

Some Thoughts on Irregular Warfare

Jeffrey B. White

*So 'ere's to you fuzzy-wuzzy, at
your 'ome in the Soudan;*

*You're a pore benighted 'eathen,
but a first class fightin' man*

Rudyard Kipling

Westerners, with their superior technology and organization, have been killed for a long time by primitives or “savages” whose style of war the Westerners misunderstood and whose skills exceeded those of the West in irregular wars. Irregular warfare is the oldest form of warfare, and it is a phenomenon that goes by many names, including tribal warfare, primitive warfare, “little wars,” and low-intensity conflict. The term irregular warfare seems best to capture the wide variety of these “little wars.” Such wars plague much of the non-Western world, and they will increasingly claim the Intelligence Community’s attention.

Since World War II, by one count, there have been more than 80 irregular conflicts. They include civil wars in Rwanda and Somalia, guerrilla wars in Sudan, and rebellions in Chechnya; they involve irregular elements fighting against other irregular elements, regular forces of a central government, or an external intervention force.

The acquisition and use of modern military technology is often seen as a solution to the problems of warfare in the late 20th century, with information warfare the latest example. Irregular warfare, however, remains confoundingly unaffected by changes in technology. In an irregular conflict, sociology, psychology, and history will have more to say about the nature of the conflict, including its persistence and intensity.

Implications for Intelligence

Traditionally, the greatest threats to US national security have been posed by states armed with modern technology and possessed of military concepts not much different from those of the United States. This has allowed the Intelligence Community to focus on the forces of similar opponents, making an analyst’s life easier, but the Community has been left less prepared for conflicts involving dissimilar foes and allies. The focus on the traditional components of military capabilities analysis—order of battle, doctrine, defense economics and so on—served the United States well in the Gulf war against Iraq but not so well in Somalia. The Intelligence Community has to do these things as long as the United States still faces conventional threats, but the Community also needs to be able to look with equal skill at the different kinds of threats posed by irregular wars.

The Operational Environment

Irregular warfare exists in highly specific operational environments, “microclimates,” which need to be understood by intelligence analysts, military commanders, and policy-makers. This presents several challenges.

First, these operational environments consist of a number of elements, including geography, ecology, history, ethnicity, religion, and politics. These are not topics to which the military intelligence community devotes much attention.

Second, for irregular warfare, these have to be seen in a detailed and nuanced context. It is specific local geography, history, and politics that are crucial. Arab history is one thing, the history of Christian-Druze conflict in Lebanon is another, and the role of specific families and family members yet another. Collecting, analyzing, and assimilating information at this level of detail is a formidable challenge for intelligence analysts, policymakers, and warfighters alike.

Changes in Political Geography

Geography needs to be seen in at least three contexts: political, cultural, and physical. Political geography, as Robert Kaplan illustrated in his article, “The Coming Anarchy,” is changeable. Kaplan points out that much of the world’s political geography is at risk because of the end of the Cold War, the

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Report Documentation Page

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE 1996		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1996 to 00-00-1996	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Some Thoughts on Irregular Warfare				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, DC, 20505				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES Studies in Intelligence, Volume 39, No. 5, 1996					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 9	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

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collapse of the Soviet Union, and the decline of established order in much of the Third World. This calls for sensitivity to the possibility that new ad hoc or de facto political structures organizing people and space will emerge. That recognition of this is not automatic should be clear.

In 1975-76 the analytic community looking at Lebanon strongly resisted the notion that Lebanon was coming apart and that the political processes which had balanced the system had disintegrated in the face of internal and external pressures. Similarly, the Intelligence Community only reluctantly and slowly discerned the collapse of the Soviet Union.

If Kaplan is right, or even partially right, the maps of the Middle East, Africa, and southwest Asia will be remade within the lifetime of those living today. Much of this redrawing will be done by what can be broadly described as “tribes.”

Political-geographic “microclimates” are even more changeable and less susceptible to analysis than political geography at the regional or state level. In *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, T. E. Lawrence described Syria’s political-geographic microclimate as he planned the final stages of the Arab revolt:

Nature had...divided the country into zones. Men, elaborating nature, had given to her compartments an additional complexity. Each of [the] main north-and-south strip divisions was crossed and walled off artificially into communities at odds. We had to gather them into our hands for offensive action against the

Turks. Feisal’s opportunities and difficulties lay in these political complications of Syria which we mentally arranged in order, like a social map.

