate but for a transcendental truth, judged by his capacity to inspire other violent nonstate actors.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, the passion- and hatred-driven third part of Clausewitz's Trinity must be redefined. No longer is the enemy limited by the resource his national population represents. Bin Laden, like the Muslim Brotherhood, is not constrained by whether he can rally the citizens of one particular nation behind the cause of war or by their willingness to be drafted into a national army. The

## The Trinity of War Expanded



The Clausewitzian Trinity of War  
in the Conventional Context



The Trinity of War Expanded for the  
Current Irregular Warfare Age

enemy's recruiting pool is very un-Westphalian; it is global. Potential irregular warriors may be recruited from Algeria, Somalia, or Michigan, for al Qaeda's definition of population is not territorially bound but religiously defined by the idea of the *ummah*, or global Islamic community. And in this he is not alone. The anticapitalist extremists who so often violently trouble the representatives of the old Westphalian order, such as the Group of Eight, are also unrestricted in their mobilization by national borders.

Consequently, although reports of the death of the nation-state may have been greatly exaggerated, a definition of war that pertains only to nations indeed is dead. Clausewitz's Trinity still applies to state-on-state conventional war ("ideal war"), but it must be supplemented with another trinity that can depict the types of actors our troops are already fighting (see figure).

### A Wondrous Trinity for Today

Clausewitz's Trinity divided the world into three parts: the government, the governed, and the defenders of the state. Each reflected a different characteristic: rationale, passion, or skill. Although the triangular representation of the three implies equality, just as with the Christian Trinity, there is favoritism. As the Son sits on the right hand of the Father, and

the Spirit serves them both, it is clear from *On War* that the party Clausewitz privileges is the military, or more specifically, the artful commander who harnesses the population's passion and might so the nation may realize its goals.

Today's irregular enemy should be understood in a more egalitarian fashion. Just as the information and media worlds have been democratized, with Web sites and blogs turning consumers into producers and vice versa,<sup>10</sup> the trinity of the irregular enemy affords and invites an interchangeability of roles and functions. Leaders can be fighters, followers can become leaders, and both can interpret and feed into the enemy's understanding of why force is necessary and what ultimate purpose it serves. In other words, the components of the Clausewitzian Trinity have become utterly fluid and interchangeable.

As we have noted, this has profound implications for the resources the enemy can mobilize and with which he fights us. In Westphalian war, the enemy only has the people of his nation-state. For today's enemies, the limitations of borders and citizenship have vanished. We are faced by a Saudi master-terrorist as the leader of al Qaeda, but violence carried out in the name of the "truth" that he serves can be executed by Nigerian students on commercial airliners or U.S. Army majors of Palestinian descent. There are no limits as to

who can be recruited and deployed against us. The only requirement is that they subscribe to the religious ideology that is global jihad.<sup>11</sup>

A second deep ramification is that in the wars America fights today, national interest no longer defines the enemy's use of force. Rather, it is truth as defined not by the elite of a government, but by ancient religious texts or their interpretations by politically and transcendently motivated ideologues. Clausewitzian *raison d'état*, the objective of violence, is no longer bound by cold or technical definitions of national interest. If ultimate approval can be gained by being a suicide bomber or killing noncombatants in the name

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*Mao broadened our understanding of warfare, but he also reinforced the Westphalian context, since the goal of the insurgent was always to become the nation-state*

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of religious glory, then the rationale for violence must not be interpreted by U.S. national security elites as being subject to the limitations of a Westphalian framework of analysis. As a result, in today's irregular context, we can replace the rationale of the trinity with



the transcendental end that the true believers see themselves as serving.

Finally, in the new threat environment, the third actor of the Clausewitzian Trinity—the commander and his forces—is radically redefined. During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and then the Cold War, irregular warfare's practitioners could be easily understood as all having one very Westphalian goal for their violence. Although they were not representatives of nation-states, they sought to seize state power. This is how the master of this kind of warfare, Mao Tse-tung, revolutionized our understanding of the utility of force. No longer was it strategically used to serve an established government. Instead, by skillfully employing multifaceted campaigns on diverse lines of effort, unfolding in both tangible and intangible space, the insurgent could systematically build a counterstate that, when powerful enough, could challenge the incumbent in a conventional campaign, destroy it, and then fill the void by becoming the new state.<sup>12</sup> With People's War, Mao broadened our understanding of warfare, taking it beyond that which served the status quo elites. But he also reinforced the Westphalian context, since the goal of the insurgent was always to become the nation-state.

Today, in contrast, we face a foe who rejects the (Western) Westphalian model, an enemy who is not interested in a war of self-determination in the classic sense of post-colonial independence. Instead, he fights for worldwide religious supremacy, and this is why there is so much talk of al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM) as representing the first global insurgency, and one we must counter with a global counterinsurgency.<sup>13</sup> His idea of self-determination is not tied to the nation-state, but to a global theocracy, the Caliphate, within which all shall be subject to the will of Allah, and not the will of the people.

It is likewise clear that the last element of Clausewitz's Trinity must be reassessed in the case of an irregular threat group that is even more ambitious than Maoist People's War would have us expect. We cannot represent AQAM as a nation-state military led by a commander serving the national interests of his government. This third part of the trinity is now populated by various types of actors. It consists of leaders such as bin Laden who say they serve no government, only God. It also consists of actors such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a terrorist and insurgent leader who said he served God but also swore fealty

(*bay'at*) to bin Laden. It also refers to domestic enemies such as Mohammad Sidique Khan, the British terrorist who masterminded the 7/7 attacks. And lastly, it can also refer to the likes of Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemen-based, American Muslim cleric who may not have had classic command and control of the Fort Hood shooter and Nigerian Christmas Day bomber, but far more importantly acted as inspiration and sanctioning authority for both Major Nidal Malik Hassan and failed suicide bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab.

