



# Chasing U-Boats and Hunting Insurgents

## *Lessons from an Underhand Way of War*

By JAN S. BREEMER

**J**ust over a century ago, a British admiral condemned the newly invented submarine as an “underhand, unfair, and damned un-English weapon.” The officer underscored his disdain for the craft by urging that submarine crews be treated as pirates and hanged. Winston Churchill, then the Royal Navy’s political head, was not willing to go quite that far, yet at one point during World War I, he ordered that captured U-boat crews be treated as criminals, not prisoners of war. Churchill’s action was symptomatic of the professional naval attitude toward this below-the-belt weapon: sinking

merchant ships without warning was not “legitimate” warfare as behooved a civilized power. Churchill himself had said before the war that doing so was akin to “the spreading of pestilence and the assassination of individuals.”<sup>1</sup>

Those sentiments of long ago have a familiar ring, albeit in a different context: insurgency warfare. Regular soldiers have historically looked on insurgency warfare as underhanded and unfair and, a U.S. combatant in Iraq might add, “damned un-American.” From the Soldier’s perspective, the insurgents’ war-making methods are neither those of a civilized opponent nor in accordance with the laws and customs of war. Particularly objectionable is the insurgent’s stealthiness: “the man, or woman, who appears to be a peaceable citizen but who

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may at any moment become ‘a spy, a brigand, and assassin and a rebel.’”<sup>2</sup>

The soldier’s horror at “war in the shadows” and the sailor’s disgust at war “below the belt” are rooted in two sources.<sup>3</sup> The first is a moral and professional revulsion against what is seen as a particularly nonheroic and inhumane form of warfare. Submarines and insurgents do not fight according to the Western way of war, in which the opponents declare themselves and slug it out face to face. Because of the way submarines have been used in two World Wars, they and insurgents share a reputation for being indiscriminate. Because the U-boats refused to distinguish between civilian and military shipping, or between neutrals and enemies, they acquired the “terrorist” sobriquet. The second, more practical reason for the submarine and the insurgent’s ill repute has to do with the difficulty for the conventional sailor and soldier in finding—and therefore defeating—their respective opponents. Submarine and insurgency opponents involve asymmetric warfare; both have historically tied down disproportionately large numbers of forces. As many as 10 counterinsurgent or antisubmarine defenders can be needed for each enemy operative.

Fighting and defeating the submarine is the business of antisubmarine warfare (ASW); counterinsurgency is its counterpart in irregular war. At first glance, the two forms of warfare could hardly be more different; one is fought at sea and is technology-intensive, while the other is almost exclusively carried out on land and

is manpower-intensive. Yet the strategic and operational problems posed by the insurgent and the submarine display similarities, notably the difficulty of finding either. This essay compares the problems of ASW and counterinsurgency. It explores in particular the strategic and operational similarities, as well as the different, yet strikingly similar, solutions to which antisubmarine and counterinsurgency warriors have resorted. In the end, it considers a final similarity between these forms of warfare: namely, the penchant for sailors and soldiers to repeatedly unlearn the lessons of the underhand and unfair ways of war.

### Crushing the Nests

The central problem in both ASW and counterinsurgency is the difficulty of finding and identifying the adversary. The physical circumstances that make for submarine and insurgent stealth are very different, but there are broad similarities. The submarine derives its stealth from separating its acoustic signature from the background noise of the surrounding ocean. The insurgent’s strength similarly comes from his ability to fade in and out of the background noise of the population at large.

At one point during the campaign against the U-boat in World War I, President Woodrow Wilson expressed his frustration with the Allies’ inability to find and sink enough boats at sea. He proposed that the U.S. and British navies team up and “crush the hornets’ nest.” He made clear the advantage of destroying the U-boats in their oper-

ating bases: “I know where the nest is.”<sup>4</sup> He was correct to attack the submarines at their moorings to solve the difficulty of finding them. The problem was that the opponent also knew this and had taken measures to protect the boats while they were concentrated in port. The President claimed he was prepared to lose half of an Anglo-American

### the strategic and operational problems posed by the insurgent and the submarine display similarities

striking fleet in the endeavor. American and British naval planners held that the price far outweighed the uncertain benefits.