In a political-geographic microclimate like those in Lebanon, Somalia, or Kurdistan, understanding is elusive. Shifting patterns of family, tribal, religious, economic, and military relations overlaid on specific geography produce a complex, dynamic, and uncertain analytic environment—one likely to make intelligence analysts cautious and policymakers and commanders uncomfortable and vulnerable.

Cultural and Physical Aspects

Cultural geography also needs to be understood in the micro sense. The geography of small areas becomes important in a tribal context. Who are the tribesmen? Where are they? What do they do? How do they live? What are their towns and houses like? These are important questions as US operations are planned and then executed.

Microphysical geography concerns the highly specific ground on which operations will occur. What exactly is the terrain like? How is it affected by different weather conditions? What kind of forces can operate on it most effectively? What advantages and disadvantages does it have for

the combatants? What constitutes key terrain in this particular setting? Irregular warfare often occurs in remote, rugged, or otherwise difficult terrain that can constrain operations by modern forces, limiting their mobility and reducing their technological advantages.

The geography of Beirut, the Shuf, and Mogadishu all were crucial to the success and failure of US policies and operations in Lebanon and Somalia. Intelligence analysts, operators, and policymakers need highly specific answers to microgeographic questions.

An Emerging Issue

Ecology is not normally considered a subject for the military intelligence community, but it may be a key element in long-range warning. As Kaplan points out, the disintegration of political systems or the onset of a humanitarian crisis may be indicated by ecological information and analysis:

It is time to understand “the environment” for what it is: the national-security issue of the early 21st century. The political and strategic impact of surging populations, spreading disease, deforestation and soil erosion, water depletion, air pollution, and possibly rising sea levels in critical, overcrowded regions like the Nile Delta and Bangladesh—developments that will prompt mass migrations and, in turn, incite group conflicts—will be the core foreign-policy challenge from which most others will ultimately emanate, arousing the

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public and uniting assorted interests left over from the Cold War.

While ecological problems are not the sole province of the Third World, it is there that the largest population increases are expected, where central governments are weakest, and where tribalism is rampant.

Importance of History

Those who become involved in a tribal conflict without knowing its history are headed for trouble. There have been few situations with a more convoluted history than Lebanon between 1975 and 1982. The complex interplay among family, tribal, ethnic, and religious groups was complicated by significant involvement by the Palestinians, Syrians, and Israelis. This resulted in a “witch’s brew” of shifting murky alliances, shady characters, and pure viciousness. Without knowing the history of the Gemayels, the Jumblatts, and the Asads involved, analysts and decisionmakers could not hope to unravel what was happening.

Ethnic and Religious Factors

Ethnicity is a powerful element in irregular warfare. Ethnic conflicts in Liberia, Rwanda, Burundi and elsewhere in Africa have led to appalling human and economic losses. Designation by ethnicity is often enough to determine where a given group or tribe will line up in a conflict, determining recruitment bases, and shaping political alignments, alliances, and other basic attributes of the conflict. Irregular conflicts, however, do not necessarily occur

along ethnic lines; some irregular wars will not be ethnic conflicts.

In Kurdistan, there is continuous struggle within the Kurdish population based on tribal and family allegiances. At the same time, the Kurds are engaged in an ethnically based struggle against the Governments of Iraq and Turkey. Similarly, in Somalia an ethnically homogeneous population engaged in bitter intertribal/interclan conflict, making both de facto allies and enemies with external intervention forces. The United States took sides when it entered this conflict, a risky action in a situation in which it held few, if any, trump cards.

Religion is a powerful force in tribal warfare, and it can reinforce ethnicity in making a conflict more intractable and cruel. Like ethnicity, religion is not a simple guide to a tribal conflict. Muslims have fought Muslims, and Christians have fought Christians. In Lebanon they formed cross-religion alliances: the Christian Franjiyahs aligned with the Muslim Syrians against their co-religionists.

The familiar saying that “all politics is local politics” is important to understanding irregular conflicts. The politics of the Phalange party in Lebanon were, and are, largely the politics of the Gemayels. The Phalange is a political expression of one “tribal” grouping within the Christian heartland of Lebanon.