### So What?

Clausewitz is still valuable. His understanding of what war between states should look like has not changed with the arrival of a globally motivated and capable nonstate actor using irregular tactics and strategies. Nevertheless, his trinity cannot be applied directly to such enemies. The context has changed. The world can no longer be described as consisting of solely the governed, the governing, and the regular militaries that serve them. It has become more complex.

Fortunately, Clausewitz's other nontrinitarian insights into conflict still hold true. His image of war as two wrestlers is just as apt in



Soldier inspects area in Tuz, Iraq, where suicide car bomber struck, injuring civilians and police officers

U.S. Air Force (Suzanne M. Day)

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describing Kennedy versus Khrushchev in 1962 as it is in representing General McChrystal versus the Quetta Shura today. This is the part of *On War* that we must reemphasize, while deemphasizing and reframing his Wondrous Trinity. With an enemy who sees himself as divinely justified, the expression of war as a *competition of wills* is more important than ever before.

In this regard, Clausewitz emphasized will over capabilities. This emphasis is doubly applicable today; it is the only way we can explain how untrained and pathetically equipped irregulars can still challenge the best fighting force in the world despite all its Predators and real-time intelligence. Understanding this element of Clausewitz's writings, Martin van Creveld warns that a "theory of war that only recognizes physical factors while ignoring moral and psychological ones is not worth the paper on which it is written."<sup>14</sup>

If we have the audacity to update the Prussian master's trinity, we should perhaps renew our faith in his famous dictum, even while recognizing how much we have misinterpreted it as of late. War may in fact serve politics as its extension in the Westphalian way of doing business, but we should also understand that war is politics, and politics is war. For too many years it is the violence—the kinetic effect—that has been our focus. Today, we face a foe who knows that war starts with ideas and depends on them, far more than it depends on weapons. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Brennan, Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, introduced this phrase in his speech to the Center for Strategic and International Studies: "A New Approach for Safeguarding Americans," August 6, 2009, available at <[http://csis.org/files/attachments/090806\\_brennan\\_transcript.pdf](http://csis.org/files/attachments/090806_brennan_transcript.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. general officer responsible for intelligence in Afghanistan understands the need for radical changes to how we think about intelligence and how we collect and process it. See Michael T. Flynn, "Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan," available at <[www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/AfghanIntel\\_Flynn\\_Jan2010\\_code507\\_voices.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/AfghanIntel_Flynn_Jan2010_code507_voices.pdf)>.

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed analysis of how the evolution of the state has influenced strategy over the centuries, see Phillip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History* (New York: Knopf, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Peters, "The New Strategic Trinity," *Parameters* (Winter 1998), 73–79.

<sup>5</sup> Martin van Creveld, "An Obituary for Clausewitz," paper presented at the College of International Security Affairs conference, *Beyond the Horizon*, National Defense University, Washington, DC, 2009. Despite experiencing irregular warfare, Clausewitz only dedicates a few pages to the subject, and even then does so solely in the context of the weakened nation-state arming its population (*Volksbewaffnung*) when conventional forces are not enough.

<sup>6</sup> On the issue of expressive versus functional understandings of the purpose of war, see Christopher Coker, *Waging War without Warriors* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2002), and Michael Vlahos, *Fighting Identity: Sacred War and World Change* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> The master strategist Colin Gray puts it best: "We know with sad certainty that war has a healthy future. What we do not know with confidence are the forms that warfare will take."

<sup>8</sup> I agree with Michael Vlahos that we potentially make matters worse by using the image of a triangle to depict Clausewitz's Trinity since the word *trinity* implies much more than three-sided geometry. How to represent the threesome pictographically in a more exacting way is beyond the scope of this article, but a worthy task. The figure included herein is but a first attempt to revise the image for the current enemy.

<sup>9</sup> On the different ways in which jihadi enemies understand victory, see Jeffrey B. Cozzens, "Victory from the Prism of Jihadi Culture," *Joint Force Quarterly* 52 (1<sup>st</sup> Quarter 2009), 86–91. Also useful is Stephen Ulph, "Weak Points in the Ideology of Jihad," lecture delivered at the Westminster Institute, McLean, VA, December 10, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> I am grateful to David Kilcullen for succinctly explaining to me the revolution in the "information market" and how this affects such forms of irregular warfare as counterinsurgency.

<sup>11</sup> See Patrick Sookhdeo, *Global Jihad: The Future in the Face of Militant Islam* (Three Rivers, MI: Isaac Publishing, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Mao is notoriously misunderstood and wrongly attributed. For consideration of his position on the Clausewitzian notion of irregular warfare, see the various works of Thomas A. Marks, especially the seminal *Maoist People's War in Post-Vietnam Asia* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 2007). A summary of Mao's five key questions in warfare and how they can be used to understand an irregular warfare threat can also be found in Thomas A. Marks, Sebastian L.v. Gorka, and Robert Sharp, "Beyond Population-Centric Warfare," *PRISM* 1, no. 3 (June 2010), 79–90.

<sup>13</sup> For a full examination of problems that the concept of global counterinsurgency brings with it, see Stephen Sloan and Sebastian L.v. Gorka, "Contextualizing Counterinsurgency," *The Journal of International Security Affairs* 16 (Spring 2009), 41–48.

<sup>14</sup> Van Creveld.