

Why the Strong Lose

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The continuing insurgency in Iraq underscores the capacity of the weak to impose considerable military and political pain on the strong. Whether that pain will compel the United States to abandon its agenda in Iraq remains to be seen.

What is not in dispute is that all major failed US uses of force since 1945—in Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia—have been against materially weaker enemies. In wars both hot and cold, the United States has fared consistently well against such powerful enemies as Nazi Germany, Imperial Japan, and the Soviet Union, but the record against lesser foes is decidedly mixed. Though it easily polished off Milosevic’s Serbia and Saddam’s Iraq, the United States failed to defeat Vietnamese infantry in Indochina, terrorists in Lebanon, and warlords in Somalia. In each case the American Goliath was militarily stalemated or politically defeated by the local David. Most recently, the United States was surprised by the tenacious insurgency that exploded in post-Baathist Iraq, an insurgency now in its third year with no end in sight.

The phenomenon of the weak defeating the strong, though exceptional, is as old as war itself. Sparta finally beat Athens; Frederick the Great always punched well above his weight; American rebels overturned British rule in the Thirteen Colonies; the Spanish *guerrilla* bled Napoleon white; Jewish terrorists forced the British out of Palestine; Vietnamese communists drove France and then the United States out of Indochina; and mujahideen handed the Soviet Union its own “Vietnam” in Afghanistan. Relative military power is hardly a reliable predictor of war outcomes.

Why do the strong lose? One must distinguish between general factors common to many cases of great-power losses to weaker adversaries and those that, I argue, may be peculiar to the United States. With respect to common causes of the stronger side’s loss to the weaker, Andrew Mack, in his pio-

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neering 1975 assessment, argued that the place to look was differentials in the political will to fight and prevail, which were rooted in different perceptions of the stakes at hand. Post-1945 successful rebellions against European colonial rule as well as the Vietnamese struggle against the United States all had one thing in common: the materially weaker insurgent was more politically determined to win because it had much more riding on the outcome of war than did the stronger external power, for whom the stakes were lower. In such cases:

The *relationship* between the belligerents is *asymmetric*. The insurgents can pose no direct threat to the survival of the external power because . . . they lack an invasion capability. On the other hand, the metropolitan power poses not simply the threat of invasion, but the reality of occupation. This fact is so obvious that its implications have been ignored. It means, crudely speaking, that for the insurgents the war is “total,” while for the external power it is necessarily “limited.” Full mobilization of the total military resources of the external power is simply *not* politically possible. . . . Not only is full mobilization impossible politically, it is not thought to be in the least *necessary*. The asymmetry in conventional military capability is so great and the confidence that military might will prevail is so pervasive that expectation of victory is one of the hallmarks of the initial endeavor.¹

Superior strength of commitment thus compensates for military inferiority. Because the outcome of the war can never be as important to the outside power as it is to those who have staked their very existence on victory, the weaker side fights harder, displaying a willingness to incur blood losses that would be unacceptable to the stronger side. The signers of the Declaration of Independence risked their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor in what became a contest with an imperial giant for which North America was (after 1778) a secondary theater of operations in a much larger war. For the American rebel leadership, defeat meant the hangman’s noose. For British commanders in North America, it meant a return to the comforts and pleasures of London society and perhaps eventual reassignment.

The tables were reversed in Vietnam. There, the United States attempted to suppress a revolution against foreign domination mounted by an enemy waging a total war against a stronger power, a power for which the outcome of that war could never be remotely as important as it was to the insurgents. The United States could and did wreak enormous destruction in Viet-

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nam, but nothing that happened in Vietnam could or did threaten core overseas US security interests, much less the survival of the United States.² Thus, whereas the Vietnamese communists invested all their energy and available resources in waging war, US annual defense spending during the war averaged only 7.5 percent of the nation's gross national product.³ Far more important to President Lyndon Johnson than securing South Vietnam was securing the enactment of his expensive Great Society program of social reform. Indeed, after he left the White House he bemoaned the resource competition between “that bitch of the war on the other side of the world” and “the woman I really loved—the Great Society.”⁴