This is a common phenomenon in the Third World. Aideed’s “party” in Somalia was largely an expression of his clan and its allies.

In these situations sweeping political concepts like socialism, democracy, and nationalism may have no real meaning. To view Walid Jumblatt’s “socialist party” in Lebanon as representing an expression of “socialism” was to misunderstand completely its motivation, role, and intentions. Jumblatt’s real interest was in furthering the interests of his “tribe,” the Druze.

Tribal warfare is an extension of tribal politics. These are inevitably the politics of feud, betrayal, old debts, and narrow economic advantages. While Israel and Syria played a “great game” in Lebanon, and the United States saw Syrian actions there through Cold War lenses, the Lebanese played a “little game.” The Chamouns, Gemayels, and Franjiyahs killed each other to settle scores, Christian fought Christian for control of economic enterprises in Beirut, and the Druze and Christians raided each other’s territory and defended their own in a pattern which was wholly Lebanese, centuries old, and obscure to outsiders. They made bad enemies and poor allies.

In Lebanon in the early 1980s, all the factors of the microclimate produced a situation that could only be dimly perceived by outside observers, including intelligence analysts. The ambiguity of the situation there contributed to serious errors of policy. The United States moved to support a Christian-dominated “government” and military no longer

reflecting the distribution of power in the country. With little understanding of the microhistories and cultures of the Lebanese, the United States was to some degree “captured” by the Christians, who spoke English and were seen as “Western” in outlook and style. It was easy to see their enemies as our enemies. The Israelis fell into the same trap, and both countries paid a heavy price. The ultimate “winners” in Lebanon were the Syrians, who understood what they had gotten into and were prepared to stay for the long haul.

Modern and Irregular Warfare

From the elements of the operational environment and the microclimates they produce, a form of warfare emerges that is more pervasive and much different from modern conventional warfare. There are a number of dimensions across which modern and irregular wars will differ. At least nine can be identified:

Organization

The first dimension is organization. Western military historians look at the development of organized warfare beginning some 6,000 years ago as a signal event. The early states of the Fertile Crescent brought the first organized armies into existence. By the third millennium B.C., some were “standing” combined armed forces with clear organization and articulation. Ever since forces became organized, order of battle has been a subject of intense interest for military analysts, who believe better organization equals more effectiveness.

Tribal forces usually have loose organizations, their order of battle is amorphous, and they generally do not make strategic deployments. Irregular “units” are likely to reflect a tribe or clan bound to specific geography and a traditional leadership structure. The Druze militia in Lebanon and clan-based forces in Somalia are recent examples of irregular “armies.” While neither would have chance in a head-on fight with a Western army, the Druze defeated the Lebanese Christian militia and regular units of the Lebanese Army; the Somalis gave US and UN forces all they wanted in Mogadishu.

Technology

Western military analysts have rightly focused much attention on technology as a driving force in warfare. In little wars, however, the level of technology may not be the most important factor.

Irregular warfare involves the use of what is available through purchase, theft, capture, or local manufacture. Tribal forces specialize in raids, skirmishes, and ambushes where the assault rifle, machinegun, mortar, and mine are basic weapons. While some tribal forces have tanks and field artillery, most rely on individual and light crew-served weapons.

Logistics

All conventional armies carry with them the “ball and chain” of their logistic system. Heavy mechanized forces consume enormous amounts of fuel, ammunition, petroleum products, and spare parts. This system constrains mobility and operational flexibility and creates exploitable vulnerabilities.

Irregular forces are substantially less limited by logistic factors. Their

Contrasting Dimensions of War	
Modern	Irregular
<i>Organized</i>	<i>Informal</i>
<i>Advanced technology</i>	<i>At-hand technology</i>
<i>Logistics-dependent</i>	<i>Logistics-independent</i>
<i>National direction</i>	<i>Local direction</i>
<i>Coherent doctrine</i>	<i>Ad hoc doctrine</i>
<i>Decisive battle</i>	<i>Raids and skirmishes</i>
<i>Soldier</i>	<i>Warrior</i>
<i>Allies</i>	<i>Accomplices</i>
<i>Segregation</i>	<i>Integration</i>

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needs for food and ammunition are simpler, and they normally do not move over great distances. They draw support from the local population. Much of their weaponry is easily transported, and they usually develop their own ability to service and repair simple weapons and vehicles. These logistic factors reduce the vulnerability of irregulars to counter-logistic strategies. There are no rail or road nets to attack, no ammunition dumps to bomb, no bridges to knock out. It also is difficult to separate irregulars from their weapons and to find arms caches when they exist close to the people.