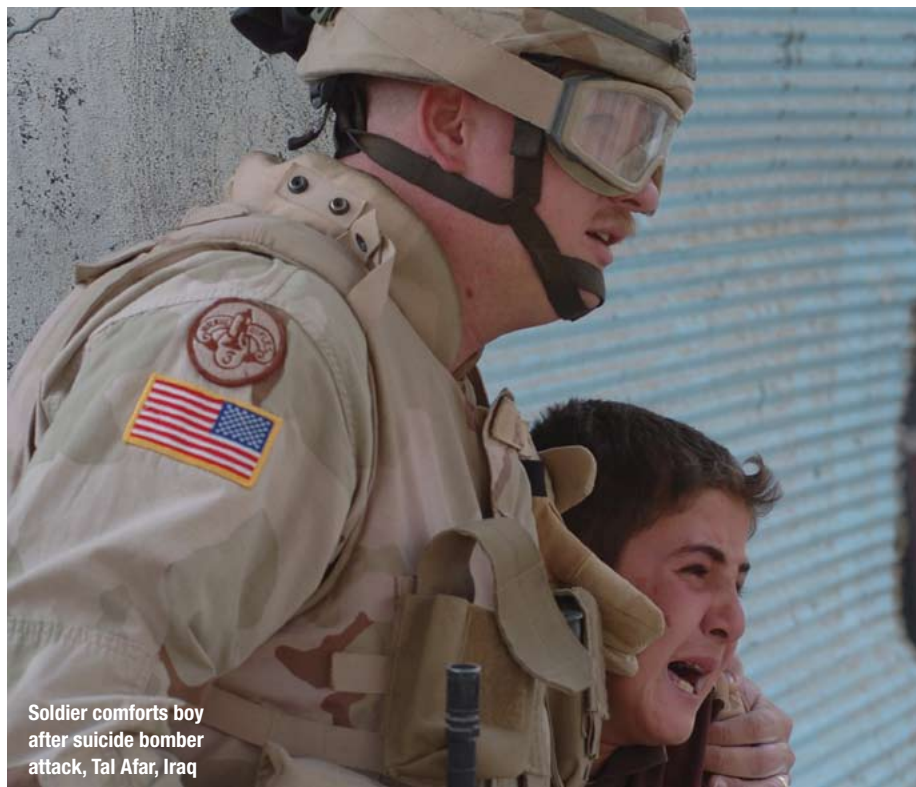
The difficulty of destroying the underwater opponent at the source resurfaced in the next World War. In 1942, British and American bombers began a sustained campaign against U-boat bases along the Atlantic coast. During the first 5 months of 1943 alone, 9,000 tons of high explosives and incendiaries were dropped. Unfortunately for the Allies, the Germans were prepared: U-boat pens had been wrapped in concrete up to 25 feet thick and were defended by dense anti-aircraft batteries. None of the shelters were ever penetrated, and only one U-boat was destroyed at its base in Trondheim, Norway. When, in an attempt to achieve greater accuracies, American bombers switched to low-level attacks, heavy losses forced the abandonment of that strategy.

Between the cost and risk of directly attacking the sources of the submarine menace, and the temptation to do so in order to short-circuit the detection problem, ASW strategists resorted to a compromise containment option. This usually involved laying minefields and other explosive underwater devices. Again, the record is mixed. Tens of thousands of mines were laid during both World Wars in an effort to bottle up the U-boats in their ports, but they had little impact. In World War I, nearly a third of the 178 U-boats lost were sunk by mines; however, most sinkings occurred in minefields planted astride the boats’ transit lanes, not their base exits. Results were worse in World War II: of 687 U-boats sunk, mines victimized only 35. The reasons for these meager effects were the same in both wars: the poor reliability



55th Signal Company (Albert Eaddy)

Illinois National Guardsman with cache of munitions



Soldier comforts boy  
after suicide bomber  
attack, Tal Afar, Iraq

Fleet Combat Group Pacific (Alan D. Moriyale)

of mines, particularly British ones, and the ASW defender's frequent failure to patrol the minefields with ships ready to counter enemy efforts to clear a passage and break out. The reason for this omission was basically the one that deterred the defender from "storming the nests": the danger of operating in the teeth of the enemy's strength. Consequently, the U-boat was always able to find or quickly create a crack in the mine barriers.