Key Vietnam War players in the Johnson Administration grasped neither the disparity in interests and will that separated the United States and the Vietnamese communists nor its consequences. They could find no reason for the enemy's tenacity and staying power. In 1965, US Ambassador to South Vietnam (and former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) Maxwell Taylor marveled, “The ability of the Vietcong continuously to rebuild their units and make good their losses is one of the mysteries of this guerrilla war. We still find no plausible explanation for the continued strength of the Vietcong. . . . [They] have the recuperative power of the phoenix [and] an amazing ability to maintain morale.”⁵ A year later, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara remarked to an acquaintance, “I never thought [the war] would go like this. I didn't think these people had the capacity to fight this way. If I had thought they could take this punishment and fight this well, could enjoy fighting like this, I would have thought differently at the start.”⁶ Secretary of State Dean Rusk later confessed: “Hanoi's persistence was incredible. I don't understand it, even to this day.”⁷ Even General William Westmoreland conceded that the US leadership “underestimated the toughness of the Vietnamese.”⁸

Reinforcing blindness to the fact and implications of the Vietnam communists' commitment to total war was an ignorance of Vietnamese history and culture, an arrogant confidence in American ability to determine the future of South Vietnam, and a bad strategy. Indeed, superior political will—a greater commitment to the fight—would not, alone, seem sufficient to defeat a stronger enemy. Having even a significant edge in resolve cannot overcome a strategy that pits insurgent military weakness against the bigger enemy's military strengths. The Tet Offensive was a military disaster from which the Viet Cong never recovered because communist forces came out in the open and tried to take and hold fixed positions, thereby exposing themselves to crushing US firepower. (The Taliban made the same mistake in Afghanistan 33 years later.) Tough is one thing. Tough and stupid is quite another.

Ivan Arreguin-Toft, in his seminal assessment of how the weak win wars, argues that “the best predictor of asymmetric conflict is strategic inter-

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action,” and that “strong actors will lose asymmetric conflicts when they use the wrong strategy vis-à-vis their opponents’ strategy.”⁹ In his view, the strong actor has two strategies available: “direct attack,” aimed at destroying the weak actor’s armed forces and thereby his capacity to offer violent resistance; and “barbarism,” aimed at destroying the weak actor’s political will to fight via such depredations against noncombatants as crop destruction, roundups into concentration camps, hostage-taking, rape, murder, and torture. Two strategies are also available to the weaker side: “direct defense,” or the use of armed forces to thwart the stronger side’s attempt to capture or destroy the weaker side’s territory, population, and strategic resources; and “guerrilla warfare” (and its related strategy of terrorism), or “the organization of a portion of society for the purpose of imposing costs on an adversary using armed forces trained to avoid direct confrontation.”¹⁰ For both the stronger and the weaker sides, the direct approach targets the enemy’s armed forces, or capacity to fight, whereas the indirect approaches of barbarism and guerrilla warfare or terrorism seek to destroy the enemy’s will to fight.

Arreguin-Toft contends that the stronger side is most likely to lose when it attacks with a direct strategy and the weak side defends using an indirect strategy, all other things being equal. Why?

Unlike direct strategies, which involve the use of forces trained and equipped to fight as organized units against other similarly trained and equipped forces, indirect defense strategies typically rely on irregular armed forces (i.e., forces difficult to distinguish from noncombatants when not in actual combat). As a result, an attacker’s forces tend to kill or injure noncombatants during operations, which tends to stimulate weak-actor resistance. Most important, because indirect defense strategies sacrifice values [territory, population, resources, etc.] for time, they necessarily take longer to resolve so long as weak actors continue to have access to sanctuary and social support. In asymmetric conflict, delay favors the weak.¹¹

This was pretty much what happened in Vietnam. The United States opted for a direct “search-and-destroy” strategy against enemy field forces practicing (with the exception of Tet) an indirect strategy of guerrilla warfare.

The result, for the stronger side, was a politically intolerable protraction of bloody and indecisive hostilities. The British in North America also pursued a direct strategy against American forces, which were waging what amounted to a protracted guerrilla war. The Minutemen fought as irregulars, and General George Washington was careful not to risk the survival of the regular Continental Army. He was always prepared to run away from superior British force. Both the Vietnamese communist and American rebel leaderships understood a critical reality that their stronger opponents failed to grasp: the guerrilla can win simply by not losing, whereas the counterinsurgent power can lose by not winning.