Direction

Modern conventional war is essentially state-to-state war. This central marshaling and direction of resources provides required organization, technology, and manpower. Advanced systems are used to command and control the state's forces.

Tribal wars, however, are small wars, directed by the local leadership for local, perhaps personal, reasons. Divining such reasons is difficult because values, goals, and strategies and tactics are based on obscure, idiosyncratic, and remote (in time and place) factors.

Local leaders use simple communications systems working over short distances. Telephones, walkie-talkies, and runners can provide an effective communications net for local operations. In the battle to capture Aided, Somalis moved almost without direction to the scene of the fighting. The Russians experienced the same phenomenon in Grozny.

For irregulars, “riding to the sound of guns” can be as effective as any modern command-and control system.

Doctrine

One hallmark of modern military organizations is the development of clear doctrine for the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. Doctrine establishes what the forces will fight for; how they will be provided with resources; how they will be organized and deployed; the weapons they will use; and how they will fight.

Irregular forces do not have highly articulated doctrine. They are used to fighting on their own ground, are intimately familiar with their weapons, and can be quite adept at the tactical level. Some leaders and men may have had basic training in the West or East; most of their knowledge is homegrown.

The lack of expressed doctrine makes it difficult for modern forces to understand their potential irregular opponents and their allies. It also makes them easy to underestimate. Knowledge of the way tribal warriors fight can be costly if it has to be gained through experience.

Decisive Battle

From Marathon to Desert Storm, the Western aim in warfare has

become to engage the enemy and defeat him quickly, with minimal losses to friendly forces. This is warfare for the rich and powerful, those who can invest in the kind of technology and forces needed for a fast victory.

Tribal forces avoid operations of extended scope, duration, and intensity. They move in and out of contact as determined by their leadership or in response to threats. Their history and culture provide the experience and legitimacy for this kind of warfare, while their weapons and ability to use them make them effective in waging it.

In a localized conflict, strategic and operational mobility may not mean much. Tactical mobility may be more important. Tribal forces are often expert at moving over their ground. In Mogadishu, Western forces had to move in convoys escorted by armored vehicles along certain corridors; even movement by helicopter could prove dangerous.

Soldiers and Warriors*

Modern armies develop cohesion, discipline, and professionalism through a deliberate process of training and indoctrination, and this process produces excellent soldiers and units. In irregular forces, a more natural process is at work, achieving, at least in some cases, a similar result.

*See Ralph Peters, “The New Warrior Class” (*Parameters*, Vol. 24, No. 2, summer 1994, pp. 16-25) for a detailed discussion of warriors and the implications for the US military.

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One of the most cohesive forces of all time, the phalanx of the Greek city-states, owed its formidable cohesion and battle discipline to the fact that it consisted of men who knew each other well. The cohesion and battle discipline of the Army of Northern Virginia were based on a similar local recruitment pattern. Tribal forces are drawn from this kind of base.

Soldiers and warriors are not the same. The modern soldier is a product of a system that takes him out of “normal” life and makes him over into a disciplined, responsive professional in the use of lethal force. He answers to a clear chain of command, and he is expected to carry out orders from his superiors, all acting to achieve the goals of the state.

The warrior is not taken out of the civilian part of society and placed in something different. He is within normal society in his role as a warrior. His skills and weaponry derive from what is available to his tribe. His knowledge of war probably is confined largely to that found within his society. He operates within a looser organization and a more relaxed disciplinary system. The warrior lives close to the land and the people on it. Under the proper circumstances and handling, he can be as effective as the modern professional.

Warrior leaders also differ in significant ways from leaders in modern armies. Although they may have little or no formal military education and training, they may have extensive combat experience at the small-unit level. They know their men and

understand their psychological and social needs. Their military leadership may be reinforced by their political or religious roles.