### Attacking Dodge City

Destroying or containing insurgents at the source in Iraq has proven even more difficult. There are two kinds of insurgent sources: strongholds inside the immediate theater of operations, and sanctuaries for training and replenishment outside the theater, frequently across international borders. Physical geography in different conflicts has varied from mountains, to jungles, to urban areas, but there have always been two common factors: the difficulty of access and the problem of finding and fighting insurgents in their terrain of choice. Just as the depths of the seas are the submarine's principal protection, rugged terrain, whether in mountains or jungles or urban centers, is the insurgent's main means to compensate for a relative disadvantage in numbers and equipment. His familiarity with the terrain gives him an edge on several counts:

- strongholds are likely located in areas where the insurgents enjoy a degree of popular sympathy
- insurgents will almost certainly have an intelligence advantage
- insurgents will know when a large counteroperation is afoot.

Next, due in part to this intelligence, the insurgent will prepare the battlefield with

In Fallujah, 70 percent of the population of 300,000 had to be evacuated before 15,000 U.S. troops could seek out and destroy the few thousand insurgents rumored to be ensconced in the "Dodge City of Iraq."<sup>5</sup>

The costs and risks of a storming-the-nests strategy have historically outweighed its tactical advantages. Even more powerful reasons militate against this strategy in a counterinsurgency environment. Urban counterinsurgency operations are costly, risky, and arguably counterproductive if the overall strategic aim is to isolate the insurgents from the population at large.

The ASW defender's second-best choice has historically been to intercept the boats after they leave the relative safety of home bases but before they reach their hunting grounds. Minefields, tripwires, and physical obstructions such as nets have been the principal methods. The best known mine barriers in World War I were the Dover barrage between France and England, the Northern barrage between the Scottish isles and Norway, and the Otranto barrier between Italy and the former Yugoslavia. The British had planned to replicate the first two at the outbreak of the next World War, but Germany's swift occupation of France and Norway rendered the plan moot.

The necessity for mines and other physical barriers to be backed up with mobile quick-reaction forces holds equally when the opponents are insurgents. Stone walls and other obstructions have been used for thousands of years to prevent the infiltration

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mines, booby traps, fire zones, and improvised explosive devices.

When the specter of a guerrilla war first loomed in Iraq, some suggested that its defeat would be easier than in Vietnam because the insurgents would not enjoy the protective canopy of jungle foliage. That was not the case. Because jungle or mountain hideouts are commonly located in thinly populated areas, insurgents can usually be isolated from the surrounding population. But as the United States has discovered in Iraq, isolating urban insurgency strongholds from the population at large is far more problematic.

of undesirable elements. The two best-known attempts since World War II to use this strategy to prevent the transit of guerrillas to and from their sanctuaries were the French-built Morice Line in Algeria and the so-called McNamara Line in Vietnam. The success of the first compared with the broad failure of the second highlights the critical role of the mobile component in a counterinsurgency barrier strategy.

The French began construction of the Morice Line in the spring of 1957, when it became clear that tactics so far had failed to suppress the activities of the Algerian guerrilla

movement. The line stretched some 200 miles along the Algerian-Tunisian border, anchored in the north on the Mediterranean Sea, and in the south at the Sahara Desert. Its main features included an 8-foot-high electrified fence, minefields on both sides, barbed wire entanglements, and electronic sensors that set off an alarm when the fence was penetrated.

**offensive sweeps, cordon-and-destroy operations, and search-and-destroy missions appear rarely to have produced the desired results**

Eighty thousand soldiers garrisoned the line. It was patrolled on foot 24 hours a day. When the alarm was activated, mobile strike teams, supported by tanks, artillery, and helicopters, could respond quickly. All indications are that the barrier was an unqualified military success. By the end of 1958, the combination of static and mobile defenses had killed over 6,000 would-be intruders and intercepted thousands of weapons before they could reach

the guerrillas inside Algeria. The line ensured that some 30,000 insurgents in Tunisia were cut off from their patrol areas in Algeria.

The decision to build the McNamara Line was prompted by the recognition that the American bombing campaign against North Vietnam had failed to stem the infiltration of men and materiel into the South. Although the name is usually associated with an antipersonnel barrier that was to span the Vietnamese isthmus just south of the demilitarized zone, it was actually only half of a complex multibarrier system. The second half involved an antivehicular barrier over the Laotian panhandle to interdict traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Work on the antipersonnel portion began in the summer of 1967 and was to be completed a year later. Its code name was *Dye Marker*, but *McNamara Line* stuck.