Indirect defense via irregular warfare is in most cases the only sensible strategy for the weaker side, because a direct defense is an invitation to swift defeat. The principal elements of irregular warfare are protraction, attrition, and camouflage. Protraction and attrition are dictated by the conventional enemy's military superiority. Because the weaker side has no hope of quick and decisive victory, it employs time and the steady infliction of casualties and other war costs to subvert the enemy's political will to continue fighting. Protraction also requires a willingness to trade space and resources for time, because attempted territorial defense plays to the conventional enemy's superiority in firepower. Camouflage, or the capacity to dissolve into the local population and terrain (natural and man-made), shields irregular forces from the potentially catastrophic consequences of the enemy's firepower superiority and compels the enemy to inflict politically self-defeating collateral damage on the civilian population.

In the 20th century, Mao Tse-tung crafted a theory and practice of irregular warfare known as "protracted war" or "revolutionary war" that delivered communist victories in China and Indochina and inspired other insurgents elsewhere in the Third World. When the United States encountered this particular brand of irregular warfare in Vietnam, it grasped neither the essentially political nature of the conflict nor the limits of its own conventional military power in the Indochinese political and operational setting. It waged the only war it knew how to fight, but was stalemated by an enemy with a ferociously superior will to win and a strategy of warfare that denied decisive application of US military strengths.

The stronger side's vulnerability to defeat in protracted conflicts against irregular foes is arguably heightened if it is a democracy. In his persuasive study of how democracies lose such wars, Gil Merom argues that "democracies fail in small wars because they find it extremely difficult to escalate the level of violence and brutality to that which can secure victory."¹² For democracies, the strategy of "barbarism" against the weaker side's noncombatant social and political support base is neither morally acceptable nor, over time, political

sustainable. Since 1945, wars against colonial or ex-colonial peoples have become increasingly unacceptable to most democratic states' political and moral sensibilities. Merom says that "what fails democracies in small wars is the interaction of sensitivity to casualties, repugnance to brutal military behavior, and commitment to democratic life." Democracies fail in small wars because, more specifically, they are unable to resolve three related dilemmas: "how to reconcile the humanitarian values of a portion of the educated class with the brutal requirements of counterinsurgency warfare, . . . how to find a domestically acceptable trade-off between brutality and sacrifice, [and] how to preserve support for the war without undermining the democratic order."¹³

Dictatorships in the business of practicing brutality at home and unanswerable to public opinion do not share modern democracies' vulnerability to defeat via protracted hostilities with a highly motivated irregular foe, which almost certainly explains why such war has been practiced more often against democracies than dictatorships. Insurgents seem to grasp democracies' lower tolerance for such war. In his landmark study of suicide terrorism from 1980 through 2003, Robert Pape discovered that, contrary to conventional wisdom, almost all suicide attacks during that period, including those in Iraq, were motivated primarily by nationalism and conducted against the territory or forces of democracies and quasi-democracies—specifically, the United States, France, India, Israel, Russia, Sri Lanka, and Turkey—perceived to be occupying, or supporting the occupation, of territory the terrorists considered to be their homeland. (Post-2003 suicide attacks in Spain and Great Britain, which participated in the US-led occupation in Iraq, are consistent with Pape's findings.)

Pape believes that suicide terrorism, which, like guerrilla warfare, is "a strategy of coercion, a means to compel a target government to change policy,"¹⁴ targets democracies for three reasons. First, democracies "are thought to be especially vulnerable to coercive punishment." Their threshold of intolerable pain is lower than that of dictatorships. Second, democracies are believed to be more restrained than authoritarian regimes in their use of force, especially against noncombatants. "Democracies are widely perceived as less likely to harm civilians, and no democratic regime has committed genocide in the twentieth century." Third, "suicide attacks may also be harder to organize or publicize in authoritarian police states."¹⁵ Pape notes, for example, that not a single suicide attack was conducted in Iraq during the 25 years of Baathist rule, even though al-Qaeda and other radical Islamist groups regarded Saddam Hussein's secular state as an apostate regime. Saddam Hussein effectively monopolized terrorism in Iraq.

The conclusion that democracies are softer targets of coercive insurgent violence than dictatorships would seem validated by Merom's case stud-

ies of the Algerian War, the Vietnam War, and the Israelis in Lebanon. In all three cases the stronger side relied on conscripted armies that incurred substantial casualties, and in a democracy there is nothing so toxic in weakening domestic political support for limited war as dead and maimed conscripts. But hasn't the United States shown that a democracy can reduce its vulnerability to weaker-side coercive violence via reliance on professional troops and on advanced military technologies that have lowered casualty rates to unprecedented levels?¹⁶ Democratic vulnerability to insurgent coercion is hardly a given in low-casualty fights waged by volunteer professionals.