Allies and Accomplices

Coalition warfare has become commonplace, and the United States rarely would expect to fight alone. This makes it necessary to understand our potential allies at least as much as we understand our enemies. British General Allenby’s fortune in Palestine was that he had T. E. Lawrence and the wisdom to use him to help manage his difficult Arab allies. Similarly, one success of Desert Shield/Desert Storm was the management of a diverse military coalition. These examples make the point that a beneficial relationship with an ally should not be assumed as we enter a conflict or operation other than war. This is even more true when entering into a tribal conflict where “accomplice” may be a more fitting term than ally.

In some situations, allying with a local party carries certain dangers. For example, the intervening force can be captured by the locals’ agenda. They understand the situation better, and they are capable of abrupt actions and changes of policy that upset the foreigners’ goals and sensibilities.

The process of becoming allied with a native party to a conflict can happen almost accidentally, or at least without a clear decision process. To become allied with the Christians in Lebanon or with one of the Somali factions was hazardous. In these cases, the risk is of becoming an “accomplice” of the locals, at least in the eyes of the opposing factions; an accomplice can soon become a target. The outsider also can be quickly jettisoned in the interests of the locals. In these murky situations, it is difficult for the alien elements to match the footwork of their allies.

Segregation and Integration

The final dimension of variance between modern and irregular warfare concerns the relationship of wars and the forces involved in them to their societies. Modern conventional war can be seen as segregated from society, in the sense that the forces are drawn out of society and sent to a “front” or “theater” to conduct the war, which in general will be of limited duration.

In many little wars, the forces are inseparable from society. A conflict can continue for generations and become a routine part of a society. This has clear implications for external elements entering the conflict to settle it, separate warring parties, take sides, or deal with humanitarian issues.

In a protracted conflict, time will generally be on the side of the local forces. It will prove difficult to separate the combatant from the civilian population as men, women,

children, and the aged all become potential combatants.

Where the conflict has a long history and is joined with a warrior culture, there will be a profusion of small arms and carrying them will be viewed as necessary and right. As a result, disarming the combatants will be difficult.

Operations in Lebanon, Somalia, and elsewhere have demonstrated how hard it is for an external force to have more than a passing effect on a conflict that is deeply embedded in a society.

Those entering such conflicts from the outside should expect minimum positive results and maximum difficulties. The larger and more extensive the goals, the greater the prospect for frustration and defeat.

Balance Sheet

Western forces entering a tribal conflict face an asymmetric form of war. They have the advantages of tremendous firepower, excellent strategic and operational mobility, the discipline of professionals, massive logistic support, and effective structures to guide and control operations. In a standup fight in open terrain, they can destroy tribal forces handily.

But their tribal opponents also have advantages. As they “own the ground,” they are unconcerned with time. They do not seek a decisive battle, and they prefer to engage in raids, skirmishes, and ambushes. This keeps their casualties down, while inflicting some on highly casu-

ality-sensitive Western forces. For modern soldiers, this is frustrating. But it is nothing new—the Greeks and Romans had the same experience against their barbarian opponents.

All of this suggests that one style of warfare is not objectively superior to another. When irregular forces are confronted on their terrain, the superiority of modern forces and their style of warfare cannot be assumed. Rudyard Kipling summed up in a few lines the complexities and risks of entering into a tribal conflict:

*When you're wounded and left
on Afghanistan's plains,
And the women come out to cut
up what remains,
Jest roll to your rifle and blow
out your brains.
An' go to your Gaud like a soldier.*

Intelligence Considerations

The considerable differences between modern and irregular warfare lead logically to differences in the appropriate intelligence approach. The struggle's history, its specific geography, its clan or tribal structure, its leaders and their roles and relations, the nature and capabilities of its warriors and how they are developed and supported within the society, and the tradition of warfare become essential elements of information for the intelligence analyst, policymaker, and commander.

Understanding the microclimate of the conflict requires a deep appreciation of the society in which it occurs. In Defense Intelligence, area expertise approaching this level is

normally found in its attachés, foreign area officers (FAOs), and experienced civilian regional analysts.

Even comprehending the purely military elements of a little war requires special understanding. The traditional elements of military analysis have to be looked at differently. This demands an ability to step away from Western or modern models of warfare to focus on those that are considerably more primitive and less dependent on technology.

The order of battle of irregular forces does not approach the rigidity of modern forces. Units differ in size and structure from tribe to tribe and from time to time. This makes it difficult to display confidently what the enemy's forces look like and how they are deployed. Even the concept of deployment loses some of its meaning when the forces are closely integrated with their society.