Had it been completed as first planned, it would have resembled the Morice Line—a cleared strip 600 to 1,000 yards wide, filled with barbed wire, minefields, and sensors, overseen by watchtowers, and backed up by a series of manned strongpoints and fire support bases. Things turned out very differently, however. Preliminary work on the barrier was completed during the first

few months of construction, but progress was slow, not in the least because the U.S. Marine Corps construction crews had to work within range of North Vietnamese artillery. Then, the Tet offensive happened in the spring of 1968; sensors and other equipment destined for *Dye Marker* were diverted to the Marine defenders at Khe Sanh. When the siege was over, work on the McNamara Line was never resumed.

The success of the Morice Line highlights the same lesson ASW strategists have learned: static barrage systems alone are a partial and temporary palliative at best in preventing the opponent from moving to and from his area of operations. Successful barriers, whether at sea or on land, have involved static obstructions complemented with frequent and mobile patrols on the ground. The Morice Line was manned by an average of 400 soldiers a mile. Had this number been applied to *Dye Marker*, some 64,000 Soldiers and Marines would have been needed. Those numbers were not available; thus, if the McNamara Line had been completed as first envisaged, chances are that, like the Dover anti-U boat mine barrage in World War I, it would have leaked like a sieve.

**Soldiers guarding suspected insurgents, Mosul**



55th Signal Company (Jeffrey Sandstrom)

## Seeking Out the Enemy

Senior U.S. military leaders never shared McNamara's enthusiasm for the barrier. The Army and the Marine Corps alike feared it would be manned with forces they much preferred to use in offensive search-and-destroy operations. Searching for and destroying guerrillas on land, and hunting and killing U-boats at sea, have historically been the soldiers' and sailors' preferred counterinsurgency and ASW solutions. However, from a strategic cost-benefit perspective, hunting down and destroying the opponent in his operating area has been the least productive option for at least two reasons. The first is that, in contrast with the antisource and antitransit alternatives, the enemy is now on the loose and set to target his victims. The second goes back to the problem that links the submarine and the insurgent to begin with: looking for a submarine at sea or finding an insurgent in the field is like looking for a needle in a haystack. One historical fact is highly suggestive: in both ASW and counterinsurgency, most hostile encounters have been the result of flaming datums. That is, most U-boats were detected and most guerrillas found

after they revealed their presence by initiating hostile action.

Despite a vast investment in manpower, ships, and—later in the war—aircraft, the hunt-and-kill (HUK) strategy was a failure on about every count: it rarely kept the U-boats from sinking merchant vessels and sank few U-boats in return. One HUK operation in September 1916 is illustrative. Over 1 week, 2 or 3 U-boats sank more than 30 merchantmen in an area off the south coast of England that was being watched over by 49 destroyers, 48 torpedo boats, and 168 auxiliaries. The weeklong hunt itself involved 13 destroyers and 7 decoy vessels, known as Q-ships; the submarines got away unscathed.<sup>6</sup>

## Rounding Up the Usual Suspects

A story in *The Economist* about an American counterinsurgency raid in Iraq would have sounded familiar to the British ASW crews who sought in vain for U-boats in September 1916. It reported how one night in fall 2004, a convoy of 1,000 troops, with Apache helicopters overhead, descended on Baiji. Their targets were three houses in the town center that intelligence had linked to the Abu Musab al-Zarqawi-led insurgents.

When the Americans arrived, they found ample evidence that insurgents had been active, but none could be found in the houses or elsewhere. Nevertheless, 70 men were detained on the grounds that they were, according to an informant, "bad."<sup>7</sup>

Offensive sweeps, cordon-and-destroy operations, and search-and-destroy missions have been standard features of the counterinsurgency repertoire since the birth of irregular warfare. In post-World War II counterinsurgency campaigns, at least, they also appear rarely to have produced the desired results. According to one professional student of insurgency warfare, "Routine patrols, isolated ambushes, large-scale sweeps, and even outposts, tend to be wasted activities" and are "historically ineffective."<sup>8</sup> Indicative of the strategic failure of the search-and-destroy alternative as practiced in Vietnam is that, after 4 years, the term was dropped because it had become associated with "aimless searches in the jungle and the destruction of property."<sup>9</sup>

The reasons the search-and-destroy counterinsurgency solution has proven mostly disappointing are the same that have historically bedeviled HUK operations against submarines in their patrol areas:

**Soldiers returning fire in Al Madain, Iraq, while searching for insurgents**



55th Signal Company (Gul A. Alsan)



Soldiers patrol Tal Afar after suicide bomber killed 33 Iraqis and injured 50

Fleet Combat Group Pacific (Alan D. Monyelle)

lack of actionable intelligence. HUK tactics against submarines in transit have one important advantage: the ASW defender knows that for the submarine to travel from its operating base to or from its patrol area, it must pass through a known area, often a geographically constricted chokepoint. The ASW hunter in open waters must cover a vast expanse.