Mack, Arreguin-Toft, and Merom offer path-breaking insights on the phenomenon of the strong losing to the weak. Disparities in strength of interest and willingness to sacrifice, the dynamics of strategic interaction, and the relative vulnerability of democratic states to coercion via properly conducted irregular warfare go a long way in explaining the outcome of many "unequal" wars, especially insurgencies conducted against foreign occupiers.

Most insurgencies fail, however, and few succeed without decisive external assistance. Curiously, neither of these facts, most importantly the issue of outside help, has drawn the attention of Mack, Arreguin-Toft, or Merom. The weaker side's possession of superior will and strategy is hardly a guarantee of success. Substantial external assistance may be required to convert superior will and strategy into victory. Indeed, external assistance, be it direct or indirect, can alter the power relationship between weaker and stronger, and thus distort the very meaning of the two terms. Consider the following cases: the American Revolution, the Chinese Communist Revolution, the French-Indochinese War, the Vietnam War, and the Soviet-Afghan War.

The American War of Independence turned decisively against the British only after the formation of the Franco-American military alliance of 1778 and the subsequent French infusion of massive financial credits and munitions (most critically, artillery and gunpowder), and the dispatch to North America and its coastal waters of a powerful French army and fleet. Indeed, it was French forces ashore and afloat that sealed the fate of Cornwallis's army at Yorktown, which in turn prompted the British to sue for peace.

As for the Chinese Communists, it is commonly believed that their victory was won without major external material assistance. To be sure, in August 1945 Stalin began turning over to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) large stocks of Japanese war materiel which the Soviets had seized in Manchuria. By then, however, the Nationalist side was almost certainly doomed by 14 years of Japanese aggression and occupation, which greatly weakened Nationalist military forces and deprived the Nationalist government of control over most of China's population and much of China's terri-

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tory. Though it was certainly not Japan’s intention to assist the Chinese Communists, the effect of Japan’s behavior in China did exactly that by weakening the Nationalists, probably fatally. Thus Mao profited immensely by outside help—albeit indirect and unintentional.

In the French-Indochina War, the insurgent Viet Minh were initially (1946-1949) isolated from outside assistance; they were short on military experience, poorly armed, and incapable of mounting the kind of major military operations that finally collapsed French political will in 1954. What turned the tide was the PLA’s victory in China in 1949 and subsequent conversion of the Sino-Vietnamese border into a conduit of major Chinese military assistance in the form of professional advisors and training teams, large quantities of small arms and military gear, and, most important, modern artillery captured from Nationalist armies.¹⁷ It was Chinese-supplied artillery that enabled the Viet Minh to crush the large French garrison at Dien Bien Phu, and it was the fall of Dien Bien Phu that produced the French political concessions at the Geneva Conference that ended French rule in Indochina and established communist rule in what became North Vietnam.

The subsequent and largely indigenous communist insurgency the United States faced in South Vietnam, culminating in the Tet Offensive of early 1968, had clear and mounting negative effects on public and congressional support for continued prosecution of the war. Tet shocked the American electorate, forced Lyndon Johnson from the White House, and compelled a reassessment of US war aims. During the Tet Offensive, however, the Viet Cong suffered horrendous manpower losses. By 1971 the insurgency had been substantially reduced and effectively contained by a combination of military action, ruthless counterterrorism, land reform, and major improvements in economic infrastructure and agricultural productivity. But this success counted for little, because by then the original insurgency had been replaced by a large and superbly armed conventional North Vietnamese army as the primary threat to South Vietnam’s survival. It was this army, not the Viet Cong, which brought South Vietnam down in 1975. South Vietnam was conquered by an external military force that had, especially after 1968, access

to massive logistical support from China and huge quantities of sophisticated weaponry from the Soviet Union.

The Soviets had their “Vietnam” in Afghanistan, where insurgent mujahideen profited significantly, perhaps decisively, from US and other external assistance, including thousands of Arab volunteers funneled through friendly Pakistan. Especially important was the US provision of Stinger surface-to-air missiles. The Stingers greatly reduced the effectiveness of Soviet heliborne operations, which formed the backbone of Soviet tactical mobility in Afghanistan.