An attempt, at the direction of the then-J2, early in the 1992-93 Somalia crisis to apply the same techniques used to display Iraqi order of battle (the so-called bubble charts) proved nearly futile. Somali forces simply did not fit with standard OB techniques; over time, however, a reasonably accurate picture of the factions' “order of battle” was built up. Equally, databases and ADP applications have to be designed to fit irregular forces. ADP tools such as those that were designed for the Warsaw Pact can be applied to situations like Rwanda and Somalia only with difficulty.

Similarly, the doctrine of tribal forces is not to be found in a formal sense. There are traditional forms of

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warfare, some learned or experienced ways of fighting, and these have to be discerned from the history of the conflict and its participants. This demands an investment of time by the analysts, and their managers have to give them that time.

The weaponry used also has to be seen in terms relative to the conflict at hand. Have the weapons served the needs of the combatants in the past? Are they good enough? Given the operational environment, can they use these weapons with effect against a modern force? Are the weapons of the modern force likely to be effective in the specific operational environment? What real advantages do they provide? How will policy constraints, rules of engagement, terrain, and the integration of the enemy into his society limit the use of modern technology?

Addressing the issues raised here and answering the kinds of questions just posed provide a more subtle analysis of the capabilities of modern and irregular forces. What is called for is a greater degree of attention and sensitivity to, and flexibility for, irregular forms of warfare. It requires the Community to preserve what expertise it has on areas where irregular warfare is under way or likely and to develop new skills and the people to use them for this form of war.

Specialists and Generalists

There needs to be a core of experts in tribal wars around whom to wrap the generalists and the inexperienced newcomers. The Community has to invest in specialists. No commander wants to go into an operation with

only general knowledge of the situation. Nor should any intelligence officer. In every crisis, it always comes down to a few recognized experts providing the core knowledge to decisionmakers. The generalists do general things, and the experts provide what decisionmakers and warfighters need.

An appropriate balance between specialists and generalists is not easy to achieve. As Napoleon said, the best strategy is to be strong everywhere, but this is a strategy only for those rich in resources. In the current and foreseeable resource environment, management has to determine where this balance should be. It could be aided by a better forecasting and long-range warning capability that would allow appropriate resource shifts in time to develop analytic and collection expertise. The Community needs to focus more attention on the forecasting arena, not least of all for this purpose.

Collection Needs

There also are substantial implications for the collection of intelligence. The collection system has been optimized to obtain information on modern military forces, not for those involved in irregular conflicts. This was and is necessary, as there remain significant modern potential enemies. But it has left the

Community less capable of turning up what it needs for little wars. This is the case both for the type of information collected and the relative priorities under which collection occurs.

The constellation of overhead systems and other national technical means is good at finding the hard facts like locations, numbers, and technical data. But those kinds of data are more difficult to discern or less important in an irregular conflict, and some important information cannot be determined by sophisticated technical collection. What is required is human intelligence that can develop the microclimate of the conflict and its military aspects. Attachés, embassy officials, and HUMINT collectors, sensitive to the local operational environment and its military dimensions, can help to meet this need.

When we entered Somalia in December 1992, we had a one-line database on the military forces there. Our attempt to use standard collection means and strategies was only partially successful because these conventional means could not deliver the kind of specific information we wanted. There were no Somali motorized rifle or tank divisions, no air defense system, no navy, and no air force. The Somalis had some trucks and jeeps with crew-served weapons and a few pieces of armor. Someone was needed to locate and count them from the ground and to find out if they were operable. Eventually, we got this information, and even better intelligence on the clan forces' capabilities, from US Special Forces units.

The question of collection priorities for collection also needs to be considered. How to balance between collecting on the most likely areas for operations and those that pose the most serious potential threat? Does Africa or China get more emphasis, and in what time frame? When is the collection apparatus driven to acquire the information the analysts will need to answer their customers' requirements? Some will argue with justification that open sources are at least part of the answer. Ultimately, the Community's goal should be to understand irregular warfare at the level T. E. Lawrence sought:

When I took a decision, or adopted an alternative, it was after studying every relevant... factor. Geography, tribal structure, religion, social customs, language, appetites, standards—all were at my fingertips. The enemy I knew almost like my own side.