In one way, hunting for insurgents is even more difficult than chasing submarines. During both World Wars, the British and their allies knew what kind of target the “gray wolves” were looking for—merchant ships. That meant that the ASW hunters could reasonably expect their prey to congregate in the shipping lanes. That was usually not enough to find the enemy. In the case of counterinsurgency, as seen again in Iraq, the insurgent’s target set is far more diverse: coalition soldiers, Iraqi police and national guard, civilian collaborators, worshippers in mosques—the list goes on. The question of who and what to protect, and therefore where and how to concentrate resources, is accordingly much more difficult. This has critical implications for the applicability to counterinsurgency of the one ASW solution that defeated the U-boats: the convoy system.

### Rethinking the Nature of Counter(insurgency)

Historians of the two U-boat wars are unanimous in the verdict that the convoy system was the single most effective ASW strategy in terms of ships saved and enemy submarines sunk. It was also a

strategic choice made only with the greatest reluctance by most senior naval planners in World War I. There was less resistance in World War II, but even then Winston Churchill confessed how, despite the convoy system’s obvious success, he “always sought to rupture this defensive obsession by searching for forms of counteroffensive. . . . I could not rest with the policy of ‘convoy and blockade.’”<sup>10</sup> The convoy system was successful for several reasons, but the key was a shift in thinking about the nature of the ASW problem. It was the recognition that victory against the U-boats was less about the number of submarines sunk and more about the number of ships and cargoes saved. In operational terms,

**the Allied navies that fought the hard-won war against the U-boats in 1914–1918 went back to business as usual**

this meant that the ASW defender’s first responsibility was to ensure the security of friendly shipping—not hunting U-boats. Convoying did this in two ways: by re-routing shipping away from known U-boat concentrations or, if that failed, interposing warships between the submarines and their prey. Escort screens effectively separated shipping from the enemy. Next, by herding vessels otherwise scattered across the ocean into groups, the seas were effectively

emptied, and the burden of finding the target shifted to the submarine.

When in early 1917 Germany declared unrestricted U-boat warfare against all shipping regardless of nationality, it hoped that up to 40 percent of neutral shipping would be deterred from continuing trade with England. The threat appeared to work; in January 1917, the number of port entrances and clearances by neutrals still amounted to over 1,300, but during the next 2 months, the monthly average fell by almost two-thirds. It required the introduction of the convoy system and the new sense of security it brought for the neutrals to come back and ply their trade.

Again, the lesson learned by comparing ASW and counterinsurgency operations is striking. The counterinsurgency defender faces essentially the same problem found in ASW: how to create enough security for the population to give him, not the insurgents, its allegiance. This is not to say that security is enough—there must be a promise of a better future as well. It is nevertheless a truism that the population will give its allegiance to the side that will best protect it. As with ASW, the offensive seek-and-destroy solution has made at best a marginal contribution to counterinsurgency. In fact, when the factor of collateral damage is included, its gains are probably zero.

### Lessons Learned, Unlearned, and Relearned

ASW and counterinsurgency have something else in common: the repeated institutional failure of navies and armies to absorb and pass on the lessons learned in these two most difficult forms of war. Indeed, it may be precisely because these kinds of war are so difficult to contend with that armies and navies have preferred to put the whole unsavory business behind them and go back to “real” soldiering and sailing. Robert Cassidy made this point:

*Because the experience [in Vietnam] was perceived as anathema to the mainstream American military, hard lessons learned there about fighting guerrillas were neither embedded nor preserved in the U.S. Army’s institutional memory. The American military culture’s efforts to expunge the specter of Vietnam, embodied in the mantra “No More Vietnams,” also prevented the U.S. Army as an institution from really learning from those lessons. . . . The Army’s intellectual rebirth after Vietnam*

focused almost exclusively on a big conventional war in Europe—the scenario preferred by the U.S. military culture.<sup>11</sup>