It is, of course, impossible in any of these cases to determine with certitude whether external assistance was decisive, or even whether it contributed more to the weaker side’s victory than superior insurgent will and strategy. Fighting power is a *mélange* of measurables (e.g., troop strengths, weapon counts, sortie rates) and intangibles (e.g., generalship, organizational quality, morale). It seems reasonable to conclude that no amount of outside assistance could redeem the fortunes of a weak-willed and strategically incompetent insurgency. It seems no less reasonable to conclude that highly motivated and skilled insurgents can be defeated if denied access to external assistance and confronted by a stronger side pursuing a strategy of barbarism against the insurgency’s civilian population base. Here, the militarily defeated insurgencies of the Boers in South Africa, the *Insurrectos* in the Philippines, and the National Liberation Front in Algeria come to mind. (The irony of the Algerian War was that French political will to continue the war collapsed even as truly barbarous French military policies, including the widespread use of torture, were driving the insurgency toward defeat.)

The discussion so far has focused on factors that analysts regard as common to many, perhaps most, stronger-side defeats by materially weaker adversaries. But, of course, no two stronger sides are alike; each has its own history, culture, and way of war. Are there peculiarities in America’s history, culture, and way of war that further disadvantage a democratic United States in wars against a materially weaker irregular foe with superior will and strategy? 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 US military’s profound aversion to counterinsurgency. Both combine to form a recipe for politically sterile uses of force, especially in limited wars involving protracted hostilities against weaker irregular opponents.

General Douglas MacArthur spoke for most Americans when he declared, in an address to a Joint Session of Congress on 19 April 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 pro-

longed indecision. In war there is no substitute for victory.”¹⁸ MacArthur had just been fired as commander of UN 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.

This Jominian view 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. One need look no farther than the Gulf War of 1991 to see what happens when the civilians stand aside, so this reasoning goes, or no farther 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 1991 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.¹⁹ 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 Operation Iraqi Freedom, 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, conventional wisdom is dangerously narcissistic. It completely ignores the enemy, assuming that what we do alone 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 entails 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. War’s object is, after all, a better peace.

There can be no other justification for war. “Military conflict has two dimensions,” observe former presidential national security advisors Samuel Berger and Brent Scowcroft, “winning wars and winning the peace. We excel in the first, but without an equal focus on the second, combat victories can be lost.”²⁰

The US military’s historical aversion to counterinsurgency 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, past evidence suggests a distance between the kind of war the United States prepared to fight and the kinds of war it has actually fought in recent decades. Hostile great powers, once the predominant threats to American security, have been supplanted by rogue states, failed states, and non-state actors—all of them pursuing asymmetrical strategies to offset US military strengths. This new threat environment places a premium on stability and support operations—i.e., operations other than the powerful conventional force-on-force missions for which the US military is optimized. Such operations include peace enforcement, counterinsurgency, stability, and state-building.

The need for such stability operations has been reinforced in the Iraq War, which, once again, has exposed the limits of conventional military power in unconventional settings. Operation Iraqi Freedom 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 in-eradicable 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. Operation Iraqi Freedom followed not only three decades of determined US Army concentration on conventional operations but also over a decade of steady cuts in active-duty US ground forces, especially Army infantry.²¹ Most stability and support operations, however, including counterinsurgency, are inherently manpower-intensive and rely heavily on special skills—e.g., human intelligence, civil affairs, police, public health, foreign language, foreign force training, psychological warfare—that are secondary to the prosecution of conventional warfare. Forces postured to achieve swift conventional military victory thus may be quantitatively and qualitatively unsuited for post-victory tasks of the kind that the United States has encountered in Iraq.

Antulio Echevarria, director of research at the US 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 US style of warfare—speed, jointness, knowledge, and precision—are better

suites for strike operations than for translating such operations into strategic successes.”²² 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 post-modern 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.” He warns that “these notions are not only astrategic and ignore the paradoxical logic of strategy; they also implicitly rely on unrealistically effective operations, and thereby seemingly ignore the presence of friction.”²³

Former West Point professor Frederick W. Kagan also believes that the primary culprit in delivering politically sterile victories is the US conception of war. The reason why “the United States [has] been so successful in recent wars [but] 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.” For Kagan, the “entire thrust of the current program of military transformation of the US armed forces . . . aims at the implementation and perfection of this target set mentality.”²⁴

But target destruction is insufficient and perhaps even 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 the purposes of securing population centers and infrastructure, maintaining order, providing humanitarian relief, and facilitating revived delivery of such fundamental services as electrical power and potable water. Kagan continues:

It is not enough to consider simply how to pound the enemy into submission with stand-off forces. . . . To effect regime change, US forces must be positively in control of the enemy’s territory and population as rapidly and continuously as possible. That control cannot be achieved by machines, still less by bombs. Only human beings interacting with human beings can achieve it. The only hope for success in the extension of politics that is war is to restore the human element to the transformation equation.²⁵

Too much focus on the perfection of military means can cause the user to lose sight of the political purpose on behalf of which those means are being employed. Did the Pentagon simply lose sight of the main 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 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 not structured for the stability operations required in the aftermath of a swift conventional campaign?²⁶

Accelerated military speed may in fact be strategically counterproductive. "The focus on high-intensity conflict means that the United States is winning wars faster and with fewer casualties," observed Berger and Scowcroft. "But that 'transformation' has had an unintended consequence. Rapid victory collapses the enemy but may not destroy it. Adversaries can go underground to regroup, creating a need for more troops for longer periods of time after combat ends."²⁷ The highly respected British strategist Colin Gray contends that though "the transformational push may well succeed and be highly impressive in its military-technical accomplishments, it is likely to miss the most vital marks." Why?

There are a number of reasons for this harsh judgment. First, high-tech transformation will have only modest value, because war is a duel and all of America's foes out to 2020 will be significantly asymmetrical. The most intelligent among them, as well as the geographically more fortunate and the luckier, will pursue ways of war that do not test US strengths. Second, the military potential of this transformation, as with all past transformations, is being undercut by unstoppable processes of diffusion which spread technology and ideas. Third, the transformation being sought appears to be oblivious to the fact . . . that there is more to war than warfare. War is about the peace it will shape. It is not obvious that the current process of military transformation will prove vitally useful in helping to improve America's strategic performance. Specifically, the country needs to approach the waging of war as political behavior for political purposes. Sometimes one is moved to the despairing conclusion that Clausewitz wrote in vain, for all the influence he has had on the American way of war.²⁸

None of the foregoing is to argue against continued conventional military perfection. US 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. These 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 the kind sought by Pentagon transformationists, also permits increasing substitution of technology for blood, which in turn has reduced US 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 policy question is not whether the United States should continue to maintain its conventional primacy, but whether, given the evolving strategic environment, it should create ground (and supporting air) forces dedicated to performing stability and support operations, including counterinsurgency. Forces and doctrine optimized for conventional warfare and the rapid application of intense violence are hardly optimized for the counterinsurgent mission, which demands the utmost restraint and discrimination in the application of force. Firepower is the instrument of last rather than first resort. There is no big enemy to close with and destroy, but rather the presence of threatened civilian populations that must be protected in ways that minimize collateral damage. Conventional ground force preparation for counterinsurgency requires major doctrinal and training deprogramming of conventional military habits and reprogramming with the alien tactics, doctrines, and heavy political oversight inherent in stability and support operations. Needless to say, forces so reprogrammed—commonly manpower-intensive and relatively low in firepower—will not be optimized for big, high-tech conventional conflicts.

Whatever the arguments for the establishment of forces dedicated to dealing with asymmetric threats (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 upon what it likes to do and does well. The United States is exceptionally good at conventional warfare but not particularly good at fighting irregular adversaries to a politically decisive finish. Marine Corps 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 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.”²⁹ Strategic Studies Institute analysts Steven Metz and Raymond Millen observe that while “the strategic salience of insurgency for the United States is higher than it has been since the height of the Cold War, [insurgency] remains challenging for the United States because two of its dominant characteristics—protractedness and ambiguity—mitigate the effectiveness of the American military.”³⁰

Historically, in the two decades post-Vietnam, institutional resistance to counterinsurgency operations inside the US military was strong. This tendency was reinforced by a (proper) concentration on conventional warfare capabilities required to deter, and if necessary defeat, the massive threat posed by

the Warsaw Pact. A 2005 RAND Corporation study delivered to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld concluded: “Iraq underscores . . . the overwhelming organizational tendency within the US military not to absorb historical lessons when planning and conducting counterinsurgency operations.” The study proceeded to recommend:

In the future, US military forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations must be composed of personnel with 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. Serious attention should also be given to creating in the Army a dedicated cadre of counterinsurgency specialists and a program to produce such experts.³¹

The argument here is not that the Defense Department is hopelessly unadaptable to the deconventionalized global strategic environment—only that its force-structure bias toward conventional combat is long-standing and well entrenched, and that overcoming it will entail fundamental change in how US military forces are organized, equipped, manned, and trained.