The Allied navies that fought the hard-won war against the U-boats in 1914–1918 also went back to business as usual. Most admirals resumed their preoccupation with the navy of battleships and the upstart aircraft carrier. Even such an astute naval observer as Hector Bywater concluded that when all was said and done, the submarine could amount to no more than an “auxiliary of the surface fleet” and could “in no conceivable circumstances force a decision.”<sup>12</sup> Anyway, the British now had active sonar, which finally made the hunt for submarines possible—or at least the British thought so. Moreover, far fewer ships were needed. In September 1939, the entire British Empire mustered just 200 destroyers, compared with over 430 in the Royal Navy at the end of World War I. In the end, “virtually every surface and air antisubmarine lesson of the first submarine war had to be, and ultimately was, relearned in the second at immense cost in blood, sweat, and treasure.”<sup>13</sup>

It is commonly held that if a target can be seen, it can almost certainly be hit, and if hit, it will most likely be destroyed. Battles and wars waged under these circumstances can be fought and won at the tactical, force-on-force level. When, on the other hand, targets are ambiguous and seen only fleetingly, a war-winning solution may need to be found at the strategic level. That means shifting the soldier's solution space from the tactical to the strategic level, which entails a change in perspectives on the nature of the objective at hand. The British response to the U-boats in World War I highlights this point. Their initial mistake was to confuse strategic ends and tactical means and to counter the U-boats' strategy at the tactical level. It was a solution that simply was not in the grasp of existing detection and attack technologies. Only when the British ran out of tactical alternatives and defeat stared them in the face did they revisualize the defeat of the U-boats as a strategic problem in which the objective was not to sink U-boats, but to preserve ships and cargoes.

The counterinsurgency defender shares many of the same tactical problems that challenged the ASW defender. The key problem is the missing first element in the find-hit-destroy sequence. Thus, the counterinsurgency

planner may need to follow in the footsteps of the U-boat hunters and seek to defeat the opponent asymmetrically—that is, at the strategic level. This means that the first objective is no longer to kill insurgents, but to defeat the insurgent's purpose; killing insurgents becomes merely one means toward that end. The insurgent's purpose is to undermine the government's central claim to legitimacy, which is the ability to provide law, order, and security. His tactical means is violence, but it is a violence whose significance is strategic first and tactical second.

Just as U-boat commanders were instructed to avoid tactical encounters with the convoy escorts and concentrate on the convoy itself, so insurgent violence is aimed less at the government's and population's physical capacity to resist than their moral stamina. The defender's strategic goal follows logically; it is to defeat the insurgent's physical and moral capacity to create and sustain an environment of physical and moral insecurity. **JFQ**

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Michael Glover, *The Velvet Glove: The Decline of Moderation in War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1982), 205. Germany retaliated by putting 39 British officers in military jails.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>3</sup> The term *war in the shadows* is borrowed from Robert B. Asprey's two-volume history of guerrilla warfare, *War in the Shadows* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975). John Winton's study of subterfuge and surprise in naval warfare is entitled *Below the Belt* (Greenwich, CT: Conway Maritime Press, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Tracy Barrett Kitredge, *Naval Lessons of the Great War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Page, 1921), 370.

<sup>5</sup> See Patrick J. McDonald, “U.S. Plans Decisive Attack on ‘Dodge City of Iraq,’” *The Los Angeles Times*, October 30, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Henry Newbolt, *Naval Operations*, vol. IV (London: Longman's, Green and Co., 1928), 333–337.

<sup>7</sup> “When deadly force bumps into hearts and minds,” *The Economist* (January 1, 2005), 32.

<sup>8</sup> Robert R. Tomes, “Relearning Counterinsurgency Warfare,” *Parameters* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

<sup>9</sup> John H. Hay, Jr., *Vietnam Studies: Tactical and Material Innovations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1974), 177.

<sup>10</sup> Winston Churchill, quoted in S.W. Roskill, “CAPROS—Not Convoy: Counterattack and

Destroy!” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* (October 1956), 1,048.

<sup>11</sup> Robert M. Cassidy, “Back to the Street without Joy: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Vietnam and Other Small Wars,” *Parameters* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2004), 73–74.

<sup>12</sup> Hector C. Bywater, *Navies and Nations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1927), 18–19.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dardanelles to Oran: Studies of the Royal Navy in War and Peace: 1915–1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 40.

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