Recent initiatives within the US Army may be a step in the right direction. The Army is in the midst of the most significant restructuring since World War II, as it moves to the Modular Force. The resulting changes in active and reserve forces are intended to provide units more effectively organized for both conventional operations and stability and support operations. Personnel policies have been adjusted to promote stabilization of units, teams, and leaders throughout the preparation for, conduct of, and return from combat operations. In recent years the Army also implemented a new officer management system that develops and promotes officers with the skills necessary for success across the full spectrum of military operations.

Even with such military changes, strategic success is not guaranteed. The strong, especially democracies, lose to the weak when the latter brings to the test of war a stronger will and superior strategy reinforced by external assistance. In the case of the United States in Vietnam, a weaker will and inferior strategy was reinforced by an apolitical conception of war itself and a specific professional military aversion to counterinsurgency. In the case of Iraq, the jury remains out on the issues of will and strategy, but the unexpected political and military difficulties the United States has encountered there seem to have arisen in part because of a persistent view of war as a substitute for policy and an antipathy to preparing for war with irregular adversaries.

NOTES

1. Andrew Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict,” *World Politics*, 27 (January 1975), 181-82.

2. The chief argument for intervention in Vietnam was that failure to intervene would undermine the credibility of US defense commitments elsewhere. There is no evidence, however, that any major US ally in Europe or Asia saw Vietnam as a test of US credibility. On the contrary, many regarded US intervention in Southeast Asia as a mistake that undermined US capacity to defend its commitments worldwide.

3. This is the average for years 1965-1974 and is based on figures appearing in Jeffrey Record, *Revising U.S. Military Strategy: Tailoring Means to Ends* (McLean, Va.: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1984), p. 100.

4. Quoted in Doris Kearns, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 251-52.

5. Quoted in George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), p. 249.

6. Quoted in Tom Wells, *The War Within: America's Battle Over Vietnam* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), p. 99.

7. Dean Rusk with Richard Rusk and Daniel S. Papp, *As I Saw It* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), p. 472.

8. Interview with Tom Wells, in Wells, *The War Within*, p. 99.

9. Ivan Arreguin-Toft, "How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict," *International Security*, 26 (Summer 2001), 95.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

12. Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society, and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), p. 15.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 230-31.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

16. During the eight years of major US combat operations in Vietnam, the United States sustained a daily average of 19 dead and 100 wounded; in Iraq, the average daily loss rate as of August 2005 was slightly over two dead and almost 16 wounded. See Jeffrey Record and W. Andrew Terrill, *Iraq and Vietnam: Differences, Similarities, and Insights* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, May 2004), pp. 11-12, 59; and data appearing on the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count website, <http://icasualties.org/oif>.

17. Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 47-49.

18. Reprinted in Jay M. Shafritz, *Words on War: Military Quotations from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1990), p. 425.

19. This 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.

20. Samuel R. Berger and Brent Scowcroft, "The Right Tools to Build Nations," *The Washington Post*, 27 July 2005.

21. See Robert M. Cassidy, "Back to the Street without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Other Small Wars," *Parameters*, 34 (Summer 2004), 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 Press, 1987), pp. 127-37.

22. Antulio J. Echevarria, *Toward an American Way of War* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, March 2004), pp. 10, 16.

23. David J. Lonsdale, *The Nature of War in the Information Age* (New York: Frank Cass, 2004), pp. 9, 211.

24. Frederick W. Kagan, "War and Aftermath," *Policy Review*, No. 120 (August-September 2003), p. 27.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

26. David C. Hendrickson and Robert W. Tucker, "Revisions in Need of Revising: What Went Wrong in the Iraq War," *Survival*, 47 (Summer 2005), 27.

27. Berger and Scowcroft.

28. Colin S. Gray, "How Has War Changed Since the End of the Cold War?" *Parameters*, 35 (Spring 2005), 21.

29. Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century* (St. Paul, Minn.: Zenith Press, 2004), pp. 3, 5.

30. Steven Metz and Raymond Millen, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in the 21st Century* (Carlisle, Pa.: US Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, November 2004), p. vi.

31. *Iraq: Translating Lessons into Future DoD Policies* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, February 2005), p. 7.